Electrostatic Potential

by tenscupcake

Summary

As the Doctor and Rose traverse time and space looking for adventure, they slowly fall victim to a mysterious energy that can manipulate their emotions. Though confused and unnerved by the cerebral affliction, neither of them understands its cause, or realizes that it could jeopardize their friendship. What will it take for them to discover the truth?

Notes

Guys, I am SO EXCITED ABOUT THIS STORY. I honestly can't stop thinking about it, and I've been chugging away at it like crazy. It's made me more productive with writing than I have been in ages. Even though AM is an important story to me, I've been really down in a rut writing it just because of the nature of that fic. It's super draining to write it and even to think about it tbh. Then to add to that, I read through a really good set of ten/rose fics recently and it really revived my desire to read more of them, and since it's been a whole year since I finished CS now, I figured it was time for me to really immerse myself in this couple again. I've missed them terribly.

You guys might be interested to know I've already planned out this story in its entirety (my rough outline has 32 chapters and an epilogue - WOO!), and I absolutely am in love with it. I really hope you guys enjoy it too. I actually have more than 6 chapters done already, but I was waiting to post until I really felt ready since I do have another WIP that I've set on the shelf... Anyway. Without further ado... :)

P.S. thank you SO SO MUCH to Amber for her invaluable help brainstorming and drafting this fic, and to Heidi for the superb beta services.

P.P.S. the rating will, of course, increase later.
Chapter 1

The Doctor gulps down the last of his orange juice and slams the empty cup on the nearest table. The very same moment, another refreshment catches his eye.

“Cake!” he announces cheerfully.

Rose downs the last of her cup and sets it next to his, then follows on his heels to the tray of cake decorated with a Union flag of frosting. Layers of the fluffy white cake are filled with red jam, and regardless of which fruit it’s made from, she can only guess how strongly it’s calling the Doctor’s name. He has something of an insatiable sweet tooth.

He picks up the crumby, frosting-covered knife and cuts them both a hearty piece.

“Mmm, that’s brilliant,” he says through a giant mouthful of red, white, and blue.

Rose tucks into hers as well, and it is delicious – tastes homemade.

Vehicles on the small residential road have been completely displaced by celebratory citizens, couples and families alike dancing to whatever tune is on the radio, something too 50’s for her to recognize. The Doctor seems content to watch as he shovels forkfuls of cake into his mouth every few verses, a large grin plastered on his face that widens when he sees an elderly couple dancing or a bloke lifting his partner over his head.

But when the next song begins, his eyes go wide as he looks over at her.

“Somebody stole my gal!” he exclaims.

For a moment, she fears he is referring to when her face was stolen, and wonders whether he has suddenly decided that now she’s ‘his gal’ and he should do something about it. But she realizes he must mean the title of the song. He drops his plate – half-eaten slice of cake, fork, crumbs, and all – onto the table nearest them, shrugs out of his coat and flings it over a chair. Eyebrows raised expectantly, he reaches out his hand, expecting her to do the same.

“C’mon!” he encourages. Never one to deny him a bit of fun, she sets her plate next to his, trying to mentally take note of where they are so they can return for them later, and places her hand in his. He tows them both away from the long tables of food and drinks towards the middle of the street, rambling details about the song just as its namesake blasts out through the speakers.

“Johnnie Ray. Top of the charts in April 1953. Not the only rendition of the song, or even the first, but certainly one of the best.”

The melody of the song is more mellow than the last, but the speed and enthusiasm of the dancers has not diminished. Rose doesn’t know the first thing about contemporary dances of the 1950s, but the Doctor and their surrounding company are satisfactory enough teachers that she doesn’t feel lost. Unlike other styles she’s familiar with like the Tango or ballroom, most of the moves don’t require much physical contact aside from plentiful hand-holding. Most of the time, she just has to move her feet as quickly as everyone else and twirl in the right direction at the same time as the Doctor without her heels knocking her off balance. His enthusiasm is entertainment enough by itself – he snaps his fingers when his hands aren’t connected to hers and makes exaggerated happy faces each time they jump apart, tethered to one another only by their joined hands. She spends much of the dance giggling at him, and he beams with pride that he can still make her laugh.
When the song ends, he bows, ever the gentleman, and she curtsies in response.

“Thank you, darlin’,” the Doctor drawls in a half-decent impersonation of the King himself, his lip curling up.

“Thank you…” She isn’t sure what term of endearment she could respond with to stay in-character and cute without crossing the line into inappropriate and awkward, so she settles for leaving it at that.

“She’s a bit too early to hear Elvis on radio,” he muses, returning to in his natural accent. “We can pop ahead a few years. Few thousand miles east. Psychic paper ourselves some tickets to a concert. Eh? What do you say?”

She doesn’t get a chance to answer, because just as they’re just about to head back to retrieve their forgotten plates of cake and consider leaving, a song she recognizes filters through the crowd. It’s been remade a dozen times and featured in countless movie soundtracks, but she’d never be able to name it. Not something she would normally play in her room of her own volition, but one that has a special place in her heart. Even now, her pulse quickens and cheeks flush thinking about the last time she heard it.

“Oh, we both know this one!” She hits him on the arm, excited.

“Yeah?” He tilts his head curiously.

“Don’t you remember?” she asks.

“Remember what?”

She can’t tell if he’s genuine or teasing, but she decides to humour him anyway.

She starts to sway her hips back and forward in an exaggerated motion as she takes a few steps back, then forward again, and swings her arms from side to side, snapping in time to the motion.

“Rose, I’ve just remembered!” she imitates his previous incarnation’s rugged Northern accent. “I can dance!”

The Doctor’s laughter projects through the street as he momentarily doubles over with it.

“Of course,” he nods as he composes himself. “All right then, one more dance, for old time’s sake?” He holds out a hand with a dazzling smile.

“You’re still rubbish at impressions of me,” he says as they find a rhythm again.

He twirls her away before she can respond, but she reels herself back in.

“Am not.”

Another twist that distances them.

“Are so.”

Other couples in the vicinity start to get adventurous, ladies leaping into the arms of their partners to be whirled around and set back on the ground on the other side.

During the bridge, as they plant their feet and focus on their hips and arms, the Doctor nods over to an example of the feat.
“Want to try that?”

He smiles hopefully.

“I dunno,” she arches an eyebrow. “You’re a bit skinnier than those blokes. Sure you can catch me?” She does her best to sound playful, but it’s difficult while this out of breath.

His jaw drops open, affronted.

“Rose Tyler,” he gasps. “When have I ever let you down?”

She rolls her eyes at his pun, and they fly apart at the music’s cue.

With her best ‘you better not drop me’ warning glare and a few more sways of her hips, she runs towards him and leaps into the air, shouting as she swings her feet up. His arms are exactly where they should be, catching her with perfect timing and not a single bruise under her knees or on her back. As much as she’d like to stay cradled in his arms forever, with the fast tempo of the song, by the time she realizes how well he pulled it off, her heels are already clacking down on the asphalt again.

“What’d I tell you?” he winks as they restart their routine with another round of the chorus.

“Not bad,” she admits, exertion a timely cover for the extra blush on her cheeks.

They round out the last verse with a few quick under-the-arm twirls, one more of the extravagant jump-catch-and-spin moves, and finish the song two arms’ length apart, connected only by their hands. As soon as the last note fades away, he tugs on her arm to reel her back against him, and she’s so winded from the longer dance that she can’t right herself before she collides with him. To her relief, he only laughs when she falls against his chest, so she stays put rather than distancing them immediately. Catching her breath is a perfect excuse to hug him as long as she can, and she nuzzles her nose into his jacket and breathes in the scent of it. It always brings her heart home.

“So,” he announces after a few moments, a subtle cue for her to end the intimate moment before it becomes excessive by his standards. “Next stop? Elvis?”

“Okay.” She smiles as she pulls back and drops her arms away from him. “But… tomorrow, yeah? I’m a bit knackered.”

“It has been a long day,” he agrees with a nod. “C’mon, let’s get you home.”

The Doctor grabs his coat from the chair, and their half-eaten cakes just from where they left them on the table. The Doctor tucks into his delightedly, and they retreat to the sidewalk to avoid being trampled by avid dancers as the music starts up again. They reach the TARDIS before the lively music is out of earshot.

“I’ll take that for you,” he says as he reaches for her now empty plate and sets both of them on the captain’s chair for temporary safekeeping. He chucks his coat over a coral, then wanders over to the console to begin the dematerialisation sequence. He twirls around the panels for a while, still high from the dancing, and she steadies herself on a coral when a predictable lurch throws off her balance as the TARDIS engines fire up.

As Rose watches him, she’s struck with the realization that their evening won’t end anything like a typical couple’s. More often than not, when they partake in an innocent but clearly romantic activity, it’s difficult for her to cope when he resumes platonic interaction as usual. During the lengthy pause in which she longs silently for him to act more like a bloke from 1950’s and court
her properly, she neglects to respond to a few of his questions. It takes him a moment of rambling about which Elvis show to take her to tomorrow to realize she has fallen rather quiet. He turns towards her fully, hands in his pockets, and silences himself for a few moments as he assesses her shift in mood. He seems to conclude that she’s waiting not for a romantic gesture, but for for him to make some attempt to say goodnight.

“So… goodnight, then,” he offers.

He’s oblivious as ever, but somehow it never dampens her affection. She doesn’t want to expend the extra energy to go out again, but neither does she want to part with him for the night. So she fabricates an excuse to spend a little more time together.

“Yeah, I was gonna… read in the library for a bit before I go to sleep. If you want to join me.”

“No telly tonight?” he asks.

“Don’t think so, no.”

They both chuckle softly.

“Sure,” he adds with a nod.

“’Kay.” She can’t help the huge smile that blooms across her face every time he agrees to such intimate nighttime activities, no matter how long it’s been. “Give me thirty minutes or so, just gonna wash up.”

He gives her a signature two-finger salute as he whirls around to pilot the TARDIS to an appropriate resting place for the night.

Her shoes, dress, and jacket quickly make their way onto the floor of her bedroom; she’ll put them away properly in the morning, or else the TARDIS will take care of it for her while she’s asleep. Too drained to wash her hair, she tucks loose strands messily back underneath the pink headband in front of the mirror. Staring at her less-than-stellar nude reflection, she hesitates before pouring makeup remover onto a cotton ball. Close quarters with the Doctor for the rest of the night: does she want to look blemished and tired?

She shakes her head. The notion is ridiculous. He couldn’t care less what makeup she does or doesn’t wear, and if she walks into the library looking prepared for a date rather than a good night’s sleep, he’ll be rightfully suspicious.

Alone in her en suite, away from the confections and happy music of the coronation celebration and without the constantly chattering presence of the Doctor, graphic memories from earlier in the day return to disturb her anew. She scrubs the layers of makeup from her face and brushes her teeth mechanically as her mind forfeits to flashbacks of the interior Magpie’s shop, empty just after closing. Being paralysed as a digitized monster sucked her spirit from her body. Being trapped incorporeally in a binary void, unable to do anything except watch the other souls fill in the slots around her and cry out for the Doctor. Hope that somehow he will find her faceless body, and pull off an unprecedented electronic rescue. Stop the Wire without sacrificing the innocent victims imprisoned with it as collateral damage.

Things like that tend to catch up with her once she’s away from her Time Lord protector for too long.

By the time she shuts off the shower, her skin is bright pink from how hot she had adjusted the water temperature, but she’s still shivering. She squeezes her eyes shut as she wraps herself in a
fluffy towel, trying to erase the bluish image of that thing from behind her eyelids, but the darkness only makes it worse. Sod the reading, all she wants once she gets to the library is his arms around her and her head on his chest. But it’s rare that he allows such things to happen. As flirtatious and affectionate he is in the public eye, he’s often distant and reserved when they’re alone in his ship. A consistent, clear message that nothing romantic or domestic will ever develop inside of it. But if she can convince him that she’s been sufficiently traumatised, he won’t hesitate to comfort her. Of that much she is certain.

She chooses a pair of pyjamas that meet a set of imaginary standards in her head – a middle ground between comfort and sexiness – the snugly fitting pink yoga pants she got last Christmas and a white tank top.

When she arrives at the library, her weathered paperback copy of *Pride and Prejudice* rests exactly where she’d left it the last time she’d been in here a few days before: on the small, circular end table next to the oversized green couch. Across from this couch, and her book, sits the Doctor on the singular bulbous black leather chair, one leg crossed over the other, a large text perched on his knee. His wardrobe remains mournfully intact; without the discarded jacket, loosened tie, and unclasped buttons at his neck that would signal bending the rules is permissible for the night.

“Better?” he asks, turning his head when he catches sight of her in his periphery.

“Yeah,” she mumbles, hopes a bit dashed. Despite her desperation for physical comfort, she is reluctant to squeeze into the negligible amount of space that remains on the seat meant for one. He hasn’t offered any clues that he wants her to, and he clearly chose the single chair for a reason. To send another message.

She may be desperate, but she isn’t pushy.

She swipes her book off the end table, collapses onto the very edge of the large couch and brings her knees up to her chest. Curling inward as much as possible, she tries to emulate the way he closes himself off, if only to maintain the illusion of dignity for herself. But hardly two sentences into the page her bookmark tells her she’s left off on, the Doctor speaks up again.

“You all right?”

Her head snaps up to look at him, and he closes his book on his hand, tentatively holding his place but also ready to cast it aside if need be. Her face must be revealing more than she intended, so she hides it from his view, staring down at black letters she can’t make sense of at the moment.

She has a snap decision to make. To lie, as he often does, to strictly preserve their friendship but guarantee going to sleep alone. Or to tell the truth, for the chance to cuddle the foul images away, but run the risk of scaring him off.

She closes her book, sighs, and shakes her head without looking at him.

To her surprise, he gets to his feet, leaves his book on the chair, and crosses the rug in a few long strides to crash onto the couch next to her. With his arm around her shoulder, he pulls her against him, and she drops the book onto the cushion between them, forgotten. He rubs his hand up and down her bare arm in a soothing gesture, and she burrows into his jacket and wraps her arm around his waist, amazed at how quickly the waking nightmares recede into the shadows. He may be thin and slight, but there is nowhere in the universe she feels safer than in his arms. They’ve never failed to rescue her from harm yet.

Their hugs never last long enough. The moment he set her down on the street earlier today after
their reunion hug, she wanted another. She swallows down a moan as she snuggles against his chest and curls her fist into his jacket, because though it would be one of sleepy contentment, it could easily be misconstrued. The double-beat of his hearts thumps faintly through all the layers, a more effective lullaby than any song she’s ever heard. Though his body temperature is so-and-so-whatever degrees cooler than hers, his skin always feels plenty warm against hers, and his clothes always radiate with comforting heat the same way any other bloke’s would. He may be an alien, but he makes for a very convincing human, when he wants to.

She inhales through her nose a few times, savouring her one moment. Fabric starch, hair product, and the crisp, pine cologne or aftershave it is that makes him smell nice. Something mildly sweet mixes with the fragrance, and she smiles against the fabric. The sugary aroma of jam or biscuit crumbs or in today’s case, cake and frosting, have a way of lingering around him for some time. Underneath everything else endures a trace of the TARDIS itself: something nostalgic and ancient, dusty trunks and faded parchment. She thinks about it often when she’s lying in bed alone, the scent she associates with the Doctor, but she is never able to precisely recreate it. Though she could recognize it anywhere, every time she is close to him, in a way it’s like experiencing it again for the first time.

In his embrace, she becomes so calm and relaxed that she’s nearly asleep when he fidgets beneath her. She startles into alertness and, loath though she is to disrupt the current arrangement, pulls away from his chest. His eyes meet hers with an intensity she doesn’t expect. He clasps her hand in his and squeezes it lightly, running his thumb over hers.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to get to you.”

“No, don’t.” She shakes her head resolutely. She never intended for her confession to make him feel guilty. “It’s not your fault. Not at all.”

“Well, if I hadn’t left you – if I’d been with you when you first went into that shop, I could’ve stopped it happening at all.”

“Maybe. But it was my choice, yeah? I stayed back at the Connolly’s and followed the trail. We split up to investigate all the time. This is no different.”

The Doctor doesn’t respond. Still clasping her hand in one of his, he lifts his other hand to her face. With delicate pressure, he strokes a few fingers across her cheek, then pushes a few locks of hair away from her face, displeased with anything obstructing his view.

This is completely unprecedented behaviour. She wants to lean into his touch, or respond with tentative touches of her own, but she freezes up, terrified that he will spook and withdraw if she moves at all. It’s incredibly rare he initiates contact this intimate, and she thinks it must be a mere vestige of seeing her with a blank face. Gratitude that her eyes, nose, and mouth are back where they should be. He cradles her cheek in his palm and brushes his thumb over her jaw; he must feel the warmth of her skin by now, and it makes her blush even more. His hand shifts so that he is holding her jaw firmly in place, his thumb on her chin, so close to her bottom lip that her heart flutters in her chest.

But before even the smallest seed of a thought that he may be about to kiss her can take root in her mind, Rose is overcome with an unexpected emotion.

Anger.

The intensity of it is such that she suddenly has a difficult time masking it. Her face contorts with the onslaught, mouth twitches downward, teeth and jaw clench noticeably, eyebrows pull together
subtly. She’s suddenly, properly furious.

Detecting these changes immediately, the Doctor drops his hand with a concerned expression.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, evidently worried he’s crossed a line by touching her face in a way that sharply contrasts with their normal customs for physical contact.

Has he crossed a line?

Why else should she feel so upset?

Because he had a point, and he should have come to rescue her sooner, before her face was stolen by the Wire?

But how could she be angry with him for that, especially after she just explained to him that it isn’t his fault, and she doesn’t blame him?

Regardless of the cause of the fire consuming her brain, snuffing it out doesn’t seem possible at the moment. She hasn’t felt this helplessly angry since he sent her back home while he and Jack were facing down the Daleks on Satellite Five. Foreign and nonsensical though her anger feels, she can’t shake it off.

Until she can get to the bottom of this, she doesn’t want to risk lashing out at him, saying something she’ll regret, when she isn’t even sure why she’s angry with him. Or if she even is angry with him, or at something else entirely.

“Nothing, I just…” She wrestles with her own tongue to keep from spitting out the words. “I’m knackered, I’ve got to go to sleep.”

“But –” he begins to protest, confusion palpable on his face.

She untangles herself from him and eases off the couch as gingerly as she can, and offers him the most convincing smile she can, but it turns out to be a half-smirk, half-grimace.

“Night,” she says.

“Night?” he answers, more of a question than a response. “Are you sure you don’t… I mean, if you want some company I could…”

“I’ll be okay, Doctor,” she insists through her teeth. “See you in the morning.”

He doesn’t say anything more to try to discern what the problem is, or to convince her to stay with him, and she doesn’t look back as she walks away. The image of him on the couch, body still facing the depression in the cushion where she was sitting, hurt and confused, is already burnt into her eyelids, certain to plague her with guilt later.

But she’s so bloody angry that at the moment, she doesn’t feel as terrible as she should. She doesn’t want to leave him like this, but she knows she can’t control this magnitude of anger and doesn’t want to take it out on him. Something about it feels unfamiliar, even dangerous. It seems to lack both motivation and direction in a way that she’s never experienced before.

What the hell is going on? Did the Wire get her own wires crossed in her brain? Did the conversion of her consciousness to an electronic signal damage it sufficiently to manipulate her emotions?
Until she sorts this out, she had best keep her distance from the Doctor, so he doesn’t become a victim of a fit of anger he doesn’t deserve.

But by the time she gets to her room and settles under her covers, prepared to investigate the mystery of her anger, it has almost completely burnt itself out. Only the confusion of the whole ordeal, and the guilt of leaving him alone prematurely with hardly a one-sentence explanation, are left in its wake. Since when is she so mercurial? The Doctor is the expert at that, not her. She feels pathetic for succumbing to the mood swing so quickly, and wishes she had stayed and thought it through with him rather than abandoning him. He might have been able to help her discover the reason for her anger, or even overcome it.

She wants to run back to the library to apologize and ask if he’ll still spend the night with her, but she also considers herself deserving of just punishment for this behaviour. Rather than play games with him anymore, or worse, risk another strange outburst of random emotion, she decides to save the apology for morning, and rolls over to try to sleep. This all may very well be merely a symptom of exhaustion.
Here it is, as promised :) I hope you guys enjoy it. I certainly enjoy writing it, it's been my only light through some very dark days lately.

Thank you very much Amber and Heidi for your assistance!

“Not one sodding mirror on this entire planet,” the Doctor mumbles to himself. Seated on the edge of the bed that he and Rose were forced to share the night before, he squirts some hair product from his travel-sized bottle into his hand, and starts to knead and pull it through his damp hair. Eyes closed, he tries to focus on the task, drawing from memory to manipulate it into his usual style without being able to see it.

Rose is still in the shared loo getting dressed and otherwise prepared, and he can hear her own impassioned complaints through the thin wood of the door.

They aren’t being held hostage, in so many words, but the Queen made it clear that if they tried to get back to the TARDIS (which is being kept in the dungeon) prematurely, they would be marked fugitives of the law for the rest of eternity. He thinks ‘eternity’ was a bit of strong word to use, when in truth it would only be until the destruction of Jihoko, which he already knows is in less than a hundred thousand years. Still, he doesn’t want to be unable to return to this planet again in the future, just in case he is ever inclined to do so. And if he and Rose leave a bad taste in the natives’ mouth, their disappearing blue box is something that future generations could easily be warned of.

Rose bursts out of the bathroom door, holding the front of her dress up with a hand on her chest. She isn’t wearing a touch of makeup – back to that pesky ‘no mirrors’ thing – but she looks as beautiful as ever. The deep burgundy dress clings to her waist and flows all the way down to her ankles, and when she moves, it shimmers in the dim light from the lantern by the bed. Her hair is curled into tight ringlets, and he notices a few angry red marks, most around her hairline and one on her ear.

“Burnt yourself?” he asks, pulling the sonic out of his jacket pocket.

“Dunno how a girl’s supposed to use a curling iron with no sodding mirror.”

He chokes back laughter at her choice of profanity; it’s the same word he used not a minute earlier to condemn Jihoko’s lack of mirrors.

He adjusts the setting and aims the sonic at the burns on her face, healing up the inflamed skin in a matter of a few seconds.

She thanks him with a sigh of relief, pressing her fingertips to the skin to confirm the burning has stopped.

“How does my hair look?” he asks, holding his hands out hopefully.

She snorts.
“Like a bloody porcupine.”

She lifts a hand up to his hair – the same hand that is meant to be keeping herself concealed – and the dress slips. She catches it in a fraction of a second, but even in the brief time frame that it was unrestrained, he saw much more of her breasts than he should be allowed to. Ever.

He closes his eyes and apologizes, even though it’s in no way his fault.

“I didn’t see anything,” he lies, willing to say anything to make her hate him less.

Rose curses under her breath and turns around.

“Do up this bloody zip for me, will ya?”

“Yes, right.” He opens his eyes and shakes his head to clear the pristine vision from his mind. Curse this randy incarnation.

He’s going to hell for that, whether it exists or not. Especially after what happened the other day, when she got so upset with him for even considering kissing her in the library. He knows better than to ever think of her that way.

He aims to fasten up the dress without touching her skin at all, but the damned zip gets stuck in the dress before it’s gone up two inches. He has no choice but to reach inside and un-stick it from the fabric, and her skin is just as silky smooth and warm and inviting as ever. Forced to hold two ends of the dress together with one hand and pull up the zip with the other, he’s forced to continue to touch her. He stops breathing and lets his respiratory bypass kick in, so at least the smell of her soap and perfume won’t mingle with the soft texture of her skin to completely demolish his already crumbling composure. He finally gets it zipped up all the way and clasps it closed, letting out a shaky breath of relief that he survived without pushing the dress down over her hips rather than helping her keep it on.

“Thanks,” Rose mumbles as she turns around again.

She looks up at his hair and shakes her head with a chuckle, and only then does he remember what she’d been about to do before her dress fell.

“Sit down,” she commands, nodding to the bed.

He lingers hesitantly for a moment, but she raises her eyebrows, impatient. No choice but to yield, he collapses down onto the mattress, holds his breath, and braces himself for the worst.

She buries both hands in his hair, collecting clumps of product he’d missed to massage them from roots to tips. He clenches his fists in the sheets and grinds his teeth to stop a moan from escaping his lips. She brushes down the sides where it must look ‘like a bloody porcupine’ and runs her fingers over the top of his head, taming areas he messed up too much. Her fingertips graze his scalp on every movement and she pulls on thick strands to arrange them in the right angle, never straight up but tipping forward the way he likes it. It feels right. More right than it did when he was doing it. He would be immensely proud and grateful for her meticulous assistance, if her assistance weren’t lighting his face on fire and turning his insides to useless mush.

He closes his eyes and leans into her touch, craving even more of it, for her to scratch her fingernails and tug even harder.

“Doctor, look up,” she scolds him, tilting his chin up with a finger.
“Right, sorry.” Even more heat floods through his face as his eyes fly open.

This is ridiculous. He has to get a hold of himself. Find something, anything to distract him from Rose’s soft, dainty fingers combing his hair. Why has she never touched his hair before? It feels brilliant. More than brilliant. He’s going to have dreams about this moment and all the different directions it could have gone for months.

NOT HELPING.

Holding his eyes open wide, he focuses on other things, like the scuff on the wall by the armoire or the fly buzzing by the door or the fact that he’s starving. He needs a snack, not a shag. His brain is just confused.

Finally, Rose drops her hands from his head. She nods to herself, proud of her work.

“C’mon, then, let’s get this over with.” She gestures for him to stand up.

After this ball, they’ll be free to go. Everyone who was muted by the Great Calamity has been healed, but the royal family simply insisted they come celebrate tonight to be properly thanked before they depart. He has already established that he wants future visits to this sector to be pleasant, so he’ll humour them for this, despite how heavily he frowns upon their many, ridiculous religious superstitions. No mirrors being chief among them.

“Wait, wait.” Rose stops him with a hand on his chest before he can walk past her. “Your bowtie is all lopsided.”

Of course it is.

He holds his breath while she fiddles with it. When she can’t get it to look right within the first few seconds, she unties it completely.

Great. Like he needs more kindling for the flames of desire already roaring inside him – now he can add ‘taking off his clothes’ to his list of things that get him going. She hasn’t even taken anything off, not really, but her fingers pulling at the knot with the urgency that they did… it was easy for his mind to wander. To imagine her pulling the strip of silk out through the collar, then moving her hands down to unfasten the buttons on his jacket, pushing it off his shoulders and onto the floor. It certainly doesn’t help when her fingers brush against his throat as she starts tying it properly, and his self-control takes another nosedive. Wondering how those fingers would feel brushing against certain other sensitive areas.

By the time she has worked the black fabric into a presentable bow on his neck, he’s nearly put himself in cardiac arrest.

Well done, Doctor.

He’s a bloody Time Lord. His physiology shouldn’t submit to such base desires unless he wants it to.

Well, he tilts his head thoughtfully to himself. Therein lies the problem. When it comes to Rose, deep down he does want it to.

“How do single people on this planet ever look presentable leavin’ the house?” she wonders absently, patting the bowtie and turning to the door.

Single people?
As though they aren’t single people?

No. He needs to stop reading so much into little comments she makes. By ‘single’ she just means people who live alone.

“Dunno.” He shrugs, and pours all his effort into shooing these fantasies and musings out of his mind. Taking her hand in his (still slightly sticky with hair product), he leads them both out of their living quarters and down the corridor towards the grand hall.

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There is no dancing at balls on this planet, evidently. It’s too sensual to be done in public.

Does he even care, at this point, if he and Rose are labelled enemies of the state by this backwards, Footloose-reminiscent dystopia?

He sighs to himself. Yes, he cares. The citizens of Jihoko have been perfectly gracious to them thus far, by their own standards, and he’s simply being a condescending and judgmental arse.

But he has to admit, he is glad Rose doesn’t ascribe to any of this kind of rubbish.

Somehow, over the course of an hour, various attractions and circumstances have caused him and Rose to drift apart. He’s finally found his way to a large, circular table of food near the southeast end of the hall after being dragged around by the arm to meet every curious representative, royal relative, and brigadier in attendance. He surveys the room intently for a few moments until he tracks down Rose’s glistening burgundy dress. She’s standing clustered with a few native women about twenty metres away, a glass of something dark purple in her hand, watching some of the local males throw what look like darts at a giant target on the wall. Convinced enough that it’s a stupid activity that won’t earn her affection or attraction, he turns his attention back to the many trays and plates of nibbles.

He picks up a plate for himself, and gathers up as many offerings as he can fit – something that looks like a small, unwrapped taco, a few slices of local fresh fruit speared with toothpicks, a tiny sandwich, what appears to be a devilled egg, and a glorious-smelling biscuit that reminds him of a jammy dodger. He’s about to pop a fruit into his mouth when someone taps him on the arm.

He pauses with it poised between his lips, and turns to find a beautiful young woman in an emerald dress staring up at him.

“Hi,” he says, setting the piece back on his plate.

“Are you the one who cured Arla?”

He sighs.

“In the flesh.”

He inspects her head to toe. She’s short, quite pale, with dark red hair, and has on a dark lipstick that she must have had assistance applying, if he and Rose’s difficulty getting ready is anything to go by.

Rose is ten times prettier, at least.

“I’m Ryquin,” she says, staring at him like he’s a god taken corporeal form.
“I’m the Doctor,” he answers, holding out the hand not holding his plate of food.

She closes both her hands around his, but doesn’t shake it, just holds it there in between them and continues staring at him. He glances around to ensure no one is catching sight of the unusual display, but no one seems to be paying them any attention.

“How did you do it?” she asks, holding his hand fast in hers and stroking her finger down his arm.

He fidgets in his shoes, increasingly unsettled by her behaviour.

“It wasn’t anything wrong with their brains,” he explains, his hand twitching unpleasantly with her touches. “It was their vocal cords; they were damaged by an airborne poison. I repaired them with my sonic screwdriver.”

“Sonic screwdriver?” she asks, letting go of his hand and reaching for a bite of food herself. He pulls his arm away, grateful to regain his personal space, and brings it back to his plate. He pops the bite of fruit from earlier in his mouth, pulling it off the toothpick with his teeth and discarding the tiny wooden stake in an adjacent bin.

“Yep.” He nods, once, looking down at his plate rather than back at her.

“What is a sonic screwdriver?” she asks.

He sighs again, not much caring if Ryquin notices his irritation.

He shifts his plate to his other hand, and reaches the other into his jacket to pull out the sonic and allow her a look. She reaches out her hand to touch it, though, and he stuffs it safely back in his jacket before she gets the chance.

“Sorry,” he says, pulling a grimace. “Too dangerous to be handled by anyone but me.”

“Wow, dangerous,” she says, smiling. “You must be brave.”

“Suppose,” he offers, trying to smile back but it turns out more of a scowl.

His eyes wander over to find Rose again, to find a morsel of comfort to help him survive this deeply uncomfortable conversation. He finds her immediately, and she happens to turn her head to glance over at him at the same time. She must have been looking for him earlier, because she seems to have known exactly where he was already. He’d like nothing more than to be reunited with her right now, rather than trapped on the receiving end of brazen flirting he wants nothing to do with. He smiles at Rose across the distance, his hearts already feeling lighter, and she smiles back, but their tiny, private moment is interrupted by Ryquin.

“You know, my parents always wanted me to marry a foreigner…”

He turns towards her, bracing himself for the fresh wave of panic that will undoubtedly wash over him any moment, but it never comes.

Instead, staring into those green eyes waiting for him to respond, he feels… rejected. That dreadful feeling of wanting someone you’ll never have, and the emptiness that follows the realization that you can’t. Looming jealousy that someone else will have his way with her, if he doesn’t.

What the hell?

He doesn’t want this woman.
He doesn’t even know this woman.

But somehow… he does?

How is she making him feel this way? Is she… manipulating his mind? No, she couldn’t. He would be able to sense something that sinister and powerful.

“Mine certainly didn’t,” he responds, delayed. It wasn’t funny, but she laughs anyway, and strokes her hand down his arm again.

Blimey, this woman is anything but subtle.

That’s what they all get for outlawing things as innocent as dancing. Off the charts repressed sexual frustration that will find an outlet in any out-of-towners it can.

Despite the overwhelming sense that he’ll be walking away from a forbidden fruit, an icon of desire that has scorned his affection, he has to leave Ryquin’s presence. Make it back to Rose. That’ll help clear his head. Whatever trickery this is, Rose can set him straight again. She always does.

“Sorry, Ryquin, it was lovely to meet you, but, I’ve actually got a tight schedule to keep.”

“Oh, okay –”

“Enjoy the rest of the ball.” He nods with a pathetic attempt at a smile before whirling around to hurry away.

“Thank you, Doctor!” she calls from behind him, but he’s not even listening.

The sinking feeling doesn’t go away as he crosses the crowded floor to get to Rose. He can hardly think straight, with the bizarre concoction of emotion swirling through his head. Jealousy hasn’t consumed him this way since he saw Rose ogling after Captain Jack. And he has never before been the victim of something as pathetic as pining. Time Lords do not pine. And wanting something he can’t have? Please. He could seduce that girl if he wanted to. But he doesn’t want to. For some reason, wires are crossed in his brain.

Maybe he’s still shaken over the other night, when Rose stormed out of the library. If he were going to pine over someone, it would be Rose. But he won’t. Because he doesn’t pine. He will freely admit that sometimes errant, lustful thoughts about her flit through his mind. And sure, sometimes the ephemeral desire to telepathically bond with her or even marry her momentarily possesses him. But they’re easy enough to ignore most of the time, because she likely does not reciprocate such feelings, and even if she did, their situation is too complicated for those things to be feasible. And besides, she has promised never to leave him, and she’s the best friend he could ever ask for. She fills an emptiness in his life, brings light into darkness. He can hardly complain that they don’t have more, when she’s already given him so much.

He’s so lost in thought, and so angry at himself for succumbing to such inexplicable emotions, that he becomes careless with his steps and crashes into a guest. The man’s plate of food flies out of his hand and crashes to the floor, spilling its contents before rolling across the hall like a Frisbee.

“Sorry!” the Doctor rushes out, holding his palms up in surrender. “I’m so, sorry, really, I didn’t –”

“Doctor!” the thick man beams as he turns around, and the Doctor recognizes him from earlier: Harald. They’d been introduced by the Queen. “No harm done, chap! Where are you heading off to in such a hurry?”
“To find the Queen. My companion and I must be going, and we mean to bid the royal family farewell.”

“So soon?” Harald asks, with an exaggerated frown that makes his moustache droop.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Well, I thank you for your service to our kingdom, sir.”

“Of course.” The Doctor nods, shakes the man’s hand as he offers it, and continues his path toward Rose.

“Safe travels,” Harald calls after him, and the Doctor spins around to offer a wave goodbye.

When he finally reaches Rose, he takes her hand in his without any other alert of his presence, and it startles her. When she turns to identify her mystery suitor, she looks surprised to see him. Rose glances to either side of him, and reaches up on her toes to look over his shoulder, like she’s searching for someone else.

“Looking for someone?” he accuses, his tone bitter. Who else could she be looking for? Some other bloke that made a pass at her while he was away? The mere notion swiftly makes him livid.

Rose regards him for a moment, confused by his question, but then shakes her head slowly.

“No.”

Then she smiles at him, a real, genuine smile, teeth and tongue and all.

As he predicted, Rose’s presence is precisely the magical potion he needed. The brewing storm of despondency in his head dissipates within a few short seconds, leaving nothing but calm in its wake. She squeezes his hand, and he squeezes back, breathing out a happy sigh that she’s by his side again, and no more randy locals are standing between them. He bumps her shoulder with his playfully before leaning in close to her ear.

“Want to find the Queen and get out of here?” he whispers, quietly enough that the surrounding ball-goers will not hear.

She sets down her glass on the nearest table before bumping his shoulder in return.

“Thought you’d never ask.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes a little bit of an angsty turn. Hope you guys enjoy! Thanks Amber and Heidi for the feedback!

Though he had been talkative enough over dinner, The Doctor is silent as they navigate the tubular corridors back to their accommodation for the night. Their slow, deliberate walk is interrupted only by the predictable sequence of noise each time they pass through a section door. A clunk of metal, a hiss of pressurized air, and an announcement of which number door has been opened and closed by a cold, robotic female voice. And though he’d been willing to ignore some of their typical physical boundaries beneath the canopy of glass separating them from the black hole, the distance he’s putting between them now warns Rose that it was strictly temporary.

A length of at least three feet separates them at all times, and when he isn’t punching a button or twisting open a door, his hands are securely in his pockets. Each time she glances over at him, he’s looking straight ahead, his features carefully composed into a sombre mask. Drained from the stresses of the day and lost in her own thoughts, Rose can’t muster the courage to close the gap or break the silence.

The Doctor shuts the door to their shared room behind him (this one is a somewhat regular metal door with a handle, rather than the vacuum-sealed vault access doors everywhere else on the base). He looks as though about to ask something, his lips twitching for a moment, but whatever the question is, he swallows it. Scuffs his trainers on the floor, runs a hand through his hair, and turns toward the single window without saying anything at all. She’s never had to endure so much tension over cohabitation before, but they’ve also never lost the TARDIS before. She can only imagine how he’s feeling right now.

For a few moments, all Rose can do is linger by the door and stare at him, wondering how he can look out at the pit that swallowed the TARDIS without having a complete nervous breakdown.

The living quarters are cramped and austere. A cot barely big enough for two is shoved against the wall, two white pillows and a set of starchly white sheets hardly inviting linens. Three small drawers are built into the wall next to the door, and a cabinet for hanging clothes above them. A narrow entryway to her left leads to the tiny loo she’d peeked inside earlier, separated only by a thin blue curtain. It’s little more than a closet crammed with a toilet, equipped with a sink and mirror over the back, and what can’t be more than a two-by-two foot shower with an overhead nozzle.

It’d be nice to at least wash her face and brush her teeth, if she’ll be sharing a bed with the Doctor tonight.

With him sufficiently distracted, and since she hasn’t yet formed the right words to say to him, she plods as silently as she can towards the curtain and pushes it aside. The only hygiene items to be found are a bar of soap in the shower, a bleached white towel hanging on a rack, and a roll of toilet paper. Evidently, everyone else aboard the station brought their toiletries from home. She can make do with the bar of soap, she thinks, but she certainly didn’t stuff a toothbrush in her trousers before heading out the TARDIS doors this morning.
She could make her way back through the corridors alone and find a member of the crew to inquire about some extra supplies, but the idea is not at all appealing. There is a small chance the Doctor may have something in those bigger-on-the-inside pockets of his. That’s an innocent enough question to break the ice.

She shuts the curtain and turns to him, and he hasn’t budged an inch from his post by the window. Taking a deep breath, she clears her throat softly.

He turns around instantly at the sound.

“Erm… any chance you’ve got a toothbrush or something?”

He pulls his hands out of his pockets, and pats down his torso, his forehead scrunching up thoughtfully. One hand dives into the inner pocket of his jacket, and after a moment of digging, he pulls out a thin cylinder of white plastic with bristles at the end and holds it out for her.

“Always keep one on hand.”

“Thanks.” She takes the object in disbelief. She wasn’t sure that she actually expected him to have one in his suit; she was just glad to have an excuse to speak to him. “What about…”

“Blue button,” he interrupts.

She turns over the object in her hand. Just as he said, there is a circular blue button.

Curious, she presses her thumb on it, and a thick blue goop oozes onto the bristles of the brush from obscured holes in the plastic.

“ Weird,” she mutters.

“Peppermint,” he counters.

Genuinely apprehensive of the lack of verbosity from him, she twirls around and escapes behind the curtain without further comment.

She leans back against the only empty wall in the tiny cupboard of a room, closing her eyes. She really hopes he isn’t like this the whole night. It’s hard enough keeping herself together; if he continues to do such a poor job hiding his distress, the effect is surely to be compounded for them both.

Opening her eyes, she stares at the silver faucet above the shower. She hadn’t planned to take one, but a warm shower sounds rather enticing. Since the earthquake, the permeating cold of this metal place has slowly seeped into her bones. She turns the knob all the way to ‘H’, and holds her hand under the weak, ice cold spray, praying it will heat up if she waits long enough. The whistle of the nozzle and the quiet rain against the shower floor is a welcome relief from the sickening silence.

She waits for several long moments, letting the freezing water distract her from the thought of the Doctor waiting for her behind the curtain. Will he still be a brooding statue by the window when she comes out? Or will he be sitting on the bed, or perhaps lying down? Maybe he’ll have fled the room altogether, after the awkward interaction they just had? She wouldn’t put it past him. And she won’t be angry with him if he has. But she could really use a cuddle, if he’ll let his damned relationship barriers down enough to allow it.

Without him by her side tonight, she’ll have no choice but to succumb to the thoughts of her mum and friends. Never seeing or hearing from her again. Thinking she’s dead. She never even got to
say goodbye. Before she can go too far down that road, Rose realises the water flowing over her skin is still as frigid as when she turned it on. She yanks her hand away, shakes off excess droplets of water, and fiddles with the knob to turn it off.

No hot water, then. She doesn’t have any other clothes to change into, anyway, or any hair ties on hand to keep her hair from getting wet. Perhaps it’s for the best.

She drops the toilet lid down and kneels on it for better access to the sink. It’s covered in a supportive, soft rubber, like it was designed for such an arrangement. Not as bad as it could be. She runs a bit of water over the dry, pasty brush and shoves it in her mouth.

But as soon as she gets a rhythm of brushing going, the emotions she has been holding back all day creep out of the depths and swiftly overwhelm her. Fear and grief synergise with each other and take her heart in a tenacious grip. She rests a hand on her chest, trying to hold herself together and push this pain back to wherever it came from, but she can’t control it. Before she can hold them back, tears are rolling down her cheeks. Salt mixes unpleasantly with the peppermint as a few find their way into her mouth.

Why now? She’s been doing an excellent job of ignoring the imminent realities she will have to face and staying strong for the Doctor. It isn’t his fault. And he’s just lost the most important, precious thing in his life. He doesn’t deserve to have her sorrows piled on top of his own. She was planning to save her mental breakdown for whenever, if ever, they were safe someplace far away from this black hole. Or at least a time when she was away from the Doctor so he didn’t have to see it. He’ll only blame himself for her grief, and she doesn’t want that.

But this profound ache inside – it isn’t one of mere separation from her loved ones, being inadvertently stuck a few hundred years in the future. In the privacy of her mind, she falls quickly into an abyss of loneliness as the acute, crushing despair of death weighs on her heart. It doesn’t just feel like she won’t see her mum again, but like she’s died. Like they all have. That aside from the man she’s on this sanctuary base with, everyone she’s ever loved is dead.

She retracts the toothbrush and covers her mouth with her arm to suffocate her sniffling and choke back sobs before they can escape. The running water isn’t loud enough to drown out the sound, and she doesn’t want the Doctor to hear. It doesn’t even make sense for her to feel this way. Her family and friends are alive and well, back home, and she is not alone. Even though they’ll no longer have the TARDIS, she and the Doctor will always have each other. She has to believe that. But as much as she cares for him, and as logical as this line of thought may seem, it doesn’t stop the tears from spilling over.

She holds her breath and resumes brushing, tries to focus on it. But the sense of anguish persists. She rushes over the rest of her teeth rinses out her mouth with a handful of water, and drops the brush on the tiny counter with a clatter. Pulling her hair back in one hand, she splashes the cold water onto her face, hoping it will provide a physical barrier for the tears. She flinches at the sight of herself in the mirror, water dripping down her blotchy pink face and black smudges bleeding down from her eyes. Lovely.

With a sigh, she steps off the toilet and reaches into the shower for the bar of soap. It has to get at least some of the evidence off. She scrubs her face with lather as though it will wash away pain as easily as concealer. When she looks in the mirror again, most of the makeup save for a small black rim around her eyes has been cleansed away. Her eyes are still bright pink, but tears are not actively flowing. Confident that she has wrested back control of her façade, she dries off her face on the towel – crunchy and unscented like a towel from a cheap hotel – before turning back to the mirror.

The red on her face and in her eyes is going to give her away.
Maybe if she flips off the light switch before crawling into bed, he won’t be able to see. Taking a couple deep breaths, she fans away the moisture threatening to well up in her eyes and swallows down the persistent lump in her throat. She has to face him. She’ll never get over this if they’re apart.

When she pushes back the curtain for a peek, the Doctor is lying on the bed, his shoes discarded on the floor but his suit intact. Hands linked on his chest, he stares up at the ceiling without acknowledging her return. His features are composed into a typical visage of unreadable stoicism, but Rose is so attuned to the Doctor’s defence mechanisms by now that she can normally see through them. Tonight, it’s even easier than usual. His mask is worn and fatigued, insufficient to hide this magnitude of sorrow. Try as he might to prevent it, it’s his eyes that always give him away. Dark, glassy, unfocused. She thinks maybe, if he weren’t a Time Lord and too superior for it, he might be crying.

“Mind if I turn the light off?” she asks, surprised by the croakiness of her voice.

Still, he doesn’t turn, but he shakes his head lightly.

Relieved, she flips the switch and the room is plunged into relative darkness. Without the bright overhead lamp, the only source of light is the faint orange glow from the black hole devouring stars outside the window, and the emergency light strips at the baseboards of the room. All very ‘spaceship’ in a way the TARDIS hasn’t felt to her in a long time. She tiptoes the three steps to the edge of the bed and kicks off her shoes.

“Maybe I can get down there,” he murmurs.

“Wha’?” She freezes.

“If I could find a way down there…”

She knows where he’s going with this. If he could get the TARDIS out of the pit, he could rescue them all without a problem. All their troubles would be solved immediately.

“How?”

“I could put on a suit. Go out there. Find a safe route down. Or…”

“You are not jumpin’ down there, don’t even think it,” she reprimands, her voice shaking at the thought.

“I’d just regenerate at the bottom.”

“How d’you know!?” She’s half-yelling, but she doesn’t care. It’s to be expected that her temper would flare up with the emotional stress she’s already under. How can he be even thinking of this? Just a few hours ago, she thought they were in this together. That he didn’t mind being stuck with her, but it looks like he minds a bit more than he led on.

“The risk is small,” he amends.

“Doctor, you can’t,” she pleads, desperation flooding her voice.

“What’s the alternative, hm? Fall into a black hole? Waste away on a strange planet?”

Tears spill hot and copious down her cheeks again. She covers her mouth with her hands and turns away from him, but when she sucks in a strangled breath, she knows privacy is a lost cause.
“Rose, no, I’m… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. Don’t… please don’t cry.”

The bed behind her creaks, and his hand lands on her arm. Tugs on it. But she doesn’t want him to see her breaking down like this, it will only push him away even more.

“C’mere. Please,” he whispers.

Unable to resist a direct plea from him, she turns around. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed, arms outstretched, and she falls into them. Crumpling onto his lap, she wraps herself around him, knees hugging his hips and arms wound tightly around his back, face buried in his shoulder. No strength left to restrain the tears.

“It’s not my fault,” she blubbers into his jacket. “That we’re stuck ‘ere. You’re all I’ve got now. An’ if you left me, I…”

He’s quiet through a long bout of this. Rose doesn’t know what he’s waiting for, or if he intends to respond at all. For a few minutes, he merely rubs his hand soothingly on her back, letting the tears fall without judgment. Eventually, the heaving sobs give way to a quiet, constant stream of tears. It’s only then the Doctor speaks up.

“Hey.” He pushes gently on her shoulder until she pulls back reluctantly to reveal her face, looking down at his tie rather than his face as she waits for whatever rebuke is coming. But he tilts her chin up with one finger despite her wishes, and in the dim light of the room, his dark eyes are shining with worry in the reflection from the window. Anxious creases are carved into his forehead. “I’m not leaving you. I wouldn’t.” He brushes hair back from her face. “Not ever.”

She sniffs, trying to suffocate the sobs and get a hold of herself.

“’Kay.” Her bottom lip wobbles dangerously, and he rubs his hands up and down her sides in an attempt to prevent another episode.

“It’s just… The TARDIS is more than just a ship. To me. She and I are… connected. She’s alive. And she’s the last telepathic link I’ve got. After all this time, I don’t know what I’m going to do without her.”

Of course. Rose knew the TARDIS was telepathic. Why didn’t she consider this? She feels so stupidly selfish now, not having realised this sooner.

“I’m sorry.” It’s all she can think of to say. What words could offer him any comfort him in a situation like this? “I’m so sorry.” She wraps her arms around his neck and crushes herself to him again, her cheek pillowed against the fabric of his jacket. It takes him a few long moments, but he slowly returns the gesture, bringing his arms around her back and resting his chin on her shoulder. Counterintuitive though it seems, with all the added contact, it only gets harder to stifle her tears, and in only a few moments they are soaking into his suit again.

He shushes against her neck. “It’s all right. We’re gonna be all right.”

She doesn’t know how long they sit like that. The only measure she has of the passage of time is the slow drip of tears onto his jacket until her eyes are dry. The circles he draws on her back until her breathing slows back to normal. The relaxing tempo of his own slow, deep breaths once she is calm enough to hear them. The nightmarish grief consuming her from the inside out slowly withdraws back into the shadows in the comfort of his arms, and she savours the peace they share in its absence.

He breaks the stillness suddenly, fidgeting underneath her. “You should get some sleep.”
She interprets this as a clear signal that his intimacy limit has been reached.

“Yeah,” she agrees, sullen. Not wanting to cross a boundary by overstaying her tenuous welcome on his lap, she disentangles herself and climbs off of him.

He gets to his feet and steps aside, adjusting his tie and smoothing out creases in his trousers.

She rolls onto the bed and scoots onto the far side, against the wall to leave him enough room. Zips down her jacket and pulls it off, throwing it on the floor next to her shoes. It’s cold with only her camisole on, but she’ll be more comfortable with a blanket on than a jacket with a metal zip. She reaches down to pull the thin white blanket (or is it just a sheet?) from the foot of the bed up to her navel, and lies down facing the empty half.

He stands there for a moment, restless, rubbing the back of his neck. She’s about to ask if he’s going to stay here or not, but he talks first.

“Mind if I use that toothbrush?”

Surprised by his choice of question, it takes her a moment to answer.

“Erm… I suppose?” It comes out like a question in itself.

Sharing a toothbrush? Isn’t that arguably more intimate than her sitting on his lap? Well, it’s not even that intimate. It’s just a bit gross. But then, the Doctor is weird like that. They shared a popsicle a few weeks ago, and he once put a piece of gum she’d been chewing in his mouth to test her saliva for a native virus. The idea of sharing a toothbrush probably doesn’t repulse him in the least.

He doesn’t say anything more, just disappears quickly behind the curtain, and a yellowish glow radiates from around the blue fabric when he turns the light on. She closes her eyes and listens to the sound of his aggressive brushing, and can’t help but smile. It’s oddly domestic, waiting in a bed they’re about to share for him to finish washing up for the night. Surprisingly soothing. Their prolonged hug did wonders for her emotional state. The pervading sense of loss and loneliness have vanished almost without a trace.

He lingers in there long enough that when the flimsy bed finally dips beside her with a pronounced squeak of the springs, she has nearly nodded off, and has to force her heavy eyelids open.

He chose to lie on his back, a subtle attempt to create personal space for himself, though the narrow width of the bed means their clothes are touching regardless. He squirms a bit on the lumpy economy mattress, finding a suitable position. When he finally lies still for a few seconds, some of the despondency from earlier creeps back into his demeanour. She can almost feel it in the close air between them.

“You gonna be okay?” she asks in a hesitant whisper.

He takes a deep breath, and his Adam’s apple shifts in his throat.

“Something about this planet is blocking our communication,” he breathes, shaking his head in disbelief. “I can’t tell if she’s perished. But it feels like she has.”

After everything he has already said, such direct honesty is unexpected, and Rose is again at a loss for words. What could she possibly say to console him? This is out of her depth. Something that completely transcends the human experience.
“Is there anything I can do?” she asks.

He shifts onto his side and props himself onto his elbow, his fist on his cheek.

“Stay with me.” With most of his face obscured in shadow, it sounds more like a command than a request.

“I mean besides that,” she says, as though that much was a given.

His eyebrows pull together in puzzlement.

“I don’t think so, then.”

“Well, if there was, I’d do it.”

“You’ll be the first to know.”

Something tells her she isn’t getting the whole story there. A niggling in the back of her mind that there is some way she could help he just doesn’t want to confess.

“You don’t think you could… connect with me?” As soon as the words have left her lips, she regrets them. “Or something… I dunno. Maybe not.”

The Doctor’s silence speaks louder than words. He scrutinizes her face with such an intense gaze she has to look away from it. The quiet stretches on for so long that she is gathering the courage to apologize for asking.

“Not in the same way,” he says.

Though not the answer she had hoped for, she’s so relieved that he answered at all that it negates any disappointment.

“Oh.”

“There are some things we could do,” he explains, taking her short answer for rejection. “If you were willing. But that sort of thing wouldn’t be possible, simply because we aren’t telepathically compatible.”

“Right, yeah.” She nods, chuckling humourlessly to herself merely to ease the tension. “‘Course.” She still can’t look at him, staring instead down at the crinkles in the white sheet in the few inches of space between their bodies.

His hand finds hers in the darkness, and he links their fingers together.

“I appreciate the sentiment,” he says. He brushes his thumb across hers, and she mirrors the soothing motion.

“Least I could do.”

“If there were a way to get you back home, I’d do it.”

“I appreciate that sentiment.” She finally musters the courage to meet his eyes. “Long as you come with me.”

“Where else would I go?”
She grins up at him, but he doesn’t smile back. Just regards her with an odd look in his eyes, like he can’t decide what else to say.

“Well, s’pose we should try to get some sleep.” She pulls the sheet higher over herself, but it gets stuck right around her chest because the Doctor is still lying on top of the whole set.

“Mhm,” he nods.

“You’re layin’ on the only blanket.” She tugs on it where it’s stuck under his waist.

“Right.” He scrambles backwards off the bed, watching her pull the sheet down for him with a hand on his chest, like he’s been startled.

“You gonna be comfortable in all that?” She nods toward him, and he glances down at his wardrobe.

“Yeah, I’m… fine.” At her prodding, he crumples down onto the bed again with a high-pitched groan from the mattress, and pulls the sheet over himself.

They lie there for a few moments, shifting on the bed and adjusting their heads on their respective pillows.

“You tired?” she asks, just as a yawn overtakes her.

He sighs. “No.”

“You haven’t slept in a few nights.” She feels like his mother when she does this, but she gets worried about him when he doesn’t sleep. He may not be human, but he does get more emotionally unstable when he doesn’t sleep a few nights in a row. And in the current circumstances, emotional instability is the last thing either of them needs.

“Lot on my mind.”

“Me too. But I think it would help if we got some sleep.”

To her surprise, he scoots closer to her, until their knees knock together and he drapes an arm around her, pulling her against him with his fingers splayed on her back. She curls her fists into his jacket and burrows against his neck, inhaling the scent of him, infused with the hint of peppermint still on his breath. Peaceful in his embrace, worries temporarily forgotten in this cocoon, slumber beckons her. But before she can heed its call, the Doctor does something even more unexpected.

Before it even registers properly in her mind, he bows his head, nuzzles her cheek with his nose. She lifts her head infinitesimally towards him, purring at the unfamiliar pleasant sensation. He must just be getting comfortable, she thinks, or is half delirious out of sleep deprivation. She doesn’t let it get weird, and just enjoys the intimacy while it lasts.

But then his lips brush against her cheek, slightly parted, and she shivers as his warm breath ghosts over her skin. Alert, but not brave enough to open her eyes, she tilts her head in search of his mouth, testing his intention. He pauses with his lips a millimetre above her skin, just shy of her lips. It would only take one shift from either of them to close the short distance, but her heart is in her throat, her muscles frozen in fear that he’ll pull away any moment. That awareness will catch up with him and he’ll stop this, like he always does.

Instead of pulling away, he tilts his head down just an inch more and touches his lips to hers. Light enough pressure that she can stop it before it starts; they can both pretend it was an accident and
forget about it. It’s over in a fraction of a second, and he pulls back, his mouth hovering so close to hers she can feel his hitched breaths. He waits for her to stop him, to give any signal that she doesn’t want this. And when she doesn’t, he pushes forward again. The second kiss is firmer, and lasts longer, but still hesitant – his lips are still and tense against hers like any sudden movement could scare them away completely. And Rose is so taken aback by this abrupt step forward in their as of yet non-existent relationship that she doesn’t respond properly.

It could be a dream. Or a test. She doesn’t know what it is. But they don’t kiss. It’s simply not something they do. It’s something they did once, when the heat of the moment got the Doctor caught up because she had saved his life. But they never spoke about it, and he never repeated it, so it was not something she ever expected to happen again. Instead of kissing him back or learning what his lips feel like, she spends the duration of the kiss doubting the reality of its occurrence, and before long he pulls away again. Retreating further this time.

“Sorry,” he mutters.

He lifts his hand away from her back and starts to roll away completely, but she lifts her hand up to his cheek to hold him still. She does not want him to be sorry for kissing her again. She wets her lips and leans over to kiss him properly, and the moment she brushes her lips against his, he blossoms to life next to her. His hand delves into her hair to keep her from pulling away, and his lips part beneath hers, an invitation.

His lips are soft, and minty sweet, with just a hint of the the old library essence that clings to his clothes. His tender, curious kiss belies his usual caution regarding intimacy. The hard and cold approach he’s taken with romance up until this point is forgotten for as long as their mouths are touching. A whimper escapes her lips as she clutches his lapels in both hands and tugs him ever closer.

He cups her jaw and angles his head to tease her bottom lip with his tongue, and she parts her lips to let him inside. He breathes out a deep hum of satisfaction as she relinquishes the control to him. Her fingers bury into his hair to beg him not to stop. Several long moments pass as they sink deeper into the kiss, leaving the impossible planet behind to find solace in each other.

In a moment of clarity amidst the clouds of bliss, Rose realises she is no longer on her side but her back, her arms pinned down next to her by the Doctor’s much stronger hands. His mouth wanders from hers to her jaw and over her throat, leaving a messy trail of kisses that has her squirming underneath him. When his teeth sink gently into a patch of skin beneath her ear, she breathes out his name and bucks up against him.

And suddenly, it’s too much for him.

He pulls back and lifts up onto his knees, the only part of them touching now his hands on her wrists. He stares down at her, panting, his shadowy eyes wide with panic.

“I’m sorry, I’m…” His hands jump away, too, freeing her wrists but sinking her spirits.

“What’s –” she starts to ask.

“I can’t,” he rushes out, crashing down onto his back next to her with his arms crossed over his chest. “I’m sorry.”

“Doctor, what’s wrong? What’s happened?” She rests her hand over one of his, and he jumps at this small contact.
“It’s just… I can’t. We shouldn’t have…”

“Okay,” she soothes him, moving her hand to somewhere his jacket covers, hoping he’ll be less uncomfortable with it. He’s emotional and vulnerable right now, and she doesn’t want to make him feel pressured to do anything, or guilty for wanting to stop. It’s not her place to say what he’s ready to do. She wasn’t expecting anything like this tonight; she’ll simple be glad she got to enjoy as much as she did. “It’s okay. It’s fine, yeah? Don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” She rubs her thumb on his elbow, smirking in the dim light.

“Do you still want to stay with me?” she asks, hoping to God he says yes because she doesn’t know how she’ll stop herself from begging if he says no.

“Yeah,” he answers immediately. “Please.”

“Okay. Good, yeah. Of course. I’ll stay on my side. I promise.” She gestures down to the invisible barrier between them, but he shakes his head.

“You don’t have to.” He gulps. “I mean we can… but we can’t…”

She doesn’t know what he’s trying to say.

“Whatever you want,” she offers.

“I want to… hold you.” It looks and sounds genuinely painful for him to get the last two words out. “But that’s all.”

“Okay,” she agrees. She scoots closer to him, watching his face carefully to gauge his reaction. He doesn’t move, so she curls her arm around him and rests her cheek on his shoulder. “This okay?”

She looks up at him through her lashes, and he nods vigorously.

Consent given, she curls up a little cosier against him, closing her eyes to attempt to actually sleep. He slowly wraps his arm around her shoulder, stroking his hand up and down her bare arm.

“Goodnight, Doctor.”

He presses his lips to the top of her head in response.

Whatever happens in the morning, whether or not he is ready for another snog session like that soon, they’re going to be okay. They have to be, because all they have now is each other.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

The plot thickens! Hahaha. Thanks once again to Amber and Heidi!

Rose pauses halfway down the ramp and turns around. The Doctor can sense her eyes are zeroed in
on him, but he doesn’t look up, just stares resolutely at the empty black screen of the monitor he’s
pretending to read. The idea of this temporary farewell being dragged out does not appeal to him,
or does a list of detailed reasons for her departure. He doesn’t need a reminder of how rubbish he
is after a crisis.

“Sure you don’t want to come?” she asks.

He shakes his head.

“Sounds like you want some quality time. Besides, I’ve got a bit of maintenance to do after that
fall. The pool and the library are in a state you wouldn’t believe. And I think the gravitic
anomalizer and the seismic scanner…”

“Got it,” she interrupts, stopping him before he can elaborate further. (He knew she would.) “I can
help you later tonight, yeah?”

“Won’t be necessary.” He pushes his bottom lip out and shakes his head again. “The TARDIS and
I will have everything taken care of by the time you get back.”

Okay, he’s being a bit tetchy. But it’s only because what he really wants to do is convince her not
to leave him, and he knows he shouldn’t do that. He was completely, one hundred percent lying
when he said he’d had enough of the hugs and reassurances and was okay with her visiting her
mum for the day. He was planning on taking her home soon anyway; it had been a few solid weeks
since her last visit and he knew she would want to see her mother after what they’d been through.
But for her to ask first thing in the morning, before she’d even emerged from under the covers?
And to be gone the entire day? Just because she wanted some ‘girl talk’? He was too taken aback
by the request to do anything except pretend he was fine with it, but the more he’s thought about it
since, the more snubbed he feels. Does she think what happened on that trip didn’t affect him?

Things hadn’t grown heated the previous night, as they had on that tiny cot, but they had shared
Rose’s bed, and there was still more physical contact than usual. Rose was still frightened by what
the devil had said, and in all honesty he was, too. And cuddling comes naturally to them after trips
go sour; the closest source comfort they both have is each other. But they hadn’t talked about
anything they had inadvertently revealed, or the fact that they both came dangerously close to
death. Or the fact that they kissed. For a long time. And that they both seemed to rather enjoy it.

Based on all prior experience with Rose where anything relationship-related is concerned, he
assumed a conversation about all of the aforementioned was imminent. But it hasn’t come. Rose
seems as loath to talk about everything that happened there as he is, and it’s inconsistent enough
with her usual behaviour that it unsettles him. Tells him that one of his assumptions is wrong. And
right now, the leading candidate for the incorrect assumption is that she enjoyed the kiss as much
as she seemed to at the time. It’s the only explanation that makes sense.
And even though he’s the one who panicked and ended it, and he stands by his decision to forego any future romantic pursuits due to their many inherent complications, it still stings to think that to himself. Somewhere in a repressed corner of his mind, since those seven minutes and thirty-two seconds of passion, he’s been chuffed at the idea that Rose has fancied him all along. To find out that to her, it may have been nothing more than a provisional source of physical comfort, a mistake made in a moment of vulnerability, makes his hearts sink more than he would have thought. Regardless if he will ever allow anything more to happen, he hadn’t realized how much the mere idea of her requited affections was keeping him afloat.

“You’ll be on time?” she asks, interrupting his moping.

“Rose, I’m not even going anywhere.” He pulls the sonic out of his jacket, tosses it in the air and catches it again to illustrate his point.

“’Kay. I’ll see you later.” She smiles at him, but it’s weak. Like she’s picking up on his foul mood.

The words spark his memory, though: he’d said the exact same thing to her yesterday. An idea comes to him. A peace offering.

“Not if I see you first.” One corner of his mouth pulls up. Not a full smile, but it’s something.

Her smiles stretches into a proper one as she waves once and then turns for the exit.

Confident that his words sufficed to convince her he isn’t angry, he pulls his glasses out of his jacket, perches them carefully on his nose, and wrenches open the first panel as the TARDIS door closes behind her. He jumps down inside of it with a clang of his trainers on the metal that reverberates through the room.

The first thing to catch his eye is a fried wire on the thermocouple on engine four. First things first, then.

As much as the buzz of the sonic screwdriver and fusing frayed wires relaxes him, and as much as he wants to wallow over his failures as a romantic paradigm in the vacuum of loneliness Rose leaves behind, his mind resists both relaxation and wallowing. Before he completes even the first task of the morning, the only emotion roiling in his head is guilt.

He shouldn’t have left Rose on her own, especially after what happened on the base.

Several minutes pass as he tests the function of the newly repaired thermocouple for proper temperature sensitivity, and he surrenders himself to the shame and regret as it floods through him. Maybe he can postpone the repairs for a few hours and go and find her, and they can talk about some of the things on their mind. Now isn’t a good time for them to be apart.

Wait.

What?

Why should he feel guilty?

She’s the one who asked for time apart so quickly after a traumatic experience. The one who walked out before they got around to any real discussion. Who apparently prefers the comfort of her mother over that of her definitely-not-boyfriend.

None of this is his doing. He didn’t set the randomiser with the intention of getting them stuck on Krop Tor, or offer his help down by the drill with the hope he would get himself trapped in the pit.
with no way back up. And the extended scare with losing the TARDIS affected him more than it did Rose; it’s impossible that it didn’t.

What reason should he have to feel guilty?

It’s a soft, sentimental kind of guilt, too. Not the typical all-consuming, self-loathing kind of guilt that he has become intimately familiar with since the Time War. Something about it feels foreign, almost… out of place.

He’s suddenly reminded of the episode on Jihoko when he was overcome with jealousy and futile longing with no logical basis. Could the two incidents be connected? Some toxin he ingested that’s bringing about mood swings, or a synapse malfunction resulting from lack of sleep? He’d done a brief scan for pathophysiology and foreign compounds after Jihoko, and he quickly performs one again now, on the off chance he’d missed something before. But it comes up as blank as the first time. Temperature: normal. Blood glucose: normal. Neurotransmitter levels: normal. Whatever might be interfering with his mind, it isn’t biological.

Shutting off the screwdriver momentarily, he closes his eyes and reaches out to the TARDIS for assistance. With the telepathic equivalent of an S.O.S, he beseeches her to investigate potential causes of the emotional anomalies.

The TARDIS, however, spurns his request for help, and feels compelled to rebuke him for asking at all. Without warning, she dives inside his head and scrambles his thoughts painfully through his voluntarily weakened mental defences.

“Aghhh!” he groans, grabbing his head in both hands until the rush of throbbing disorientation recedes.

“What the bloody hell was that for?” he whinges, directing a powerful surge of fury towards the time rotor through the still-aching tendrils of his mind.

Unfazed by his anger, she responds with a quiet, calm insistence that nothing is amiss.

“If there’s nothing amiss, then why’d you muddle my brain,” he mutters, still rubbing his temples a bit. “It hurt.”

After a moment of silence, the time rotor breathes more loudly than usual, and then the TARDIS transmits an image of an olive branch.

He rolls his eyes.

“I don’t accept your apology.”

Confident enough that he will in time, she again promises him that nothing is wrong with him.

“Nothing is wrong with me?” he repeats, analysing her word choice for clues. “Nothing is wrong with me… Nothing is wrong with me… Nothing is wrong with me.”

She rolls a figurative set of eyes at him.

“Maybe you were more damaged by that little tumble into the pit than I thought. Maybe I ought to swipe and reset your telepathic interface.”

He’d never do such a thing, and she knows it. The moment he stepped inside last night, the TARDIS had seen first-hand the hollow ache of loss he experienced when he thought she was lost;
the memories had cast an ugly shadow on the bright light of their reunion. He couldn’t hide anything from her.

But the threat still serves its purpose, and she apologises for rolling her eyes.

He scoops up his screwdriver from where it slipped from his hand when she mentally chastised him, and begins to scan the array of boards, buttons, and wires around him for signs of wear.

A few moments of relative silence pass between them, only the slow inhale-exhale of the time rotor to keep his ears from ringing. He straightens out a few kinks in some copper wires and tightens a few loose screws without issue, but when he finds a snapped belt on the atom accelerator and there isn’t a screwdriver setting he can program to fix it, he begins a mental list of parts he’ll have to check in storage for.

On the plus side, while he’s been so preoccupied, the guilt has almost completely subsided.

Climbing out of the panel and moving onto the next, he extends a hesitant, careful greeting to the TARDIS with a singular branch of his mind, this time with his defences armed.

When she welcomes his presence, he asks her for help to pinpoint damaged parts he can categorise for repair or replacement. She seems surprised, but agrees.

He makes his way around the console with her guidance, and his mental list of parts grows to more than a dozen items by the time the last metal panel in the sequence slams closed.

“Sorry, girl,” he says, as the extent of the injuries she suffered hits him. He wipes his hands on his jacket to rid them of some grease and metal splinters, and slumps onto the jump seat for a moment of rest before he goes in search of parts.

It’s not his fault, she says.

“You did try to warn us.” If crossing timelines weren’t forbidden, that is certainly one of the places he’d want to go back and stop himself: his and Rose’s moment of hesitation outside the TARDIS in that storage closet. He’d shove both their reckless arses back inside so none of this will have happened. But then, if he did that, the entire team at the Sanctuary Base would die.

The TARDIS strongly suggests the accident wasn’t all bad, and it’s hard to argue with her.

“Still,” he sighs, stroking a coral just behind his head. “Wish you hadn’t taken the brunt of that mistake.”

She wishes the same.

He throws his feet up onto the console and leans back in the chair, to signify a change of subject.

“So you won’t tell me what you know?”

She doesn’t deploy an offensive strategy this time, but she does tell him to stop asking.

“Why?”

Evidently, this is something she thinks he needs to figure out on his own.

Well, brilliant.

Is there a Time Lord version of puberty no one every told him about? He’s coming up completely
He rubs his hand down his face and groans a little bit to try to guilt trip her, but she is utterly silent. *Seems about right,* he nods to himself.

He jumps down from the chair and heads out of the room, making a mental map for the storage room. If the *TARDIS* isn’t concerned about whatever is making him slightly emotionally volatile, then he shouldn’t be either. He is confident in his ability to discern any malevolent telepathic forces at work, and he doesn’t sense any. Whatever this is, he’ll get to the bottom of it (without the help of his ship). But right now, his priority is getting the *TARDIS* back in top shape.

He runs his hand down the wall of the corridor as he goes, and rather than clinging onto his bitterness with her, tries to remember how lucky he is that he still has her at all. It’s been a long time since he was as terrified as he was in those dreadful hours he thought she was lost. The only thing worse he can imagine would be if Rose had fallen instead.

**Speaking of Rose.**

What are they going to do when she returns? Will she breach the subject of ‘them,’ or at the very least ask about what happened on that cot? Normally he’d say chances are high that she will, but it *is* odd that she hasn’t asked already. They had an entire night together, plenty of opportunities to bring it up that she let pass as readily as he did.

If she doesn’t bring it up, then he won’t either. If she wants to forget about the whole thing, he’s okay with that. He has to be okay with that, at least externally.

Internally, the indecision is tearing him apart. The craving to kiss her like that again, and the instinct to run before she leaves him empty and broken, tugging each of his hearts in opposite directions. He’s finding it more and more difficult to look at her or even think of her without evoking vivid memories of that kiss. The taste of her lips and the gentle touches of her hands on his face and in his hair. Soft, warm curves pressed against him as he held her close. Her soft little moans into his mouth and the way she whispered his name.

A shiver rolls down his spine as he opens the door to the storage room, and he lets out a shaky breath.

No denying he wants another kiss. And more than that.

But can he handle the repercussions that follow upon a physical relationship? It’s what frightened him that night, and it’s what will frighten him in the days to come. Nothing about their situation has changed: he’s still a quasi-immortal Time Lord and she’s still a human who will barely live another century. He still doesn’t have a proper home planet or family to ever return to; she does. He’s still wired to crave telepathic contact, and even if she weren’t still freaked out by the idea of anything being inside her head except herself (and he wants to believe she isn’t, after what she offered last night), she doesn’t have the mental capacity for it. He’s still nine hundred and she’s still twenty.

The Doctor smacks himself on the forehead with his palm. Both their hypothetical desires aside, they can never travel down the road of romance. Or the road of anything beyond platonic companionship. He slipped, the other night, because they were both in pain, physically closer than he normally permits, and in a moment of weakness, he sought emotional solace from her lips.

Weakness is debatable, he supposes.
He should give himself more credit. Willpower only goes so far. Sleeping next to someone you’re desperately attracted to, while emotionally compromised, and expecting to make it through the night without snogging is downright foolish.

He only hopes Rose views it the same way, and is avoiding a discussion purely to avoid the awkwardness that would likely accompany it.

He is able to find eleven of the fourteen items on his mental checklist scattered in various shelves and chests around the massive garage that is the storage room. As he makes his way back out the door and down the hall with the various metal contraptions bundled in his hands, he starts to chart out a potential flight plan for the three destinations they will need to visit. One tourism-centred city on a caninoid planet, one asteroid, and one sector of an intergalactic space station with a very questionable atmosphere for humans. Rose may have to stay in the TARDIS for that one. But that first planet has plenty of shops that would interest Rose, and the asteroid has some of the best ice cream in the entire universe – those things should keep her in a good enough mood that she won’t mind sitting one very brief excursion out.

Confident that tomorrow will be a better day, and that they can move past whatever weirdness he’s created, he finds himself humming ‘Jailhouse Rock’ to himself as he installs the parts into their respective panels. Elvis songs have been stuck in his head on and off ever since the concert.

Though Rose strongly suggested she may be out the entire day, when she bursts through the TARDIS doors, it’s only half one, local time. Her face lights up when he peeks his head out from beneath the grating.

“Back already?” he asks, a huge smile plastered on his face as he hops up to her level and stuffs his glasses in his jacket.

“Already? It felt like ages.” She bites her lip in a way that he thinks is meant to be flirtatious. Like she’s accidentally said too much. And that’s just fuel for his ego.

“Well…” He shrugs, tilting his head to the side.

“Anyway, I was thinkin’ bout that chippie we like just down the street. Want to go get lunch?”

He hasn’t eaten anything yet today, and he should be able to finish this up quickly when they return. Chips sound like a delicious and uncomplicated way to forget about desperate kisses beneath black holes and enjoy each other’s company. The fact that he was so worried about awkwardness and scary conversations when he saw her again seems ridiculous, in retrospect. With only the gift of her presence, Rose has a knack for evaporating all his fears away before he can drown in them.

With a grin, the Doctor crosses the distance between them and links their hands together, brushing his thumb over hers as a symbol of his gratitude that she came back to him so quickly.

“Lunch sounds brilliant.”
The Doctor turns the circular silver trinket over in his palm, inspecting it close to his face as a ‘clearly-not-impressed’ frown pulls his mouth down.

“It was a gift from a friend of mine,” says the king. “Sent from the stars, like you two.” He fidgets restlessly on his throne of bright red and gold adorned with plush fabrics and furs, and his many rolls of fat jiggle with each shift. “No one else has yet been able to replicate the technology. It’s been broken for…” He coughs violently into his arm. “Three years. And not a visit yet from dear old Griswold.”

“It’s a watch,” the Doctor announces, entirely unconcerned with the king’s contextual information.

“Watch?” the king asks, scratching his black beard. “It’s a time keeper. Synchronized with our star. It used to be able to tell the precise progress of its trajectory through the sky, without ever having to go outside to confirm it.”

The Doctor reaches into his jacket for his sonic screwdriver, and carefully opens up the back of the watch to examine its interior: a frozen collection of gears and screws.

“A rubbish watch,” the Doctor continues, appearing not to have heard a word the king said.

Even after all this time, Rose gasps at his audacity. She glances over at the king, and his thick eyebrows have sunk low over his eyes, his dark hands clenched tightly into fists, thick knuckles going white. She turns her gaze to the guards stationed at the main door behind them, and all their own hands are tightened around their spears. Their menacing eyes are all fixed on his majesty, waiting for the order to charge them through the Doctor’s spine for insolence.

“These two wheels are rusted...” the Doctor carries on, oblivious. “And is this arbour made of plastic?” he asks incredulously, poking at the machinery with the tip of his finger.

Rose abruptly elbows him hard in the ribs.

The Doctor doesn’t gasp or jump, or appear to have been at all harmed by the blow, but he does turn to her, affronted and awaiting an explanation.

She clears her throat, and tilts her head surreptitiously towards the king with urgency in her eyes.

The Doctor turns his gaze to investigate, and seeing the king’s expression, finally realizes his mistake.

“But... it is beautiful,” he appends, nodding his head in a new appraisal of the device. “Really, top-
"notch," he lies unconvincingly.

Still, the king appears appeased, his angry grimace replaced for now with a tentative smirk. So it seems like they’re off the hook.

“And I can definitely repair it,” the Doctor assures him. “Simple. The escapement is stuck due to rust accumulation, and the regulator on the harmonic oscillator needs to be replaced. Easy fixes.”

“Excellent news!” the king bellows with a laugh, rubbing his belly.

“In fact, I can do it right now, I’ve got a couple of spare parts in an old manual wristwatch somewhere in…” The Doctor lightly closes the watch and transfers it to the hand holding the screwdriver, perching it between a couple of fingers while his free hand dives into his pocket.

“I can get you set up with a station in the workshop in the east wing,” the king offers.

“Oh, no, that won’t be necessary,” the Doctor interjects.

But as the Doctor waves his hand as a gesture of refusal, the screwdriver slips from between his thumb and index finger. Startled by the movement, he closes his hand more tightly around the device, and in the process, knocks the king’s watch from its place nestled between the next pair of fingers.

It all occurs in slow motion from there. The watch jumps slightly into the air. The Doctor’s eyes go wide as he realizes what he’s done. Hard-wired to value the screwdriver more than most other objects, his left hand doesn’t release its grip, and instead, his right hand flies out of his pocket. It makes a futile attempt to catch the watch, but the metal bounces off his knuckles and soars to the right, out of his reach. He fumbles through the air a few more times, hoping for a miracle, but his target evades him.

The watch reaches its final destination – the hard stone floor of the throne room – and its collision echoes off the distant walls, proclaiming a death sentence for them both. The clang of the metal, the shatter of glass, pings of tiny parts scattering onto the ground.

Well, it’s definitely well and broken now.

Rose’s hands fly over her mouth. The Doctor hastily stashes his screwdriver safely back in his jacket, and tears a hand through his hair with an exaggerated grimace.

“I can still fix this,” the Doctor suggests to the king, pulling at the knot in his tie with a nervous smile.

“GUARDS!” he bellows, heaving himself to his feet with tremendous effort.

Each of the guards in the room bangs their spear on the floor in unison, a sound as threatening as the clicks of loaded ammunition from a firing squad. Slowed by his weight though the king may be, the blokes stationed around the room are thoroughly and impressively in shape.

“No, no, no!” The Doctor waves his hands in an attempt to defuse the situation, and kneels down quickly to collect the watch and scattered pieces from the floor. “I promise, I’m very clever, I’ll have it good as new before you can –”

“Seize them!” the king commands over the Doctor’s pleas.

“Right then,” the Doctor squeaks, gathering everything into one hand and stuffing it into the
opposite pocket of his jacket before he grabs Rose’s hand.

“RUN!” And he tugs her into a full sprint.

They dash for the single door at the southeast corner, a stampede of heavy armour hot on their trail, and the Doctor crashes into it and turns the handle. It’s unlocked. They burst through the doorway and slam the door behind them, and the Doctor locks it with the screwdriver before he tows her down a long, arched hallway filled with doors on either side. But rather than checking any of these doors, the Doctor rushes them both towards a cupboard built into the wall. He throws open the door, and it’s half-filled with shields painted with the royal insignia.

A door handle jiggles violently down the hall.

The Doctor reaches into his pocket again, pulls out his TARDIS key and screwdriver, fiddles with it for a fraction of a second, and hangs it on the handle.

“What’re you doin’?” Rose asks, an edge of panic in her voice.

Clangs of metal and thuds of bodies echo down the hall as the guards begin to throw themselves into the locked door from the other side.

“Never mind, come on!” The Doctor hurries her inside, and she clambers inside obediently. It’s too short for either of them to stand, and too shallow to sit with their backs against the shields, but just wide enough that it might accommodate them both if they sit sideways. Scooting back against the stack of shields to leave him room, she pulls her knees up and tries to mentally prepare herself for this. He scrambles in next to her, thighs and hips and shoulder flush against hers, and pulls the door closed, and the tiny closet is plunged into darkness.

“Like they aren’t gonna look in here?” she whispers, fidgeting to try to make as little of their bodies touch as possible.

“I installed a perception filter on that key years ago,” he explains in a harsh, rushed whisper. “I just activated it with the sonic.”

“Perception filter?”

“A low-level telepathic device that prevents the user from being seen.”

“So we’re invisible in ‘ere?”

“Not invisible. Just unnoticed. It misdirects attention away from itself, and whatever it’s attached to.”

“So we’re safe?”

“Chances are very slim that any of the inhabitants here have the level of intelligence required to see through a perception filter.”

Rose flinches against the Doctor as a thundering crash echoes outside their shelter, and planks and splinters of wood clatter onto the floor. The guards have broken down the door.

“Check them all,” a deep, rumbling voice commands.

The Doctor and Rose freeze as the scuffle of guards outside spreads through the hall, and a few footfalls approach their hiding place. The Doctor doesn’t seem to be breathing at all, and not for
the first time, Rose envies his ability to completely silence his existence. Though she’s doing her best to suppress them, the occasional shallow, panicked breaths through her mouth sound loud enough in the tight enclosure to alert even the deaf.

A loud thump somewhere behind them makes Rose gasp aloud, and the Doctor reaches deftly over to cover her mouth with his hand just as the nearest hall door buckles and splinters as the guards break it down, too. Down the hall further, several unlocked doors open in sequence followed by many brusque shouts of the word ‘empty.’

Suddenly, Rose is glad the Doctor didn’t steer them into one of the adjacent rooms.

The heavy, clacking stomps of boots advance even closer towards the cupboard. Heart pounding in her throat, Rose clings onto the Doctor’s arm.

But the suits of armour pass them by, continuing on past them without even pausing at what was before a very obvious storage cupboard.

The clamour of the search continues, shouted orders and squeaky hinges and kicked, smashed doors. But after a few minutes, the guards have fanned out to reach further and further rooms in either direction, and the hall slowly falls quiet.

The Doctor pulls his hand back, and Rose sighs with relief.

“They won’t find us,” he reassures her, fidgeting next to her.

“What’re you doing?” she asks, too loudly.

“Shhh,” he admonishes, but continues to squirm.

Finally, with a tiny clicking sound, the tiny cupboard is illuminated in bright bluish-white light that burns her darkness-adjusted corneas. She squints her eyes and shields her face from the small torch with one hand.

“Sorry,” the Doctor breathes. She hears the faint buzz of the sonic screwdriver, and the light dies down in an instant to the soft, tolerable glow of a book light.

“Hold this.” He hands her the torch and she accepts it, shining it away from both their faces until the beam is directed at the opposite wall.

He reaches into his jacket pocket, pulls out his specs and perches them on the bridge of his nose, and then reaches into the opposite pocket to retrieve the broken watch, along with the busted pieces that had fallen onto the floor.

“How’re you gonna fix a watch you’ve never seen before without any proper tools?”
He scowls at her in the low light, offended.

“I’m brilliant.”

She rolls her eyes, but can’t argue. He is brilliant.

She adjusts the light where he needs it, back and forth between her hand and the watch as he inspects it and the missing pieces closely. She watches with rapt attention as he deconstructs the watch further before it can be repaired: his intense focus on the intricate parts, and the delicacy with which he handles and extracts tiny screws and gears. The way his eyebrows pull close together in concentration and his tongue touches behind his teeth. His soft, unintelligible murmurs about mechanics and calculations. It’s all enough to make her a bit flushed.

She swallows hard as beads of sweat drip down her back.

This is embarrassing. How could someone repairing a watch turn her on?

Well, it’s not someone repairing a watch. It’s the Doctor. Today was already slated to be difficult for her, because it’s one of those unparalleled good hair days for him, and he’s wearing her favourite tie: the blue and brown and white swirly one made of silk. Throw those stupid, sexy thick-rimmed glasses and his tongue into the mix, and shove them both into close proximity in a warm, dark room? It’s a recipe for disaster.

She reminisces on the conversation she had with her mum a week earlier, hoping it will rejuvenate her willpower.

“Should I… I dunno, make a move or something? Ask him?” she had asked over their eggs and toast. She had confessed everything about the kiss, but left out the details about losing the TARDIS and nearly getting sucked into a black hole, so her mum was still in an agreeable mood. Was excited about it, even.

“Has he kissed you again?” her mum had asked.

“No, not since… and we were together all night, but…” she’d left out a few more details there to spare her mother images she didn’t need to see.

“Yeah, sweetheart, talk to him. Tell ‘im how you feel about it,” she suggested.

“Well I sort of… already told him. That it was okay with me if he wanted to wait.” She hadn’t remembered her exact words, muddled as everything about that night was, but thought it was something along those lines.

“Is it?”

“Is it what?”

“Okay with you?”

“Yeah,” Rose had answered automatically. “Of course.”

“I think you have your answer then, don’t you?”

“Really?” Somehow, she had hoped her mum would encourage her to shortcut the waiting and instigate something herself. Hearing the opposite had been a bit of a let-down.

“I wouldn’t say this about most blokes, mind. ‘Specially not that blockhead you dated back in high
“Mum,” she’d scolded her, bringing her back to the point.

“Right. I wouldn’t say this about most blokes, but I think you might have to be patient with him. He’s different, y’know? Not even human. You two are both trying to figure this out. If it even can work. Does he even have all the right bits?”

“MUM!” she had cried out, her face flooding with heat.

“All right, sorry.” She hadn’t looked sorry. “But what I’m sayin’ is, I don’t think he’s just muckin’ about. He cares about you. The way he looks at you and moves around you. It’s obvious.”

“It is?” she had asked, shocked.

“Very.” Her mum had nodded. “To just about everyone. ‘Cept you, sweetheart.”

Rose had resolved to stay patient and wait for him to be ready to progress further, and hadn’t hassled him with difficult conversations or breached his comfort zone for physical contact since. Love is patient, the old adage advised.

But this. This is going to try her learned patience.

He’s transferring parts from the spare watch he had in his trouser pocket now (which he finally found), placing them in the broken watch with the caution and precision of a surgeon. Tightening fittings and screws with occasional brief whirs of the screwdriver. She really should just stop watching him to take away the temptation, but it’s mesmerizing to watch those hands at work; she can’t seem to look away.

By the time he’s finally taken the last gear from her damp and overheated palm, she is just about ready to burst into flames. It isn’t fair. And it doesn’t make sense that something so nerdy and boring could be so ridiculously arousing. But then, is there anything the Doctor does that isn’t arousing these days?

She sighs softly to herself. Evidently, she’s been neglecting her own needs.

With all the parts in their appropriate places, she thinks they may finally be able to escape this sexually charged closet. But the Doctor perches his fingertips on the crown and turns it clockwise by a fraction of a full rotation. The gears and wheels inside spring to life, but a series of tiny, but audible clunks and grinds of metal on metal signal there is still something wrong.

“Oil sink is dry,” he murmurs. “Chronometer won’t be accurate without some lubrication…”

He reaches into his left trouser pocket yet again, and after a quick search, emerges with a small container, its shape similar to ones used for eye drops. Removing the cap, he angles the dropped over a precise spot above the lagging machinery, and squeezes the bottle until a few small droplets fall from the tip. He tilts and rotates the watch to get it in the places he wants it, but still doesn’t seem happy with the outcome. Scooping up the screwdriver again, he aims it at the watch with a higher-pitched whir until the gears stop moving. Bottle in hand once more, he squeezes a droplet of the light yellow oil onto his finger, then holds the watch up to his face and touches the droplet to one particular wheel. He guides his fingertip around the surface of it, gently rubbing the viscous liquid into tiny crevices and making sure it fills the teeth of the gear. A tiny bead of oil is leftover near the edge of the interior, where it doesn’t belong. He brushes his thumb over it a few times to clean it away, stroking the rim with feather-light pressure.
Rose nearly whimpers aloud. This is torture.

Thumb and finger poised on the crown again, he turns it a couple of revolutions around, and the machinery comes to life again. But this time with the harmonious, smooth clicking sounds of a properly functioning clock.

The Doctor chuckles proudly to himself as he re-seals the casing on the watch and aims the screwdriver at the broken glass. With only a few seconds on setting 119 – re-crystallizing broken glass – the deep cracks in the face of the watch shrink and disappear. Another handful of seconds, and the dull whitish sheen obscuring the numbers and hands inside transforms to crystal clear glass. It looks brand new.

After the repaired watch and the screwdriver are tucked safely away in his jacket, he leans close to her to whisper in her ear.

“Told you I was brilliant.”

The next few moments pass in a blur. One second, she’s scoffing in acknowledgement of what he said, staring down at his bottom lip and biting her own, and the next, she’s moaning softly into his mouth while her hands bury themselves in his hair.

He loops an arm around her waist to pull her even closer to him, and answers with a contented hum from the back of his throat. And the way his mouth responds eagerly to hers, attentive to her every movement, persuades her that he is enjoying this almost as much as she is. Determined to make her melt in his arms, he leisurely tempers her desperate kisses with steady, patient brushes of his lips. Her urgency slowly ebbs and she sags contentedly against him, not a chance in the universe of ever pulling back.

Even though they have a working watch now, she loses track of how many minutes pass them by, the guards and the king forgotten.

Some indeterminate amount of time later, Rose is only a few more tastes of the Doctor’s tongue away from climbing onto his lap and shagging him right in this cupboard. But before she can, the Doctor suddenly pulls away with a messy smack, and her arms drop from behind his head as he leans to the left. Presses his ear against the door.

“I think they’ve all gone,” he mutters.

“Mmm?” she mumbles, rather woozy.

“The guards. I don’t hear them. We should be clear.”

Before she can protest, he cracks open the door and peeks through it.

Apparently seeing no one, he swings it open all the way and kicks open the other, and climbs out and onto his feet. He takes the key from the door, and reaches inside for the torch, clicks it off, and stows both items back in his trousers.

“C’mon,” he says, normal volume now. “Let’s get this watch back to the king before his armed forces catch up with us.”

Dazed, and lightheaded with lust, it takes her a moment to process his statement. She is hesitant to climb out, or even move in the slightest. One wrong shift between her legs and she might climax right here in this bloody closet.
But she has no choice, really, with him standing there waiting, his hair a vertical disarray from her fingers, his swollen lips smeared with her pink lip gloss. Maybe he plans to continue this later when they’re properly alone.

Neither of them says anything as they hurry down the hall for the door to the throne room, and Rose starts to mourn her lack of self-control. He’s acting like nothing happened, just like the last time they kissed, and she isn’t sure why. He seemed to find it pleasurable enough. Maybe he still just isn’t ready. Maybe there’s some ritual necessary for Time Lords to engage in romantic relationships that they haven’t done yet. But now is not the time to ask, she thinks. Not when she can hardly think of anything but unwrapping that suit like a Christmas present and shaving him senseless. That conversation needs to happen at a time when she is clear-headed and calm.

This visit needs to be over, immediately. She’s going to need some time alone when they get back to the TARDIS.

The Doctor presents the watch to the king (not without being threatened at spear-point by the guard who stayed behind to protect him), and upon seeing that it is functioning normally, the Doctor’s previous transgression is instantly forgotten. The king even gives them both an invitation to dinner this evening. On Rose’s insistence that she’d like to go home, the Doctor politely declines, and they receive his blessing to depart unharmed.

The king escorts them back to the TARDIS, which is parked just outside the palace garden, so none of the other guards wrongfully executes them. He bids them farewell and promises them hospitality should they ever like to return.

When they’re safely within the confines of the TARDIS, Rose loiters a few moments to see whether or not the Doctor is planning to pin her against the doors and continue where they left off. But when he doesn’t, and makes his way towards the console instead, she knows she can’t stay in his presence any longer.

“I’m gonna go and change,” she rushes out, fast-walking up the ramp.

“Hmm?”

“I got dirt and dust all over my clothes in that closet.” She laughs nervously as she dusts off nothing from her shirt.

The Doctor inspects her clothes for the supposed dirt and dust she’s talking about, eyes roaming from shoulders to feet a couple of times suspiciously. But though that search must come up empty, he doesn’t pry.

“Okay,” he concedes. “See you for dinner?” he asks.

“Yeah,” she calls behind her as she flees the console room.

He doesn’t say anything more, and she practically runs back to her room and locks the door behind her.
Hey guys, I'm back! Recovering from surgery really well. On the slow road back to having a normal life without pain. A rather short chapter, but it is something of a turning point! Hope you guys enjoy, and that you don't go too crazy with curiosity! :) Thanks as always to Amber and Heidi for the feedback!

The Doctor has found himself in quite the quandary. Ordinarily (occasional hiccups that the TARDIS won’t help him resolve aside), repressing memories and directing his mind away from unproductive thoughts is his specialty. Time Lords possess exceptional control over their conscious minds, and sharpening these skills even further was his only coping mechanism in the aftermath of the Time War.

Who would have thought that one kiss could render his superior neurobiology and years of training useless?

He can’t stop thinking about it. Perhaps because he doesn’t want to stop thinking about it. Unlike the thoughts of destruction and grief that he’s accustomed to battling in the arena of his mind, these thoughts carry him up onto a cloud and flood his synapses with pleasure. For the first time, she kissed him. It had been a week since the Sanctuary Base, and he thought they had both moved past what happened and implicitly agreed to remain just friends, and he was perfectly content with that tacit decision. Their lives hadn’t been in (that much) danger, and neither of them was having an emotional breakdown, but SHE KISSED HIM.

So many of his assumptions were thrown out the window today, it’s a bit bewildering.

As it turns out, Rose does fancy him.

Just thinking it to himself so plainly for the first time, he fights down the urge to dance and leap around the console room throwing flowers, and maintains a normal, sane walking pace (that definitely does not have a rhythm to it) to initiate the dematerialisation.

But whatever excitement he may be feeling, everything he spent hours convincing himself last week while he performed necessary TARDIS maintenance is still true. The fact that she requites at least some of his affection doesn’t change anything.

Or does it? As much as the prospect that Rose fancies him thrills him, the prospect of developing a romantic relationship still petrifies him. He’s gone down that road many times before, and it’s never worked out. Everyone, absolutely everyone, leaves him in the end, be it by choice or by death. The idea of voluntarily submitting himself to that kind of pain again is nauseating. They aren’t even the same bloody species. They aren’t genetically or telepathically compatible without the aid of advanced, ethically questionable technology.

It’s a bad idea. A terrible idea. That could only culminate in Rose leaving him, one way or another. He has no choice but to talk to her, make it clear that he can’t offer everything she might expect along with the snogging, before he permits it to continue. It wouldn’t be fair to her otherwise.
His hearts race in his chest at the thought of having to bring this up of his own volition over dinner tonight. Images of her throwing vegetables at his face and storming out flash through his mind. Maybe he doesn’t have to instigate the conversation it yet. Only if she kisses him again. That’s a fair compromise. And it ensures he’ll get at least one more kiss before she hates him.

He guides the TARDIS safely into the vortex, switches her to autopilot, and shuffles down the hall to the kitchen. Tries to breathe. He can make tea while he decides what they should eat. Tea always calms him down.

The process of preparing it is soothing in itself. He fills the kettle with water, flips the switch, and leaves it on the counter to come to a boil, then wanders over to the tea cupboard. The sheer volume of the collection, and the focus required to decide which one he wants to drink tonight, is enough to keep his thoughts sufficiently occupied. By the time he makes a selection, his hearts are no longer trying to burst out of his ribcage. He pulls out the jar of azure nightshade, a gift from the Lombakian king. Genetically derived from Earth’s nightshade family, Solanaceae, but cultivated by the Lombakians to have a maple-like sweetness and a spicy finish. It is of course, a safe species containing negligible levels of the toxic alkaloids that have made some members of the family infamous. Plus, it imparts a lovely indigo shade to the tea that is simply irresistible.

The alarm dings that the water is boiling, and he retrieves his and Rose’s favourite mugs from another cabinet and pours steaming water into his up to an inch from the brim. He’ll wait to make Rose’s until she’s done freshening up, or whatever it was she said she was doing, so it doesn’t go cold. With a few scoops of the blue leaves in a clean teabag, he submerges it into the water. He stares down at his mug as the first hints of brown and blue seep through the filter and into the clear water. Simple diffusion across a steep concentration gradient: always fascinating to watch.

He leans over the counter on his forearms and watches the streams of colour twist and spread through the water at random, fully anticipating to spend the entire four minutes contemplating the physical chemistry at work. Leaching polar extractives at near-boiling temperatures, partition coefficients of solid/liquid matrices, the mass diffusivity of each unique secondary metabolite – Woah.

He suddenly stands up straight, his cheeks hot and blood pressure spiked, as a sudden surge of electricity courses through his veins and concentrates pleasurably in his groin. Where a moment before the only images in his head were molecular structures and engineering equations, they are quickly overtaken with fleeting, explicit fantasies, all of which involve Rose and himself without any clothing. He closes his eyes and shakes his head frantically as the wave of arousal crashes over him, fighting against the current of intrusive thoughts.

This is unacceptable. Unparalleled control over the conscious mind, that’s him. He is no slave to hormones and carnal desires. And Rose does not deserve to be violated in this way. He’s had passing fantasies before, when he briefly allows himself to entertain a future where they pursue a physical relationship, but they’ve never been so graphic.

That kiss must have messed with his head even more than he thought.

Concentrating once more on the mug and its contents, he summons all his mental energy to swerve the inappropriate path of his thoughts back to a more wholesome subject. Like physical chemistry.

He succeeds well enough, and is able to force the thoughts to fade into the background and wait out the remaining two minutes without another incident. He slowly allows his guard down as he reaches into a drawer to grab a teaspoon, assured that he’s controlled his adolescent brain into behaving more maturely. He leans over the counter again as he dips the spoon into the mug and
swirls it around, timing the clinks of his spoon against the sides of the ceramic to roughly match
with ‘Burnin’ Love.’ Still can’t help constantly playing Elvis songs in his head.

But to the Doctor’s dismay, the arousal returns with a vengeance. It sizzles through his
bloodstream and clouds his head with even more potent lust, and his rhythm of stirring is
completely disrupted in the haze. He can hardly even grip the spoon as one singular desire
overshadows any and all conscious thought. His trousers grow uncomfortably tight. He grips the
handle of his mug with one hand and the spoon with the other, struggling to regain control of
himself. But the urge to touch or be touched or do something for a spot of relief is is almost
unbearable. As time goes on, his iron will to resist begins to corrode.

The fantasies return to the forefront of his thoughts: Rose’s back arching off the bed, her bare
breasts reaching for the ceiling, the completely maddening sound of his name on her lips in a
breathless moan. Mindless instinct pushes his hips forward, and his unbearably sensitive erection
makes contact with the countertop. Its cold, hard surface really should not feel nice at all –
unpleasant at best – but it does feel nice. So nice that he repeats the motion, and a sigh escapes his
lips as his crotch brushes just right against the stone counter. Visions flicker through his brain too
fast for him to focus on any of them – bodies colliding as he thrusts inside her heat, his tongue
between her slick folds, her lips wrapped around his length – and he continues to grind carefully
against the counter, knuckles white on his mug.

Bloody hell, he’s standing in the kitchen where they prepare food humping the damned countertop.

What the hell has gotten into him?

He pushes himself away from the counter, and his mug and spoon go flying from his hands and
shatter and clang noisily onto the floor, spewing puddles of blue tea and ceramic debris in every
direction. But the clamour and the mess do nothing to distract him; the loss of stimulation is
nothing short of torture. He takes a few long, measured steps away from the counter and tries to
control himself, experimentally pulls back on the reins of this unfamiliar, explosive arousal, but it’s
no use. Rose might as well be wrapped naked around him, licking his neck and grazing his inner
thigh, what with the shivers coursing down his body and his double heartbeat throbbing deliciously
just below the belt.

He stumbles a few more steps backward until he collides with the wall, and realises he can’t
restrain himself any longer. He presses the heel of his hand into the zip of his trousers and rubs
tentatively through fabric and metal, back and forth over his length. He strangles a cry in his throat
before it can escape. The awareness of where he is right now, any concept of decorum, the reality
that he could be caught any moment – all of it is lost to the sensation. The pace of his hand grows
frantic, and a grunt of relief escapes his throat with the building friction.

But it still isn’t enough.

Fumbling with the zip on his trousers, he pulls it down and shoves his hand inside his pants,
closing his damp fingers around himself. The back of his head hits the wall as he calls out Rose’s
name and tugs with firm strokes, base to tip, surrendering to it…

He bites down on his other fist, a feeble attempt to muffle the deep groan that rumbles through his
chest as he comes hard in his hand after only a few strokes.

His knees buckle and he sinks to the floor against the wall as a peaceful, pleasant droopiness
trickles through his system. In the few quiet moments of pleasure-induced relaxation, he thinks of
Rose, and what it would be like to share such a spectacular thing with her.
But as he catches his breath and the high of orgasm fades, his comfortable relief is quickly usurped by shame.

How could he have let this happen?

He quickly gets to his feet and zips up his fly, only to feel a pronounced wet spot.

He’ll have to change his pants, and quickly. Rose will be here for tea and supper any minute now. Ducking his head out of the doorway first to ensure Rose isn’t around the corner, he flees from the room and down the hallway for his room at top speed, hoping he can change his pants quickly enough that he won’t need a change of trousers as well.

The door to his room safely closed behind him, he chucks off his trousers and throws his soiled pants into the bin, and collapses onto his bed, flushed with embarrassment.

What the hell happened back there?

He does not make a habit of touching himself. He normally doesn’t need to. Unlike humans, fantasies cannot make him physically aroused unless he wants them to. Plentiful erotic imagery and sensual contact can occasionally hit more of a subconscious on-switch, provided he’s with the right person, but a typical daydream isn’t enough to get him going. And the kiss in the cupboard was lovely, but nowhere near the physical stimulation he would need to provoke that sort of reaction against his conscious will. He’s never experienced a sexual phenomenon by himself like that. The only time he has ever experienced such sudden, uncontrollable arousal in his life was with –

He sits up on his bed with a gasp.

He recalls the two other incidents where he lost control of his emotions within the last month. Reconstructs his surroundings when they occurred to formulate an explanation. As the details fall into place, suddenly he can’t believe how obvious the link is between the three seemingly unrelated events. Can’t believe he didn’t realize what was happening from the very beginning. Oh, he is so, incredibly stupid.

He knows exactly what’s going on.

Ever the eavesdropper, the TARDIS projects a brief, faint confirmation of his theory into his mind.

And his blood runs cold.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I'm a little late today, but it's still Wednesday by my clock! You guys may really start scratching your heads after this one. Or maybe it’ll be the one that gives you the revelation you've been waiting for! It's hard for me to tell.

I'm still pretty behind on writing this, just because I've been trying to get back to normal life with my mobility impairments and some residual pain and swelling... but I'm still confident I can keep on a weekly schedule. Regardless of what happens though, rest assured my enthusiasm for this fic has not diminished!

Thanks as always to Amber and Heidi for the beta work :)

The Doctor is acting weird.

He was jumpier than ever over dinner last night. And he never explained what on Earth had startled him enough to make him flee the kitchen in such a rush, his favourite mug in pieces on the floor amidst lakes of spilt blue tea. He’d been watching her all evening, wide eyes and restless limbs, like he was waiting for her to morph into a zombie. Eat his brains. Or something he would find comparably horrifying.

Her initial thought was that he was freaked out by the kiss. He freaked out last time; it was logical to assume he would freak out again. He wasn’t ready yet, she thought, and was panicking that her premature initiation meant that she had rescinded her consent to wait for him and was going to pressure him even more. She thought it was an overreaction on his part, especially since he kissed her first, but she also knew how skittish he could be. After a few feeble attempts to divine the source of his discomfort, she had given him some space for the night and hoped he would get over this unnecessary anxiety on his own. Hoped it was temporary and tried not to stress over it as she read more of her book until she finally fell asleep.

But his exaggerated caginess has continued through the morning, and now Rose fears she underestimated how much that kiss may have impacted him. Even after the call from her mum, during the whole debacle with Elton and the absorbing ogre, she could hardly think of anything besides a rationalisation for the Doctor’s behaviour.

It just doesn’t make sense.

Even though he was the one who ended it (for the second time), he seemed fine when they stepped out of that cupboard. And fine on the trek back to the TARDIS. Fine even once they were back inside, and he seemed confused that she wanted to leave to freshen up rather than stay with him until dinner. Plus, after their first kiss in Rome and the second on Krop Tor, the Doctor hadn’t felt the need to panic or distance himself. He resumed interaction as usual, frequent physical contact and flirting included. But now he seems frightened by her very presence.

She should feel angry, she realises as they make their way back to the TARDIS once again. Angry with him for not being honest with her, for feeling like he has to hide the fact that he thinks they’re moving too fast, for acting tetchy and distant this entire trip. He hasn’t even held her hand once
today.

But instead of angry, she feels scared now, too.

The fear is justified, in a sense. She thought maybe she and the Doctor were finally moving forward, but he’s has taken them ten steps backward. Their current circumstances remind her of the disastrous aftermath of the conversation outside the chip shop. He’d gone out of his way to act like a stony-hearted extra-terrestrial for an entire week in an effort to swiftly crush her hopes of ever having more than an ambiguous, somewhat precarious friendship. What if this is even worse? What if he never gets past it?

The Doctor falls predictably silent as the TARDIS door closes behind them, and proceeds to pilot the ship without any attempt at conversation or even eye contact. But watching him clam up again doesn’t fan the flames of well-justified anger or make her heart ache; it only spikes her anxiety through the roof. With hardly a mumbled farewell, she excuses herself from the room and speed-walks down the hall.

But rather than placating her fears, being alone only exacerbates them.

The door to her room slams as she falls back against it, a hand clutched against her chest to try to stop her heart from beating out of it. The avalanche of panic ploughs through and buries her underneath it, and yet she still can’t even understand why she’s so scared.

The earlier justification falls apart under renewed scrutiny. There’s no reason for the Doctor to ditch her for making a move he himself has now made twice. It will be a temporary distance between them, if anything, and things will go back to normal. The logical side of her brain assures her of that. But the illogical part drowns it out, and all she can focus on is how rapid and shallow and gasping her breathing has become. She’s hyperventilating, on the verge of tears. Like she’s just seen an axe murderer in the hallway, or she’s about to be wheeled into a lobotomy.

Suddenly, Rose is reminded of the incident after the coronation, the spell of irrational anger that overtook her in the library.

Crying into her toothpaste at the sink on the Sanctuary Base.

Something terrible is happening to her.

She has to tell the Doctor.

Despite her acute paranoia, and the nagging, irrational fear that talking to him will be a death sentence to their relationship, she throws open the door and hauls her heavy legs down the hall as fast as they’ll go. If anyone can get to the bottom of this, he can. Perhaps having a puzzle to solve will help him get over his hang-ups about forbidden kisses and romance drama.

He’s still in the console room where she left him, leaning on his elbow staring at the monitor, his eyebrows knit closely together.

Her heightened emotional state must be more obvious than she thought, because all she has to say is his name to get his immediate, undivided attention.

“Rose? What’s wrong?” he asks, stepping around the console to meet her halfway.

“I dunno, something’s…” She struggles to get the words out through her shaky breaths. “I’ve been feelin’ weird.”
He rubs her shoulder with one hand, encouraging her to continue with a small nod of his head.

“Feelin’ things I shouldn’t. Like one minute I’ll be fine and the next… like right now. I’m terrified and I don’t know why. I know it sounds stupid and probably doesn’t make sense, but…”

The Doctor’s hand drops from her shoulder, and he takes a few steps backward. His skin pales and his eyes widen, mirroring how she already feels.

“You… you’ve…” he stutters, his breathing suddenly erratic. His hand comes up to loosen the knot of his tie. “How long has this been going on?” he asks, voice hoarse.

“I dunno, I think… a month or so?”

“Oh…” he sighs, his hand tearing through his hair from front to back.

“Doctor, what is it? Have you seen this sort of thing before?”

“No, it’s not that, it’s…” He rubs his hands down his face then stuffs them in his pockets. “I’m worried about the results of some maintenance tests I just ran. I’m sure you’re just fine, Rose. You’re a walking incubator of hormones. Just mood swings. Nothing to worry about.” He walks around to the monitor as though his plan is to ignore her altogether.

She stamps her foot on the ground.

“Mood swings?” she grits out through her teeth.

He looks up from the screen only briefly. “Yeah.” He nods matter-of-factly.

She can’t believe he would brush off her concern like this. Usually, his M.O. is quite the opposite. A battery of tests and a game of 20 questions whenever she voices a complaint about abnormal physiological function.

“This. Isn’t. That,” she bites back, demanding his attention. “I’ve lived in this incubator of hormones for twenty years. I know myself, and this isn’t right.”

He looks up at her again, biting his cheek, and those vast brown eyes are hiding something.

Slowly, he walks back around to her, and pulls the sonic out of his jacket. Clicks through a few different frequencies before aiming the blue light at the side of her head. A few moments pass, only the mechanical whir of the screwdriver and the intermittent breaths of the time rotor fill the silence. He stares only at the screwdriver, rather than her face, so she stares at his tie.

“Brain activity normal,” he pronounces quietly. “Hormone and neurotransmitter levels normal. Leukocyte concentration normal.”

He lowers the screwdriver and picks up her hand. Places his thumb on her wrist.

“Temperature thirty-seven-point-one degrees. Heart rate ninety-four beats per minute.”

“You just showin’ off?”

He stares down at her wrist. Brushes his thumb over her skin.

“There’s nothing wrong with you.” He says it so quietly, it’s almost like he doesn’t want her to hear.
“So, what, that’s it?” she asks.

He releases her hand.

“You still feel scared?” he asks.

After a moment of thought, she realizes she doesn’t. The fear has vanished and been replaced by long-overdue anger in the time she’s been standing here talking to him.

“No,” she confesses.

“There we are, then.” He tilts his head to the side, then turns on his heel to walk away from her again.

“What’s gotten into you?” she demands, following him. “What’s goin’ on?” The fury erupts out of her with her words; she’s nearly shouting. At his dismissive nonchalance, his refusal to talk, the distance he’s put between them because of one stupid kiss.

“Nothing is going on,” he insists.

It’s not nothing. He’s being overly defensive, and that always means it’s something that he’s trying to make into nothing.

Livid, she marches up to him, ignoring his nonverbal cues to maintain his personal boundaries.

“Look me in the eyes,” she commands, “and tell me there isn’t somethin’ messin’ with my head.”

He obeys her, those dark brown depths focused purely on hers for the first time since she’s walked in here. Creases form in his forehead, nd he swallows hard.

“What if there was?” he asks, almost hesitant.

He goes still as stone as he waits for her answer. She thinks he’s not even breathing.

“It would be bad, right? We’d need to figure out what it is and get it out? Is that it? Is there something –”

“There’s nothing.” He shakes his head resolutely, interrupting her. His lips press into a stoic line that she knows well.

“Then wh –”

She’s about to ask ‘why did you say “what if there was”‘, but he cuts her off short again.

“If there were something mucking about in your head,” he uses her choice of words, “I would’ve seen it.”

“Are you sure?” she asks.

“Yes. Right now you’re… one hundred percent you. Let me know if it happens again, but… I don’t think it will.”

Though it sounds like good news, the Doctor looks almost disappointed by it. It doesn’t add up.

Right now, she has no choice but to trust his intelligence and experience that there isn’t an external force manipulating her mind. Trust his tireless, diligent concern for her enough that if there were,
he wouldn’t brush it off. But it still leaves her with the mystery of his unusual attitude to investigate.

“Okay,” she concedes.

“Good.” He gives her a weak smile, and returns his attention to the screen.

“Then what’s wrong with you?” she asks.

“Me?” he questions, pointing to his chest in shock.

“Mhm.” She nods. “You’ve been actin’ weird since yesterday, and you’re especially actin’ weird right now, and I want to know why.”

He huffs, already angered by the idea of having a conversation about feelings, so she decides to start guessing.

“Is it about what happened yesterday?”

“I…” He closes his eyes the way he does when his brain is going too fast, rubbing the back of his neck.

“The kiss?” she asks, explicitly this time. He winces at the word.

Rose shakes her head.

“I knew it,” she mutters to herself. “Look, I shouldn’t have done it. I know you said you weren’t ready yet…”

“Weren’t ready yet?” he mimics, opening his eyes and staring at her in confusion.

“Yeah, in the… in our room on the Sanctuary Base, you said you couldn’t… anyway, I understand. But it’s also not fair to expect me to be a saint in this, I mean, I’m patient but… I made a mistake is all. Don’t overreact about it.” She waves her hands in the air before resting them on her temples.

He’s silent for a moment.

“The thing is, Rose, I…” He breaks eye contact, and stares down at his shoes. “I never said I wasn’t ready. I said I couldn’t.”

“What?” she squeaks.

“Weren’t ready yet?” he mimics, opening his eyes and staring at her in confusion.

Yeah, in the… in our room on the Sanctuary Base, you said you couldn’t… anyway, I understand. But it’s also not fair to expect me to be a saint in this, I mean, I’m patient but… I made a mistake is all. Don’t overreact about it.” She waves her hands in the air before resting them on her temples.

He’s silent for a moment.

“The thing is, Rose, I…” He breaks eye contact, and stares down at his shoes. “I never said I wasn’t ready. I said I couldn’t.”

“What?” she squeaks.

He doesn’t have to say anything more; his steely eyes tell it all.

As her heart sinks, she lashes out in self-defence.

“That’s not… that’s not even fair,” she accuses, and a rebellious tear leaks from her eye that she catches with her fist. “You’re the one who kissed me the first two times, you can’t just… toy with someone like that, lead ‘em on and not explain anythin’ and then…”

“You’re right,” he admits. He takes a deep breath, and his eyes soften just a little. “It was my mistake.” But then he sets his jaw, deadly serious again. “I promise I won’t do it again.”

“That’s not what I want,” she cries, pathetically. She can’t believe how long she went on misunderstanding this whole thing. Mistaking his timeless refusal for a temporary postponement. All this time thinking they’d just hit the brakes on their romantic journey, when really she’d been
thrown from the car. Maybe she was never even in it. How could she have been so stupid?

“Trust me, you don’t want what you think you want. Especially not now.” He’s still hardly looking at her, his gaze roving quickly over the console and around the room, anywhere but her face.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You don’t understand what it would mean.”

“Why, because I’m too stupid? Or maybe too human?” she spits out.

“No,” he bites back. “Rose, I just thought… you of all people understood.”

“Understood what?”

“I lose everyone.” He drives his fist into the coral next to him. “Someday I’ll lose you, too. It’s hard enough when it happens to a friend, I can’t risk losing someone that I’ve let myself…”

He searches for a phrase besides the one they’re both thinking, but doesn’t find one. Jaw clenched, he just growls instead, more frustrated than she’s seen him since he wore boots and leather.

“But –”

“I’m sorry,” he interrupts her, suddenly resolute. The words ring with finality. “But I can’t do that to myself again.”

He really hasn’t changed since the chip shop. Still asphyxiated by the fear of mortality. But it’s so heart-breaking to see him like this, so broken and afraid, all the angry words of rebuttal on her tongue slip away, and she’s left without a response.

“Please,” he softens his tone, his eyes pleading. “Can we just be friends?”

She hasn’t prepared for this argument. Hasn’t the foggiest idea how to teach him to, for once, stop thinking about eternity and live in the moment. To convince him that temporary happiness isn’t negated by eventual sadness. That he isn’t cursed to loneliness because he’s the last of the Time Lords; he’s cursed to loneliness because he won’t let anyone in.

They’ll have time, she decides. And with everything he’s done for her, and everything their friendship means to her, she won’t abandon him. Not over something as stupid as sex. He means much more to her than that, even if she never does change his mind. She won’t force a romantic relationship on him where he doesn’t really want one. There’s really only one answer she could ever give.

“Yeah.” She sniffs away the last of her few ill-timed tears, and nods. “Of course.”

He exhales with relief, and opens his arms to her, and she goes into them willingly. Crushes herself against him. His arms circle around her, and he rests his chin on her head.

So no more kissing, ever. That’s okay. So long as he can remain a part of her life, she will take any offer he can give her. He’s too important to lose.

“So… hugs are still okay?” she asks, her voice small.

“Hugs are always okay.”

They stay intertwined for a long, quiet moment and she closes her eyes and enjoys it while she can.
She still feels so right in his arms, content and safe, and the constant hum of the engines and the deep breaths of the time rotor remind her that she’s home. There’s nowhere else she’d ever think of going. As long as they can share this level of closeness, and stay honest with each other, she’ll be okay. When she said ‘forever,’ it hadn’t been contingent upon a romantic relationship.

“I’m not goin’ anywhere,” she says, tugging on a fistful of his jacket.

“Not so bad, stuck with me?”

“Nope.”

“Well.” He draws out the word as he eases them out of the hug. He stares down at her for a moment, a hand lingering on her hip, and swallows hard, and she thinks he might be about to reciprocate the sentiment in a way he never has before. But instead, he twirls around towards the console, and starts mashing buttons and flipping switches.

“I have got…” he announces, creating distance between them through the natural circular progression of the launch sequence. “The perfect place for us to go next.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sorry I missed last week guys! Hope you like this chap.

They're going to be here for a good long while, so I wanted to establish a few things about this location and the characters here from the beginning... this paradise of my own creation... It'll all be important in the chapters to come! But hang tight, that mental mystery hasn't gone away... :)

The Doctor stops a few feet from the door and holds out his arm in a grandiose gesture, encouraging Rose to step out first.

She pulls open the door slowly, halfway expecting radiation and shrapnel to blast through the opening. (He’s been rubbish at landings lately, and they did land in the middle of a warzone once.) But as bright yellow rays of light pour through the ajar door, and a breeze drifts pleasantly across her skin and swirls salty in her nose, she happily throws open the door all the way. A hand over her eyes, she squints in the now-blinding sunlight, but the soft crash and flow of water entices her forward.

Her trainers sink into fluffy sand as she steps out of the TARDIS. A familiar marine perfume fills her lungs, salt and sand and fish, and seagulls caw from somewhere just out of view, high-pitched and discordant.

But this is no ordinary beach.

The TARDIS has landed in a small cove, secluded by towering rocks swirled with dark violet and lighter orchid hues. A bluish-green sea sprawls before them, sparkling as it reflects the sun. The sand beneath her feet, the colour of lilac blossoms, stretches down to meet the shoreline. A pastel rainbow glistens in the white foam where the teal waves churn the purplish sand. She drags her foot through the sand in a little circle, and lavender powder coats the sole of her shoe until she kicks it off. A sun shines in a cloudless, light blue sky just like Earth’s, its rays warming her skin while a gentle ocean breeze keeps her cool.

When the Doctor joins her in the sand, he’s turned his specs into dark shades, and he’s wearing a smug smirk on his face like he’s waiting for a round of applause. At the moment, she feels like he deserves it, but she’ll give it a few minutes. It’s a strange planet after all; anything could happen to spoil the aesthetic appeal.

“'S beautiful.” She smiles at him. She hasn’t quite forgiven him for his unexplained strange behaviour and brushing off her concern like that, but this gets him a bit closer. “Where are we?”

“Tarohanda.”

She repeats the name softly to herself. It feels right for a paradise like this.

“That’s the name of the island,” he continues. “We’re on the planet Kaelondaia. It’s very Earth-like, mostly water and an oxygenated atmosphere rich in nitrogen, but it’s about one-tenth the size,
and there’s even less land. Something like ninety-five percent water. The other five percent consists of islands similar to this one.”

Still listening to his introductory spiel, she lets her eyes fall from his, captivated by the uniquely coloured fine sand. Normally she waits for his sanction to touch anything on a new planet, but curiosity quickly wins out, and she kneels down and scoops up some of it up in her hand.

“Life on this planet isn’t nearly as evolved as life on Earth,” he continues. “Mostly aquatic life, plankton, coral, a few fish, one species that you might call a shark. But they don’t come this close to shore. And only a handful of land mammals and birds. Reptiles don’t exist, and anything humanoid isn’t even close to evolving here. The inhabitants of these islands crash landed here a few millennia ago, 12789. The Kaelondaians. They named the planet after their people, of course. Very technologically advanced. But they lost communication with home base and were never found. So they built an entire civilization on this planet from scratch. And still thriving. Hah!”

“How’s it purple like that?” she asks, mesmerized by the sand’s softness as it sifts through her fingers and blows away in the breeze.

“Same way all sand gets its colour,” he explains, kneeling down next to her and dropping his glasses in the sand. “The island formed after a massive eruption about 5 million years ago.” He picks up a handful and holds it up close to their faces, making sure the wind is carrying it away from their eyes. “It’s actually a combination of two main types of crystals. Look close.” She covers her forehead with her hand to block the sun and leans in closer, inspecting the handful of sand, and the Doctor is, of course, right. Up close, she can just make out tiny white crystals mixed with varying shades of purple. “The purple colour comes from the same sugilite crystals that make up these rocks,” he points up behind their heads, “that were brought to the surface after the eruption. And the white comes from destroyed coral reefs that once lined shores of the volcano.”

She takes another handful of sand, and stares it down for a few seconds, trying to wrap her head around such massive geological phenomena.

“Blimey.” She shakes her head.

“Oh, wait ‘til you see the rest,” he teases. Returning his glasses to their rightful place, he gets to his feet and holds out his hand.

When she takes it, it’s rough and dry with remnants of sand, but she doesn’t care.

He leads her along the beach towards the left, and they quickly make it around the bend.

“I don’t actually remember the way to the village but I think it’s…” he rambles as they round the corner and are welcomed by a different view. “Nope, not this way.”

A single, modestly sized ship dominates the view of a small harbour, a feat of wooden construction against a backdrop of deep purple and an infrastructure of decks and ramps for boarding and disembarking. Behind it floats a smaller, second ship with fewer frills and more sails, and behind them both, a third, empty docking station waits for an occupant.

“The harbour,” the Doctor announces. “The only way in or out of the island. No planes or anything like that here yet. That ship there is for passengers, controlled by the local transportation sector, but it rarely sets sail. Its residents seldom have reason to leave.”

“Can’t imagine why not,” remarks Rose.

“The second one is a fishing boat. Fish are one of the most important sources of nutrition and
income for the islanders. The last terminal is reserved for incoming ships, trade barges, communication lines, visitors from other islands, that sort of thing. The weird thing is, though…” The Doctor scratches behind his head as he scours the scene for life. “It’s empty. The entire harbour. Not a single person over here.” She turns to him, and he has his arms crossed over his chest, his forehead scrunched up in confusion.

“You been here before?” she asks.

“Years ago. Decades. But this harbour is usually bustling. This island is the biggest for tourism and trade on the planet.”

“Where’d they all go?”

“I dunno,” he sighs. “Better go and check the village. C’mon.” He takes her hand again, and as they stride with purpose back across the cove, it’s easier to forget about their domestic drama. He spouts off some more history of the planet and the Kaelondaians as they trudge through the sand.

Exploring a new place, getting to the bottom of a mystery together, it’s what they do best. And to get to do it somewhere as beautiful as this? She thinks it might be able to bring back a sense of normalcy. If they can’t return to their usual routine, or if he ever goes back to being as distant and skittish as he was yesterday and this morning, Rose won’t be able to cope. The Doctor is her best friend, and she treasures that friendship more than anything romantic she was silently hoping for the past few weeks.

Besides, as disappointed as she is, she has to try to put herself in his shoes. Think about how torn he must feel. How much the war destroyed him, and how afraid he is of losing anyone he gets close to. He may as well be a god, with how much longer he lives than everyone he spends time with. She can’t pretend to understand what that’s like.

The Doctor’s monologue and her contemplation are cut short as they round the next cluster of rocks, and her jaw drops.

A short mountain range climbs up towards the sky a few dozen metres from the shore, rocky hills and cliffs that shine with the same purple shades as the cove behind them. Rows and rows of small white buildings tiled with purple roofs cover the landscape, perched on ledges and tucked between boulders. Sandy pathways wind through rocks and exotic trees and green grasses; staircases carved directly into the rock connect the layers of elevation. The village extends out parallel to the shore, bending out of sight with the mountains further down the coast. Several boardwalks extend out from the village and into the ocean, lined with wooden huts thatched with green roofs. The tiny houses are situated directly over the water, supported by purple stone cylinders underneath, and staircases that wind down directly into the water adorn the residential piers.

Scattered throughout the village, the sand, and the piers are locals walking, running, and lounging. Men wander shirtless, and women wear sleeveless tops, but they are all wearing knee-length skirts of floral white and red patterns, regardless of gender. They all seem to share a similar skin tone, dark brown with a warm, reddish undertone.

“Brilliant,” the Doctor beams next to her.

“Guess they’re not gone, then?” She bumps his arm.

“Nope.” He shakes his head. “May be something going on though, if they’re not using the fishing boat. Worth investigating, hmm?” He strolls onward through the sand, hands in his pockets, and she follows closely, bouncing on her toes with excitement to see what the gorgeous village has to
“Like I was saying, Kaelondaians are humanoids, but they’re biologically closer to Gallifreyans than humans. Binary vascular system, superior intelligence and sensory capabilities… Though they do have a lifespan close to humans’…” Rose is distracted from his explanation by a few children at the edge of town that have spotted them, pointing and staring avidly. Rose only hopes that it’s a sign of excitement, rather than fear.

“Only two-thousand years into their new civilization and they’ve already developed stunning architectural advancements…”

Around the young boys, a small crowd of adults gathers to observe the newcomers, and none of their poses suggests excitement. The Doctor hasn’t yet noticed the display; he’s staring down at his feet as he rambles. One of the men nods to another, and he dashes through the sand to the nearest house at sea level. Rose watches intently as he disappears inside, heart hammering in her chest.

“… metal ores in the cave system at the southeast end of the island…”

The man re-emerges from the house at a swift jog, a spear in each hand.

Rose stops dead in her tracks, grabbing onto the Doctor’s elbow to hold him back.

“Doctor.” She yanks on his arm.

“What?” he asks, oblivious as he turns toward her.

As surreptitiously as she can, she nods her head in the direction of the man with the spears, and the Doctor finally glances ahead. The man hands the second spear to another bloke, and the two of them diverge from the small crowd and march in their direction.

“Oh,” he breathes.

“What do we do?” she whispers urgently, trying not to make any sudden movements.

“They can’t be heading for us.” He shakes his head.

The pace of the two men only speeds up, their trajectory unmistakable.

“You sure about that?” she grits out.

“All right, maybe they are,” he concedes.

To her surprise, the Doctor also stands stock still, save for the one hand that slowly reaches up to remove his glasses and stuff them in his jacket.

“Just leave it to me, Rose,” he says, confident. “I’ll get this sorted out.”

“You two,” the first man says, his voice higher than she expected. “Who are you?” On closer look, he looks fresh out of puberty. Twenty, maybe, tops. He’s tall and thin with sinewy muscles, with wide eyes and curly hair that bounces on his forehead with each step in a way that makes it suddenly hard to take him seriously.

“Hello,” the Doctor greets him with a smile. “I’m the Doctor, and this is Rose.” He nods at her. “We’re travellers, just passing through to visit an old friend. Any chance you can take us to Chief Kalani?”
“Hey,” the second man growls. Both spears had been pointed up towards the sky, acting merely as walking sticks until this point, but at the Doctor’s question, he tips his spear forward to threaten the Doctor.

“Woah,” the Doctor gasps, lifting his hands in the air in a gesture of surrender, and she copies the movement. “Don’t mean him any harm. Just want to talk to him.” The man’s eyes narrow a little bit more, but he retracts his spear slightly. He’s much older than the first man, the first etchings of wrinkles on the corners of his eyes and around his mouth. But his age doesn’t detract from his intimidating build: veins protrude from his muscular arms and chest, his jaw is chiselled into a square, and his black hair is pulled back into a tight bun.

For all their differences, though, both men share a clean shaven face, the same wide nose, and a small chin dimple.

“How do you know that name?” the older, thicker man asks.

“He’s a friend of ours,” the Doctor answers slowly.

“He’s a friend of ours,” the Doctor answers slowly.

“A friend of yours?” the younger bloke asks, one of his eyebrows lifting sceptically.

“Yeah,” the Doctor insists.

The two men exchange glances before turning back to the Doctor.

“Kalani has been dead for thirty years,” says the older man. “You are too young to have been his friend. Tell us the truth, now.”

“I’m sorry,” the Doctor offers, his tone sombre. “What happened?”


“I’m older than I look,” the Doctor explains. “I really did know Kalani. I visited him many times. I didn’t know it had been so long since my last visit. I meant no disrespect. Most recently I helped him find a cure for the first plague that ever hit the island. It almost killed hundreds of children, including his son, Kenai. He was only five or six at the time, but you can ask him, he may remember.”

“But you can’t be,” the older man asks, his face twisted in confusion even as he retracts his spear. “You’re the Doctor?”

The Doctor doesn’t say anything, just nods his head.

“But… you look so different. Kalani told stories, so the village would never forget him. The man from another world… The Doctor… he has white skin but he… isn’t so thin as you. He wears a colourful garment around his neck. And a hat. He has thick, curly hair and wide blue eyes. You can’t be him.”

“Oh,” the Doctor slaps his forehead with his hand. “I always forget. New me. I can… change my face. My entire body. I have a few times, actually, since I was here last. But it’s me. The Doctor. Oh, I know!” He exclaims suddenly, delving into his jacket and pulling out the sonic screwdriver. “Any stories about this?”

The older man gasps.

“The silver wand with the blue light!” The younger man’s jaw drops open.
"You are the Doctor!" the older one exclaims, grinning.

"Yes," the Doctor smiles back, stuffing the sonic back in its place. "I am!" he cheers, half-sarcastically. "Who are you then?"

The older man drops his spear into the sand, and the younger one copies him immediately.

"I’m Kenai!"

"Are you really?" the Doctor asks, his voice jumping an octave with excitement. "I didn’t even recognize you! You were such a little thing when I saw you last."

"Welcome back!" Kenai steps forward and throws his arms around the Doctor, pulling him in for a crushing hug that causes several of the Doctor’s bones to crack. He slaps the Doctor on the shoulder as he releases him, and the Doctor nearly loses his balance.

"Thank you," the Doctor says enthusiastically, trying to hide his grimace as he stretches out his back and rubs his shoulder.

"This is Kalei, my son," Kenai says, gesturing to the younger man. Kalei clears his throat and deepens his voice before he says “hello,” and shakes the Doctor’s hand.

Kenai turns his gaze to Rose, and she sticks out her hand, hoping she’ll get a handshake and not a bear hug. He doesn’t take it for a moment, just stares at her like he’s suddenly seeing her for the first time.

"Forgive me, I’ve just never seen such light skin and hair before. What’s your name again?" he asks.

"Rose," she says, and he finally holds out his own hand for hers. It’s very large, and much warmer than hers, and… oh, my, he only has four fingers. Three thick, calloused fingers and a thumb. Glancing over at Kalei, she sees he has only four, too. The Doctor failed to mention that. Nope, definitely not human.

"Nice to meet you," Kalei takes his turn introducing himself, taking a firm grip on her hand when he shakes it, a toothy grin pulling up his cheeks.

"Where are you from, Rose?" Kenai asks, ignoring the way she just stared wide-eyed at both of their hands.

"Earth. It’s a… planet." She doesn’t know how much she’s allowed to say, so she leaves it at that.

"Earth. Is there no sun there?" Kalei asks.

"Kalei," his father scolds him. "Manners."

"No, ’s all right," Rose assures him with a giggle.

"What matter did you want to discuss with my father?" Kenai directs his question at the Doctor.

"Well, the harbour was empty. Not a soul to be found, even on the fishing boat. We wanted to make sure everything was all right."

"That’s kind of you," Kenai nods, then sighs as he looks over at Kalei once more. He’s silent for a moment, looking between the village behind him and the Doctor a few times, deep in thought, before he continues. "We only take the boat out once every three or four days now. The ruki have
been dying slowly, over many cycles of the moon, washing ashore dead by the hundreds. We’re trying to use them sparingly.”

“You don’t know why?” the Doctor asks.

“No. Even Mariko, our most esteemed biologist, hasn’t been able to figure out why.”

“Hmm.” The Doctor crosses his arms and turns to Rose, stroking his chin in an exaggerated display of contemplation, a gleam in his eye. “Fish dying. People hungry.” He smiles hugely as he turns his gaze back to Kenai. “Sounds like you could use a Doctor.”

“You’ll help us?” asks Kalei, a new spark of hope in his eyes.

“What do you say, Rose?” asks the Doctor.

“Of course.” Rose nods to Kenai and Kalei with a smile.

“Visitors to Tarohanda have become rare because of the shortage of ruki. There are other sources of food near the village – small animals and root vegetables – but our village’s economy depends on selling ruki to nearby islands. They’re the most delicious and nutritious of the fish unique to this island. Without that source of income, many of our people are struggling. We can’t buy the food and supplies we normally can. So our family cannot offer much sustenance, but we can offer hospitality. Most of our guest houses are empty.”

“Oh, we’ll manage,” the Doctor insists.

“Kalei, show the Doctor and Rose to one of the empty guest rooms,” Kenai directs. “I’ll find Mariko and let her know that we have help.”

Kenai takes off at a run towards the village, kicking up clouds of lavender sand as he ploughs through it.

“This way,” Kalei says, gesturing them to follow. He leads the way at a leisurely stroll, poking his spear into the sand with every step like a little boy with a stick. He may look twenty, but he has the energy and demeanour of a thirteen-year-old. It’s endearing. And his skin really is beautiful up close. Smooth, free of blemishes, and at the look of it, hairless. Except for that mop of ringlets atop his head that makes him look even younger.

So, this may not be the relaxing, carefree vacation she anticipated when they arrived. But it is beautiful here, and having a biochemical mystery to solve will certainly take the Doctor’s mind off whatever is plaguing him. And maybe once they solve the fish problem, they can stay a few more days without worries. Maybe once he can think rationally again, they can have another conversation about what exactly scared him so much before. Based on her experience so far, the Doctor will always talk eventually, but it has to be on his own time, when he’s ready and not a moment sooner. For now, she doesn’t have the courage to bring it up again.

“So, Doctor, are you from Earth too?” Kalei asks.

“Nooo,” he shakes his head. “I’m from Gallifrey.”

“Where’s that?”

“Oh, it’s far away. Very far.” Rose can tell instantly the Doctor isn’t comfortable answering such a question, and he predictably, tactlessly changes the subject with hardly a breath in between. “Tell me, Kalei, when the ruki wash ashore, dead, do they still get eaten?”
“They didn’t for a while. We used to collect them into the boat and toss them back out to sea for
the krashka.” (Rose assumes those are the shark-like creatures the Doctor mentioned.) “Kenai and
Mariko were worried that whatever was killing the fish, would kill us too, if we ate them. Some
disagreed, but Kenai is the chief. What he says, goes.

“But one day, a very hungry kid picked up one of the dead fish from the shore. It was Mikalo, his
family hadn’t had any ruki for several days. He was too young to understand our reasons for
avoiding it. He took it home and cooked it while his parents were at their fruit stand, and by the
time the neighbours smelled the fish cooking, it was too late. Mikalo had eaten it. We waited for
days, worried something terrible would happen to him, but nothing ever did.

“Ever since then, we’ve eaten some of the dead ruki that come ashore, the ones that are still fresh.
It’s gross, I know, but ruki are a major part of our lives. Most of us would rather eat and sell ruki
that aren’t so fresh than have none at all.”

“And when was this?” the Doctor asks.

“Two moons ago.”

“Long enough for most toxins to have taken effect, if they were going to…” the Doctor mumbles
to himself.

“Huh?” Kalei asks.

“No, it’s nothing,” says the Doctor, waving his hand.

To Rose’s surprise, Kalei leads them up a staircase to the boardwalk, rather than towards the
proper village on the mountainside. As he takes the spiralling stairs two at a time, springing off his
feet, Rose notices he only has four toes, as well. Makes sense, she shrugs.

“Do they taste different, the ruki that are already dead?” Rose asks once they reach the top of the
stairs. The Doctor hadn’t asked, and she thinks maybe if it’s something they’re eating that’s killing
them, something in their diet, there might be a change in their flavour.

“No, not at all,” says Kalei. “But their skin turns a little yellow.”

“What colour are they normally?” asks the Doctor.

“Silver.”

“Interesting…” the Doctor trails off.

As Kalei leads them past several of the small huts over the water, Rose realises they must be
staying in one. They’re even more mesmerising up close, little circular wooden structures with
cone-shaped roofs made of layers and layers of fronds from the exotic trees that decorate the hills.

He finally stops at the second to the last hut on the row, and gestures to the door. A sign hangs
from a nail that simply reads ‘19’ in black letters, and it starts to feel more like a vacation again.
They’ve got a room number.

“Here we are.” He opens the door (which has no lock), and gestures them inside. Rose steps over
the threshold and out of the sunlight. The interior of the hut is plain, but inviting. A single, large
wooden bed with ornate posts sits to the left, its headboard flush against the curved wall, already
prepared with white linens and pillows. A desk and chair are situated directly across from her,
against the back. Next to the desk is a doorway that leads outside, and sunlight filters through the
dozens of columns of seashells hung from the top of the frame in varying shades of pink and cream. Two silver lanterns – one by the bed and one by the desk – filled with light yellow oil serve to illuminate the room after dark.

To the right is another doorway of shells leading to a smaller room. Rose pushes aside the strings and steps through to find a large purple stone tub with a shower head perched above, as well as a counter, sink, and small dark mirror. No toilet. She steps back out into the main room.

“You can stay in this house as long as you’d like,” Kalei says from outside.

“Is there no toilet?” she asks, hoping he knows what the word means.

“Just across the way.” He points to a small building directly across from theirs, marked with a triangle.

Inconvenient that it isn’t in their room, but she’ll adapt.

She walks over to the shell curtain leading outside, and pushes the strings aside to find a small, private deck. To her right, facing the ocean, under a canopy of more tree fronds, is a couch piled with white cushions, wide and plush as a love seat but as long as a bed. A narrow wooden staircase spirals down into the water to her left. She walks up to the wooden railing and looks out over the water, translucent down to the lavender sand a few feet beneath the surface, turquoise stretching into the horizon. Without a doubt, this is one of the most beautiful places she’s ever been. On Earth, or with the Doctor.

And that’s really saying something.

The Doctor sidles up next to her and leans over the railing on his elbows, eyes squinted in the bright sunlight.

“What do you think?” he asks.

“It’s incredible.”

He hums in agreement as the corner of his mouth turns up in a smile. “It is, isn’t it?”

They stand together for a few moments in comfortable silence, enjoying the view and the gentle lap of waves against the structure, before the Doctor leans closer to her and lowers his voice.

“You okay with staying here, though?”

“Yep.” She nods.

“Sure?” He leans closer and lowers his voice. “If the lodging isn’t up to your standards, the TARDIS is only –”

“Here, please,” she insists.

“What do you think!?” Kalei shouts from behind them, still at the threshold of the front door where they left him.

“We’ll take it, Kalei,” the Doctor shouts back with enthusiasm.

We?

Does he really plan for them to share a bed, after all the rambling he did earlier?
Does he really expect her to continue to restrain herself if they’re going to keep on cuddling up and sleeping together?

The Doctor interrupts her panic when he taps her on the arm with a couple fingers, signalling her to follow as he heads back inside.

Guess she’ll have to clarify later.

“So you like it, then?” Kalei asks once he sees them.

“It’s perfect,” says Rose.

“So, Kalei, you have any ruki in stock right now?” the Doctor asks, itching for a science project. Something to keep that big restless brain occupied.

But Kalei shakes his head.

“We’ve already gone through today’s supply. Either eaten, or dumped back to sea. They tend to wash ashore after sundown when the tide comes in. We can go search tonight, after dinner.”

“Brilliant,” the Doctor nods in agreement.

“In the meantime, feel free to go wherever you like. But I have to get back to work.” Kalei points his thumb in the direction of the village behind him.

“Where do you work?” Rose asks.

“In a wood shop,” he explains. “I made this spear,” he smiles proudly, holding it up for them to admire.

“Ooh, that’s impressive!” Rose congratulates him. “What other sorts of stuff do you make?”

“Furniture, houses, carved necklaces, you name it.”

“You make anything in here?” Rose asks, gesturing around the room.

“Erm, not in here,” he admits, “But if you look, ah…” he takes a couple steps out of the hut and beckons her towards him. “Over there, the third row of guest houses? I built those two on the end, there. The only part I didn’t do is install the plumbing. But you wouldn’t want me to do that, unless you want leaks.” He smiles broadly and chuckles to himself, teeth white in a striking contrast to his dark auburn skin, and it’s such a carefree, contagious sound she can’t help but laugh with him.

“That’s brilliant. You must be good with your hands,” she adds. It’s a little bit flirtatious, but she can’t help it.

“Anyway, I gotta get going. Oh! Meet us for dinner at sunset, the third house from the left over there.” He points at the bottom row of houses along the mountainside; at the same house he ran inside earlier to fetch the weapon in his hand.

“Great, thanks,” Rose says.

“See you later!” He waves back at them as he takes off at a jog down the boardwalk, the wood thumping loudly beneath his feet as he goes, and she wave and the Doctor wave back with only half his enthusiasm. Rose watches him run down the aisle, still entralled by his youthful energy and charm. She hopes she can get to know him better while they’re here.
It’s only after a few moments that she realizes the Doctor is oddly quiet.

When she looks over at him, he pulls the sonic screwdriver out of his jacket with a strange pout on his face.

“I made this, you know.” He twists it between his fingers. “I built a lot of the things I’ve got lying around on the TARDIS…” He flips the screwdriver into the air and catches it again, eyebrows raised. It’s obvious what he’s trying to do. Too obvious.

“What’re you doing?” she asks, narrowing her eyes.

“Nothing.” He rolls his eyes and stuffs the screwdriver away.

“Are you jealous?” she asks, trying her best to hold back a wicked grin.

His cheeks and ears turn pink in an instant and a scowl twists his mouth down.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he huffs out. He adjusts his tie just for something to do with his hands until he stuffs them in his pockets and heads down the boardwalk.

“Come on,” he calls over his shoulder.

“Where?” she asks. Looks like he still isn’t ready to admit he’s the jealous type. Doesn’t take much, though. She hardly said three sentences to the bloke. Complimented his craftsmanship. That’s it.

“Don’t you want to explore?” He turns around and holds his hands out wide, palms up. “There’s a whole village up there you haven’t seen yet. And a lot can change in a few decades’ time. Probably a lot even I haven’t seen yet.” He turns around and continues walking. “The running water is new, for example. Now there’s an improvement.”

If there’s one thing that gob of his is good for, it’s getting him out of trouble.

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They spend a couple of hours navigating the village’s winding pathways and staircases, going into every shop they pass. Many ruki shops along the way are closed, but the village has everything else it needs: a blacksmith for everything metal from the lamps to the pipes carrying fresh water; a sculptor to carve the native rocks into roof tiles and bathtubs; teachers that operate a small school; scientists like Mariko that study the plant and marine life (who are much more upset than the chief to be stumped by the ruki epidemic); farmers that cultivate crops further inland and sell them by the basket; even an historian who keeps track of the island’s citizens and records major events.

But what Rose notices most of all is the aura of friendliness and hospitality they find among the residents. Aside from a couple of innocent squabbles overheard between spouses or neighbours, they all seem to get along, and the only weapons to be found are spears for catching stray fish. At their core, the Kaelondaians a peaceful people, and it’s a beautiful thing to behold.

There is no fish on the plates at dinner, but Kenai’s family are wonderful hosts. The bread is hot and fluffy and the vegetables are seasoned with a menagerie of spices and sauces that remind her of Indian cuisine: layers of complementing spices, salt, and subtle sweetness.

She’s surprised to find that Kenai does most of the cooking, and Kalei is the tidiest of everyone. Kalei gets his curly hair and wide, energetic eyes from his mum, Karina, who is also quite the craftswoman. His sister, Kairi, five years younger, reads and studies engineering in school. Builds
things in her room that she collects from all over the island. Rose and the Doctor are both quietly astonished to discover that Kalei has a crush on another boy that works in the textile store next to his wood shop. But their surprise transforms to joy when his entire family offers advice on how to win him over. There are plenty of people on Earth in her time that aren’t as progressive-minded about gender roles or sexuality; it makes Rose rethink her definition of ‘advanced society.’

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They stop by the TARDIS after dinner. Rose wants to get some more appropriate clothes (most importantly sandals) and toiletry items for their stay, and the Doctor doesn’t want her to make a ten-minute walk away across the beach in the dark by herself (a gentleman through and through). By the time they’re back outside, the sun has completely descended under the horizon, and a huge moon and assorted stars cast a gentle blue glow over the navy sky and dark ocean as night swathes the village. With food in her stomach and no tellies or computer screens to stare at, only firelight to illuminate the night, drowsiness sets in quickly.

By the time she’s dropped off her things and they return to the shore to meet Kalei to pick up some samples of ruki, Rose is yawning, shuffling her feet in the sand. She isn’t of much help as they try to find a fish carcass, running to dry sand each time a wave rolls in and the chilly water tries to lick her toes. The Doctor pretty much searches one out and stuffs it into a plastic bag on his own, both Rose and Kalei falling behind his breakneck speed through the damp sand and froth.

Kalei bids them both goodnight and wishes the Doctor luck in his investigation, and they make their way back to the boardwalk.

“You should get some rest,” he says in a hushed tone as they reach number 19, nodding to the door.

“You’re not gonna stay?” she asks, rubbing her eye.

He shakes his head.

Why? she asks without words, and he reads the question in her eyes instinctively.

“I want to get started on figuring out what’s killing these fish.” He shakes the plastic bag in his hand noisily. “And I don’t want to keep you awake working in there. I’m not tired, anyway.”

She wasn’t implying he was tired; that isn’t the issue here. But neither is the fish problem. This is just him enforcing his newly issued ‘no kissing’ rule. Making sure he doesn’t send her any more mixed signals, or make things unfair for her, tempt either one of them down a path he clearly doesn’t want to travel. Perhaps he never intended to share this hut with her at all. Suddenly, she finds it likely that she’ll be spending every night they spend here alone inside of it. That would certainly send a very clear, very unmixed signal indeed.

“Okay,” she says, more in defeat than actual agreement.

“See you in the morning?” he murmurs, holding out his hand.

She hesitates a moment before taking it, fighting the urge to ask him to stay. To grab his hand and pull him inside and kiss him until he forgets why he shouldn’t kiss back. She knows he wants to down in those two big hearts, that it’s only in his head he’s fighting it. But that wouldn’t be productive. Or patient, or kind.

“Yeah.” She musters up the best smile she can and takes his hand.
He holds it in his for a few seconds, his thumb brushing against hers, before squeezing it once and letting it fall to her side again.

Unable to resist, she watches him go. And just under the yellow glow of the second lantern in his path, he looks back, a gentle smile on his lips that sets her heart fluttering in her chest.

She doesn’t go inside until he’s vanished from under the last lantern on the boardwalk.

After she takes a quick shower in chilled water (she’ll have to remember to take showers during the day here), she changes into her pyjamas, blows out the torch by the bed, and snuggles up under the fluffy white duvet. She stares out the single window at the twinkling stars, intending to stay awake for hours sulking about her solitude and the lost opportunity with the Doctor, but soft crash of waves and pull of the tide soothe her to sleep in minutes.
Woohoo! Still on time! I hope you guys like this one, I think it's really fun :) The proverbial cat is really almost out of the bag now.

It feels like the middle of the night when the front door bangs against the wall and someone barrels into the hut, shouting.

With a start, Rose struggles into a sitting position and peeks at the intruder through heavy eyelids. The figure is dark in the early pink light of sunrise from the window, and quite blurry, but she’d recognize that flawless brown hair anywhere. She lets her eyes drift closed again and rests her head in her hands. The Doctor keeps going on about something, but she can’t understand him. It’s all just blaringly loud words that make her head hurt, and it feels like she’s been hit by a lorry.

But just when she’s about to reach for the lantern, throw it at his head and tell him to sod off until later, she realizes she ought to be glad he’s here, regardless of what time it is. That he’s excited to spend time with her again.

It’s quite a change from a few days earlier, when he was actively avoiding her unless he needed something. She can’t shut him down at this early sign of eagerness to patch their friendship back together. So she holds her tongue and simply throws the covers off with an angry groan. No heavy objects thrown at his stupid, pretty face.

“’Kay, well, ‘least leave so I can get ready an’ change,” she grumbles, her voice croaking.

“Right.” He nods. “I’ll get you a cuppa.” He bounces back outside with way too much energy.

She hauls herself out of bed and to the tiny loo. Washes her face, pulls her hair up, and slips into the swimsuit she brought – black with pink flowers – pulling on a black cami and a knee-length pink flowing skirt on over it. She’ll save revealing the skimpy thing for when they’re actually going in the water.

When she finally walks outside, she finds the Doctor waiting for her on a bench just a few feet from the door, an insulated tumbler in his hand he must’ve got from the TARDIS. She takes it gratefully and starts chugging it down. He’s made it perfectly, at least.

A few gulps of caffeine in her stomach, she finally sees the Doctor for the first time this morning. He’s at least partially changed into attire appropriate for swimming. He has on the same colour blue Oxford he wore yesterday, but it’s rolled up to his elbows and buttoned halfway down his chest, and in place of the pinstriped trousers and Chucks are brown swim trunks and matching brown sandals. He’s wearing his thick-rimmed “sunglasses” and in all honesty – lack of suntan or not – looks like he belongs in some kind of men’s summer catalogue.
Kalei provides them breakfast on the go when they meet up with him at the edge of the village: sweet spiced bread and fresh fruits that look and crunch like apples but taste like mangoes. As they walk along the shore, Rose and the Doctor devour their morning treats while Kalei proposes a strategy for finding ruki during the day. The fish don’t venture close to shore, so they’ll have to take a rowboat out further and take a swim to see any alive. Kalei offers them some snorkel gear that would be primitive by a time traveller’s standards, and the Doctor predictably turns him down politely, saying he has plenty of that sort of thing back on the TARDIS.

“No problem. I’ll head back to see about borrowing a boat…” Kalei says, poised to run back to the village.

“Brilliant!” the Doctor cheers through a mouthful of bread as they part ways. “Here, look,” he adds, only to Rose. He reaches a hand into his pocket and pulls two pairs of thick, black goggles and creepy-looking grey face masks.

“What are these?” she asks, though she almost doesn’t want to know.

“These are goggles,” he proclaims, jiggling them in one hand. “And these are artificial gills from the year 19465, the Human Colony on Mycaxia. Let you breathe underwater. Well,” he tilts his head to the side. “As long as there are at least four milligrams per litre of dissolved oxygen in that water. And I happen to know that at the current air temperature of twenty-two degrees, the oceans on Kaelondaia hold an average of six-point-zero-three milligrams per litre.”

She takes one of the devices in her hand.

“So, we go underwater, I breathe through this, and I don’t die,” she surmises.

“Yep.” He nods, handing her a pair of goggles as well.

“Great,” she says, sardonic.

“I know!” the Doctor beams, either not detecting her sarcasm or pretending not to.

She rolls her eyes and downs the last of her bread, hoping there will be many more loaves of it in the coming days. It’s delicious – like a cinnamon roll without the cloying sweetness of the dripping icing. Warm, chewy, and mildly sweet, with pockets of sweet local spices tucked inside, flavours that are reminiscent of the cinnamon and ginger and nutmeg back home but that aren’t quite the same. More exotic, somehow, with unique bold flavours beyond her experience; in her mind she imagines things like ground up spicy raspberries and maple peppercorns. Combinations that never existed in her mind until now. One of many reasons she loves traveling with the Doctor: for every repulsive bite of a disgusting alien insect that happens to be a delicacy, she gets to taste an extraordinary new treat that Earth simply can’t offer.

Kalei returns with a little wooden rowboat in only a few minutes, and says they have their neighbour – Taha – to thank. Rose takes note of the name and makes a point to find her later on.

The Doctor doesn’t waste any time. He throws the oars into the boat, picks up the bow with one hand, and takes off at a run towards the waves, dragging the heavy wooden thing through the sand. She doesn’t react quickly enough to grab the stern and help him, frozen in the sand admiring the upper body strength it must take to lug it with one arm like that. He’s skinny, yeah. To lots of people, perhaps even too skinny. But she’s one of the few who knows how capable that slim body really is. Those wiry muscles are deceptively strong. A Time Lord thing, she’s always thought.

“Rose, c’mon!” the Doctor calls, jumping into the boat that’s now floating in very shallow water,
being jostled by each small wave that breaks beneath it.

She slips off her sandals and leaves them next to his, then follows the trail the boat left in the sand down to the water. When her feet splash into the water, it feels like a bath that sat too long: tepid and unpleasant for a spa treatment, but rather warm for seawater. She wades out to the boat, pulls up her skirt so it doesn’t get wet, and jumps in after him. A big grin on his face, he hands her an oar, and they start rowing.

It takes them a while to get away from shore, with the waves trying to pull them back to the sand. But once they’re out of that current, rowing is easier than she would have thought. Regardless, it’s still a form of exercise they aren’t accustomed to, and they endure their fair share of mistakes – salty splashes from large swells; near-capsizes; and they always seem to be veering left or right because his arms are considerably stronger than hers. (Eventually, he decides to alternate sides on every row, and they travel in much more of a straight line, but he doesn’t stop teasing her about it.)

When the Doctor decides they’re far enough from the shore, he stands up, his hands out at his sides to balance himself as the boat rocks perilously. He unbuttons his shirt and shrugs it off, and it floats down onto the boat. Shoving an arm into one of the pockets of his swim trunks, he spends several long moments pulling out a comically long rope, like he’s a low-budget magician. Offering no verbal explanation, he ties one end of the rope to a metal ring on the side of the boat.

“I have the virus isolated back at the TARDIS. And I’ve programmed genetic markers into the screwdriver. All we’ve got to do is find its source. Could be something the fish are eating, or something just in the water, I’m not sure. We’ll take back samples of everything we can.” He ties the other end of the rope around his waist, then he picks up a second rope and ties it next to the first on the ring, and beckons her forward. “C’mere.”

She stands up slowly, and sways as the boat lurches to the side with the movement, but catches herself on his shoulder.

“All right, easy,” he says, gripping her by the waist to steady her better.

“I’m good, yeah, thanks,” she lies. With a half-naked Doctor touching her hip, she doesn’t feel very good at all. Suddenly much too dizzy to do any swimming.

“Can you take this off?” he tugs on her tank top, and red heat floods her face.

“Erm… why?” she manages to mumble out.

“So I can tie this around you.” He holds up the loose end of the rope.

“Why?” Her throat is dry, voice raspy.

“So you don’t drift away from the boat.”

“Right.”

He moves his hand away to give her space, and she pulls the shirt over her head and drops it behind her. She can hardly bear to look at his face longer than a second, but in that one second, he doesn’t seem as floored or dazed by her exposed flesh as she might’ve liked.

He loops the rope around her waist and ties it gently, protecting her skin with his hands so he doesn’t burn her with the rope. He finishes the knot and takes a step back, and when she looks up at him, cheeks surely still red, he just nods down to her skirt. Taking a deep breath, she decides to just get it over with, and pushes it right down off her hips. It swishes to the bottom of the boat, and
she steps out of it carefully.

“The flowers suit you.”

“Wha’?”

He chuckles to himself. “The swimsuit.” He gestures down at her torso. “It’s nice.” He smiles before he puts his goggles and the breathing mask over his face and hands her the other pair.

Before she can respond, he leaps over the side of the boat and cannonballs into the water. The boat rocks so much that she loses her balance and has no choice but to use the water to break her fall, and she splashes in bum-first. The Doctor waves at her from underwater, and she gives him a fierce scowl before swimming back to the surface. To her surprise, the seawater doesn’t burn her eyes like it would back home. She puts the goggles on and tightens them to her liking, then bites down on the mouthpiece and secures the mask over her nose before she dips her head back under. She inhales a very shallow, experimental breath, and to her surprise, air fills her lungs.

Blimey, the stuff he’s got in those pockets.

She dives toward the Doctor. With the sunlight filtering through the crystal clear water, she can see for hundreds of feet in every direction. Fish have cleared the area where they splashed into the water, but she can make out at least three kinds from a distance. A school of tiny orange fish to their left (probably too small to catch, she thinks); a pair of big, ugly red things that remind her of catfish near the ocean floor beneath them (maybe they don’t taste good?); and to her right, just where she can make out the drop-off where the depths of water that follow fade to black, a handful of the medium-sized silver fish she thinks are the tasty ruki.

The Doctor is already swimming towards them, so she follows his lead.

When they get a little closer, she sees that the fish were eating one of the plants growing in the sand near the drop-off. The ruki are long gone by the time they’re close enough, but the Doctor beckons her towards the foliage anyway. He hands her several plastic bags and a pair of tweezers that she has no idea where he was hiding, and takes a pair of his own and pulls off a leaf of a swaying stalk of seaweed and places it in a bag of his own.

She gets the idea. Samples for him to analyse later. The method seems simple enough.

Figuring divide and conquer is the best strategy, she distances herself from the Doctor, and plucks a leaf from a darker variety of seaweed a few metres a way.

They spend a while collecting plants from the diverse marine forest available to the fish, and by the time the Doctor signals a return to the surface, Rose has quite a collection. A stalk from a red anemone-looking thing, a long blade of brown grass that looks like an eel, a few mushy piles of jade moss, and several leaves of varying hues of seaweeds.

When they break the surface, they both peel the masks and goggles of their faces and throw them into the boat, and squint at each other in the bright sunlight. The Doctor nods his head for her to climb in first. Mustering all her strength, she gets both her arms over the edge, and pulls herself up enough that the top half of her swimsuit has made it aboard, as well. But despite several strenuous attempts, she can’t seem to swing her first leg inside without the boat tipping over.

“Here…”

The Doctor’s hand cups under the back of her thigh and pushes to help lift her up. She gasps as her arms let go of the wood completely, and she slips off the side and plops back into the water.
“Well, that wasn’t supposed to happen,” the Doctor mumbles when she resurfaces, a grimace on his face.

“No, sorry I just, er… I wasn’t expecting…” The water is cooling her face to such a degree that it probably doesn’t look red (hopefully), but it feels on fire, and the imprint of the Doctor’s fingers just under her arse is still tingling pleasantly under the water.

“You all right?” he asks. He pushes a clump of wet hair away from his forehead.

She must look ghastly.

The Doctor, on the other hand, looks completely non-threatening. His freckles stand out more on his skin when it’s wet, contrast against his pale skin. That bottom lip of his looks even more pink and edible with a sheen of water. And with his hair all wet and droopy he looks… smaller somehow. She’s always joked with herself that some of this incarnation’s power originates from his magnificent hairstyle, but without it right now, she’s wondering whether there’s some credence to the theory, after all. It’s one of those moments she forgets he’s a Time Lord. The mysterious alien is gone; he just looks like a regular bloke she went swimming with. A handsome bloke. A handsome bloke she can’t have.

“Yeah,” she finally answers, looking away from the tempting display.

“Too much?” he asks faintly.

She looks back at him, and sees another, unspoken question on his face.

You’re not ready for me to touch you without it getting weird?

But he doesn’t look irritated. Not angry or surprised. Instead, his eyes convey patience and understanding.

“Yeah,” she murmurs.

He interprets it as an answer both his spoken and unspoken questions.

Without pressing the matter further, he grabs onto the side of the boat and hauls his weight inside in one try. It rocks back and forth as he tumbles inside with a splat, but he gets on his knees and steadies it out.

Standing up, he reaches his dripping hands out to her, and the moment she takes them, he lifts her clear out of the water. In hardly a second she’s sitting on the wooden seat, her feet the only part of her body hanging off the side of the boat.

“Thanks,” she mumbles as he drops her arms and she swings her legs inside.

“Don’t mention it.” He picks up one of the bags and takes out a plant specimen, and pulls the sonic screwdriver out of the pocket of his shorts. He lifts it next to his ear and flicks through a few settings almost faster than she can hear them until he finds the one he wants, then aims it at the dripping leaf.

“You couldn’t’ve done this down there?” she asks.

“The sonic’s not waterproof.” He glares up at her, his lip curling up in irritation like she should’ve already known that.
She rolls her eyes.

“Pockets are, though,” he adds, arching an eyebrow as he returns to his task.

She chuckles despite herself. Of course they are.

It only takes him a matter of seconds to find the right plant.

His face lights as he holds up a piece of blue seaweed she can hardly distinguish from three others.

“Hah!”

“Found the virus?”

“Yep. These cell walls are crawling with it.” He runs his fingers over the surface as he coos at it. “They’re attached to the surface somehow. Probably a glycoprotein linkage.”

“So what do we do next?”

Truth be told, she just wants to get this virus business squared away so they can enjoy their proper island vacation. Not, she tells herself, so she can have the Doctor to herself again. Certainly not so she can try to change his mind about the whole just friends thing. And definitely not because she’s hoping with a little time alone in a place like this, he’ll cave and wind up crawling into that guest bed with her and all her fantasies will come true.

“Well,” he begins, changing his demeanour swiftly to the expert scientist. But it’s much harder to take him seriously in this persona when he’s wet and shirtless. All she can seem to think about are those fantasies. Taking him back to their hut. Pushing him back onto the bed while he’s still dripping. Licking the droplets of water off his chest. Claiming his lips in a salty kiss. Running her fingers through his soaking hair…

“It must’ve just recently evolved, maybe a few months ago. One little fluke is all it takes. Apparently, the ruki haven’t evolved with their food source yet, and they’re too stupid to figure out why all their friends are dying.” He shakes his head, pitying the pathetic creatures. “They’d better bloody taste good, because they’re barely worth saving otherwise.”

Rose shakes her head and tries to focus. He’s not trying to entice her. He’s shirtless, same as every other male on the island, and behaving perfectly normally, and she’s being inappropriate and immature and sexualising it.

“How do we save them?” she asks.

“Well, that’s the question. Normally I’d say I have to let natural selection take its course, let them be wiped out or else wait for them to evolve higher intelligence or immunity to the virus.”

“But?”

“But…” He tilts his head to the side thoughtfully. “These people have been nothing but kind to us, and it shouldn’t do any harm to the ecosystem to help the ruki along. Speed up the evolutionary process, if you will.”

“How?”

“Well… same way you lot do for viruses that affect humans.”

“Right,” Rose nods, connecting the dots. “So like, what, a vaccination?” Early on in their travels,
she made a vow to never be useless. To never dwell on the fact that she’s constantly in the presence of a genius with an otherworldly brain and hundreds of years of expertise. Because by now, she’s learned that she can help him. In fact, more often than he’d probably like to admit, he flounders without a human around to offer a different perspective.

“Yeah, it’s certainly possible. But it could take weeks to develop something like that.”

“For humans, or for you?”

He grins, arrogantly, and clicks his tongue.

“Good point. But even if I developed a vaccination, how could we possibly deliver it to the entire population? No... there’s got to be something simpler...”

“Well...” She ponders aloud. “We took one sample of every plant, yeah?”

“Right,” he agrees, attentive.

“How do we know it’s affecting every plant in this species? Maybe it’s just a few, and we just got lucky to find the right spot. If it’s not all of ‘em, then...”

“We can eliminate them at the source!” He leaps up onto his feet. The boat pitches to one side dangerously, but he doesn’t seem to notice that she’s holding both edges for dear life. “We should go back down. Check a few different locations. It might not have spread far yet, if it’s really a novel virus. It could be only a handful of ruki eating them, and spreading it to one another through the water or simple contact.” He lifts her up suddenly by the arms and pushes her mask and goggles into her hands. “Rose, it’s brilliant.”

“C’mon!” He pulls all of his gear onto his face.

Before she can get another word in, he dives headfirst into the water.

The boat nearly capsizes.

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The Doctor finally goes quiet, staring out at the sun setting over the horizon. The rippling water below reflects the pastel pinks, purples, and oranges in the sky. Rose didn’t expect him to linger here with her after the topic of the ruki virus was exhausted. Assumed it would be against his new ‘rules’ or whatever they are, crossing a line. But he doesn’t seem anxious or fidgety to leave. His arms are resting on the back of the couch, fingers tapping cheerfully, a contented grin on his face. Solving scientific mysteries does always put him in a bloody good mood.

With the small infected patch of seaweed uprooted from the sea floor, and Mariko and her team of biologists monitoring the ruki population for the time being, maybe the Doctor thinks he has nowhere else to be. He doesn’t look like he’ll be budging anytime soon. But as good as that may sound on the surface, she hadn’t expected to get any quality time with him this evening that didn’t involve sick fish or bioengineering. She hasn’t mentally prepared himself to be alone with him.

He hasn’t changed back into his usual attire yet. He’s still in his swim trunks, calves and feet still bare, and his shirt is back on but it’s halfway unbuttoned. Without any product to salvage it, his hair has dried into a fluffy mess on top of his head.

It’s not fair, him making her promise not to kiss him when he looks this adorable. When the setting is this romantic – essentially a honeymoon suite over a gorgeous ocean all to themselves. When the
dim, pastel lights of the sunset glow so enticingly on his fair skin. When his bottom lip juts out like that in his partially silhouetted profile.

God, no, don’t think about his lip.

Quickly bored of the lull in conversation, the Doctor turns toward her, pulling his knee inward to angle his body towards hers again. She mirrors his movement automatically, grasping at threads of hope.

“It’ll be a few days before we know if the ruki population is bouncing back properly. I thought maybe tomorrow…” He continues speaking, but the words meld together and become impossible for her brain to process. Unintelligible.

Staring down at all the flesh exposed in the opening of his shirt, all higher orders of brain function are swiftly hijacked by those recurring fantasies again. Sinking her teeth into the long, pale column of his neck. Dipping her tongue into the hollow at the base of his throat. Running her fingers through the patches of dark hair on his chest. Pulling his shirt apart until the rest of the buttons tear off their threads and scatter into the sea...

She snaps her head up, suddenly realising he had asked her something. She didn’t hear most of what he said.

But he doesn’t look concerned that she’s been idiotically drooling over his neck for several long seconds, or at all interested in a reply to his unheard question. His body has completely stiffened, to the point that it doesn’t even look like he’s breathing, and his fingers aren’t happily tapping on the back of the couch anymore. His brown eyes are darker than usual in the dim light of the descending sun, and their gaze is fixed with intense curiosity on her mouth.

She knows she should never look at his mouth… but he’s doing it so why can’t she? His lips are just slightly parted, as though in surprise, his lower lip contoured by the shadows cast across his face. His lips pull together and his throat lurches as he swallows hard.

His hand reaches down to rest against her hair, and a shiver trickles down her spine. He can’t be about to do what she thinks he is. He probably just misses the innocent touches they used to share all the time, in the library or in front of the telly or lounging around in her room. She should go. She should leave right now before she snogs him against his will again.

But before she can move an inch, he pulls her head towards him and leans forward, guiding her lips to his.

His mouth muffles the sound that escapes from her throat, a mix between a sigh of pleasure and a sob of sweet relief. She clings onto him, pulling his shoulders closer and pushing her fingers through his hair, afraid her vocal reaction will scare him off. But he answers her with a low moan of his own, hauling her closer to him with the length of his arm around her back.

She pushes into him, and he falls back awkwardly against the side cushion, taking her with him. The makeshift position is hardly conducive to prolonged comfort, so she gathers his shirt in her fists, tugging lightly. Guessing her intention, he shifts under her until he’s flat his back. She pins him down beneath her and he submits happily to her control, tightening his arms around her back.

Just for a little while, she fights back her conscience and memories of recent conversations and lets herself have him. Buries both hands in his hair, fuzzy and pliant between her fingers. Nibbles on his bottom lip, as plump and soft as she remembers it, tastes the remnants of the unique salts of the sea. She traces the shape of it with the tip of her tongue, and the Doctor makes a pleading sound in
the back of his throat that kindles a fire in her very being.

His lips part for her, to deepen the kiss further, and one of his hand wanders down her bum while the other dips under her camisole, and warm shivers spread over her body at his touch. And that’s when her one moment of bliss is finally shattered.

She can’t let him get away with this.

This has to be something they decide together, not something he verbally refuses one day then physically takes without a discussion the next. He may have the strength and the sexual magnetism to toy with other women this way if he wanted to, but she won’t let him do it to her.

She wrenches their lips apart and lifts her chest away from his with a forceful shove.

He cranes his neck up, pulls down harder with his arms on her backside, pleading for more, trying to reunite their lips.

“Stop.” She raises her voice.

The single word snaps him out of it completely. His hands drop from her body, and his eyes widen in shock.

“Sorry,” he huffs.

“Seriously!?” She climbs off of him and hovers above him on her knees. “You can’t just… do this.” He scrambles to pull himself back to a sitting position, and straightens out his shirt and pulls the sides of it closed so less of his skin is showing. “Tell me no and go into this list of reasons why not and ask me not to kiss you and then go and pull things like this.”

“I know.” He nods, a hand coursing through his already chaotic hair.

“It’s not fair.”

“I know,” he says again, frustrated. He squeezes his eyes shut and pushes a fist into his forehead.

“I mean, did you change your mind, or are you just muckin’ about? Tryin’ to score some no-strings-attached bollocks?”

“It’s… it’s not that. I promise I’m not… I didn’t change my mind, I…”

Rose hasn’t seen him look so stressed in a long time. Erratic breathing, eyes flickering from her face back down to the couch faster than she can track them. His hands can’t decide where to rest, alternating between his hair, his neck, the couch, and flailing in mid-air. “I know I have to stop, it’s just… it’s difficult when… when you…”

“Me?” she balks. “You’re gonna put this back on me?” She stands up on the couch, and walks back and forth, her hands on her head. “Oh, I don’t believe this… I’ve been perfectly good up ‘til now. I backed off when you said to. All day I was… I was tryin’ to respect your decision, what you said you wanted. This is not…”

“Your fault,” he interrupts. Suddenly, he looks calmer. His fidgeting has stopped. “I’m not putting it on you. You’re right, this is on me.”

“Damn right.” Hardly able to look at him, she shakes her head and stares back out at the sea, darker now than before they started snogging. Most of the sky is dark blue, only dim remnants of purple,
burnt orange, and magenta remain where the sky touches the ocean.

After a moment, the Doctor gets to his feet, too, and puts a hand on her shoulder. But she doesn’t turn. Looks stubbornly ahead. If she’s going to grant him forgiveness this time, he’s going to have to do something to earn it.

“Rose, there’s something I need to tell you.”
Big things are on the horizon, guys... big things :) Stay with me. It's all gonna work out.

Something ominous in the Doctor’s hollow voice makes Rose whirl around to face him.

His eyes are shining in the relative darkness, eyebrows knit closely together, and that luscious bottom lip she just had between her teeth wobbles slightly.

He looks scared.

In an instant, all of her pent-up anger and resentment withers away. She reaches out a hand, her strongest instinct to comfort him, but retracts it halfway. He’s been an indecisive arse lately, leading her on and crushing her hopes in an endless cycle, and she can’t let one instance of puppy eyes serve as sufficient atonement this time.

“Why don’t you sit down,” he says, nodding his head down and crumpling down onto the couch, legs in a pretzel.

This cannot be good. He never gets like this except when he’s about to inform her of some imminent doom, or else reject her in some creative new way she hasn’t suffered yet.

Taking a deep breath, she slowly sinks down to his level. She folds her legs, but keeps one foot planted flat on the couch to allow for a quick escape if need be.

“The other day,” he begins, quiet and hoarse. He clears his throat and swallows hard. “You told me you were feeling strange. Feeling emotions that didn’t make sense.”

“Yeah?” She perks up. Could he be about to apologize for brushing her off and confess she was right? No, he wouldn’t…

“And I, erm…” He stares down at his shorts, swirling little circles near the hem with his index finger. “I told you it was nothing. Just hormone fluctuations.”

“Yeah?” she agrees again, her patience with this sluggish recollection dwindling. He doesn’t need to do this; she’s perfectly up to speed already.

“Well, it… wasn’t,” he finishes, ambiguous as can be.

“Wasn’t what?”

“It wasn’t just hormones.”

She scoffs at his stubbornness.

“I knew it.” Still, she can’t help but allow herself a little smile of relief that her gut feeling was right all along. Off and on since that odd exchange, she’s been worried she’s going completely
barmy. The Doctor is right ninety-nine percent of the time, and he didn’t think anything was wrong. But she was right. Somehow, that satisfaction temporarily supersedes any nagging fears of what the malicious thing in her head actually is.

“Do you know what it was, then?” she asks.

He exhales loudly through his mouth and stares up into the sky, like he’s praying to some unknown deity for courage. He rests his elbows on his knees as his eyes arc back down to hers.

“Yeah.”

“What was it?” she blurts out, but quickly backtracks to a more relevant question. “Wait, have you known this whole time?”

He looks away with another deep breath before closing his eyes with a small nod.

“Why did you lie to me?” she accuses. He’s never neglected her well-being like this before.

“Because, I…” He growls, teeth bared and all. He’s bristling, not at her but at himself, directing all his unparalleled rage inward. “I didn’t know how to tell you. I still don’t.”

“Blimey, Doctor, is it that bad?” The panic starts to set in. It’s hard to tell someone when they’re going to be imminently maimed or killed, not when they’re having benign, treatable mood swings.

“No, it’s… I don’t know.” He tugs on his hair, his fury melting back into helpless fear.

“What is it?” she pleads.

“What you were feeling was…” He hesitates again, biting his cheek.

“Doctor!” she shouts, smacking his knee with her knuckles.

“Me,” he admits, harsh but bleak.

With that single syllable, everything stops. The crash of the waves, the hammer of her heart against her ribs, the distant clamour of a fatiguing village.

“What?” is the only word her lips can form.

“You were feeling me,” he says, softer.

Slowly, the world starts turning again. Warmth and butterflies flood her chest and evacuate all the air in her lungs until she can hardly breathe. Him? She was feeling him the whole time? All the hours and days she spent worrying about her brain, thinking a spirit or robot hijacked her brain, and it was him the whole time? And he didn’t even ask!?

“Wh… what are… what do you mean?” she stammers out, struggling to form coherent sentences in such a sudden mental overload.

“For a little while now you and I have been… connected. Telepathically.” He gestures between his head and hers with a couple fingers.

“But you…” She points a shaky finger at him. “You said that wasn’t possible.”

“It isn’t. Or, it shouldn’t be,” he amends. “I don’t know how it is. Maybe something to do with the TARDIS, or Bad Wolf…”
“But it’s… why didn’t you tell me?” She asks it only as a rhetorical question; she’s been conditioned to never expect a response to a question about his emotions or motives.

So when he does respond, she isn’t listening. Instead, she’s thinking back to all the instances in the last few weeks she’s felt something inexplicable. Trying to make sense of them through a different lens, with this newly revealed context. Every intense, misplaced emotion that possessed her without warning was from him. *Belonged* to him.

It’s nothing short of bewildering. From what little he’s spoken about telepathy before, she never would have expected it to be like this. She didn’t let herself ponder it often, but sometimes she slipped: when she couldn’t sleep late at night, or while she watched him communicate with the few other telepaths they’ve encountered. She’d fantasize about what it might be like. But in her daydreams, she always imagined it to be more… comforting. And she always assumed it would involve close physical contact; his hands have always been a necessary instrument when he’s initiated communication with other telepaths. And he did mention something once or twice about being a ‘touch telepath.’

But then, he also said he would never go into anyone’s head without their consent.

None of it adds up.

She finally tunes back into her surroundings to find the Doctor on his knees, hunched forward and pleading with her.

“Please, Rose. Say something. Anything.”

She thinks back to that night on the Sanctuary Base, when he claimed it wasn’t possible for them to share a telepathic link, but that if somehow it were, ‘she’d be the first to know.’

“You said you’d tell me.”

“I know, I just… I didn’t know what you’d think.”

She frowns, disappointed he’s still using the same old excuses, but her lips turn back up when she realizes the new potential for them this creates. This could be the best thing that’s ever happened to them. Even better than snogging on the couch.

“So, what does this mean, though, really?” she asks, cautiously optimistic.

“It means I miscalculated, somehow,” he acknowledges, without directly stating he was wrong.

“I still just don’t understand why you didn’t tell me up front. It was terrible, all this time not knowin’ what was goin’ on…” She wanted to be the first to know. And she wishes he hadn’t just dove in without asking instead of just telling her up front. She would’ve said yes in a heartbeat. She’d just much rather have been introduced to it slowly and gently, rather than hurled into a confusing abyss for weeks and blindsided by the truth in retrospect.

“I know. I’m sorry.” He hangs his head, ashamed with himself. “I’m so sorry.”

She skips over his apology. It’s the least of her concerns right now.

“But, if we’re connected now…” She wonders aloud.

“Rose, don’t even worry about that,” he interrupts. “I can put an end to this right now. I just need to go into your mind very briefly to break the connection, and that’ll be it.”
“What?” She stares at him, blankly, as his words sink in. He can’t be serious. “No, I don’t… want you to,” she recoils in disbelief. Put an end to it? He thinks she wants to disconnect it? She thought she made it clear that night on their tiny cot she was more than willing to try something like this.

“Oh, he nods. “I understand. Later, then. Whenever you’re ready. In the meantime, you can take this.” He reaches into the pocket of his swim trunks, and after a few moments of digging, pulls out a small, shimmering onyx stone tied to a matching black string. “Matricite. As long as you’re wearing it, it’ll block telepathic signals being transmitted and received.” He lets the rock drop and dangle from the string, and she sees it’s meant to be a crude necklace.

He holds his hand out, willing her to take it, and her heart sinks into her gut as she realizes the truth.

She got it wrong before. He doesn’t just think she wants to break this connection. He wants her to let him.

She’s only heard the Doctor talk about telepathy a handful of times, but whenever he does, it’s with such fondness. He cherishes his telepathic contact with the TARDIS. Though they’d only met once, he gravitated toward the Face of Boe like he was a long lost friend. And he reminisces on perished connections with his people with such heartbreaking nostalgia, like he’d give anything to share it with another living person again. And she always dreamed of being able to offer something so special and intimate to him. Something she could never share with anyone else, something that was unique to the Doctor. Unique to them.

She inwardly curses her own naiveté.

Maybe it was all a pretence from the beginning. Maybe he always knew this was possible, but she was never the person he wanted to share it with. Maybe on the surface, she’s sufficiently aesthetically appealing for him to satisfy other needs, but her mind isn’t special or superior enough to partake in something intended for Time Lords. Maybe that’s why he hasn’t been able to go through with anything romantic. Doesn’t want to get her hopes up for anything beyond the physical. An elitist, but not a womaniser.

“Okay,” she squeaks out, swallowing down the lump in her throat before it can spill any tears. “You can do it.” She gets up onto her feet and scoops the rock from his hand. “Just not now.”

As soon as she turns away from him, hot moisture erupts from her eyes and rolls heavy down her cheeks.

She leaps off the couch, and ignores him when he calls out to her. Shoves aside the shell curtain and hurls the stone against the far wall of the hut before she flops onto her bed, burying her face in a pillow and pulling a blanket over herself.

She doesn’t even know how to properly prepare herself for such an encounter. So many times she’s wondered about what it would be like, if the Doctor finally had a good enough reason to do this with her. When he touched his fingertips to her temples for the first time and closed his eyes, and she felt him, the real him, underneath all the defensive layers he wraps around himself. She always imagined it would be wonderful, more intimate and special than anything physical they could do. Something beyond the human experience. Magical, even.

But instead, the first time he does it will be to remove the budding seeds of this one thing so uniquely precious to him? Like it’s an invasive weed, rather than the golden blossom of intimacy she’s always imagined it?
Rose realises it must be pathetic that she needs time to come to terms with the loss of something she never really had. But she does.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, it's been a tough week on me mentally but I managed to get this done. Pretty unbeta'd so forgive my mistakes.

The Doctor slumps against the back of the couch, sighing into his hands.

That did not go well.

Ever since Rose confronted him in the console room, he had buckled down and tried to mentally prepare himself for this conversation. To suit up with his emotional armour, fortify the ramparts, brace himself behind the barricades in preparation for any reaction Rose might have – be it fear, disgust, or rejection – when she found out the truth. But he never expected it to go quite that poorly. For her to resent him to the point that she couldn’t even be on the same couch with him another second.

It’s stupid for him to even be disappointed. He knows they can’t possibly go through with it, even if she wanted to. He’s spent the last two days in terror, not only of having to tell Rose, but of the phenomenon itself. His restrictions on physical contact and his plans to keep her at arm’s length to protect himself will be utterly futile if he allows a connection like this to flourish. Since the moment he discovered it existed, he’s known he will inevitably have to sever it, before it draws him and Rose deeply and irrevocably closer to one another.

But paradoxically, all the time that he had been paralysed with dread and putting off telling her, absolutely certain that she would not react favourably, he was also secretly hoping she would be interested. In many of the rehearsal conversations he played out in his head, he had to inform her why it was a bad idea, convince her to decline it. Deep down, he wanted to believe she’d be willing to do anything for him, even if he wasn’t ready for it. Or that she would at least be on the fence of the matter, rather than planted resolutely on the other side of it.

Those shreds of hope in his hearts made him fiercely ill-prepared for the true worst case scenario. Hearing the disappointment in her voice as she questioned his motives, watching her turn and walk away from him… It aches. More than he expected it to.

The worst part is that she’s averse to something so central to his culture. The last two incarnations, his telepathic ability has been mostly latent, lacking avenues to be utilized. But it’s one of few characteristics that make the Doctor distinctively Gallifreyan: a legacy of his home and his people the way he wishes to remember them. Something fundamental, even, to his very nature. That his biological systems are wired to crave.

He swallows thickly through a swollen throat, hugging his chest to try to stifle the expansion of a sickeningly familiar void inside him.

As much as he wants to go after her, he doesn’t want to make her any more upset with him than she already is. Sometimes Rose needs her space to be human, away from all his daunting alien idiosyncrasies. He should really just leave. Go back to the TARDIS to quietly deal with this intrusive grief before anyone else has to witness it. If Rose sees him like this, she’ll only feel
guilty, and she shouldn’t. He doesn’t ever want her to lie to him solely to spare his feelings. To keep his stupid, bleeding hearts blissfully ignorant.

He takes a deep breath and steels himself for the lonely walk back to the TARDIS. But the moment he swings his legs off the edge and hauls himself onto his feet is precisely the moment he feels something unexpected: a deluge of soft, fragile sorrow pouring down in his mind.

It’s Rose.

Wait. Sorrow? She’s sad? Not angry?

Did she not put the necklace on?

He crumples back onto the couch, the air whooshing out of his lungs.

Did he misunderstand her reaction this whole time? Is she sad because she does want to partake in this with him, and almost the entire length of their conversation he was insisting on taking it away?

She never was very clear with him. Spoke in little more than ambiguous questions the duration of their brief talk.

No, it can’t be.

Can it?

Alternatively, is she sad because by not telling her about this sooner, he’s disappointed her to such a degree that she’s considering leaving him? Are these tears of imminent separation?

Oh, no.

He has to find out.

He leaps up off the couch and heads for the doorway.

Just enough dim twilight filters through the window that he can make out a vaguely human shape on the bed as he parts the seashell curtain leading inside. Shifting his weight to the balls of his feet, he pads through the doorway, careful not to let the shells clink too loudly against their neighbours. He approaches the bed quietly, and she doesn’t stir until he sits down on the corner and the shift of the mattress alerts her to his presence.

With a start, she sucks in a sharp breath, but doesn’t turn around.

“What do you want?” Her voice is surprisingly clear and steady. Without his new, secret shortcut to reveal her true emotions, he would probably stick to the assumption that she’s angry and leave her alone.

“Are you upset?” he asks softly.

That’s not even the right question. Clearly, she is. What he doesn’t know is why. God, he’s stupid.

“No,” she calls back, in a normal voice. It’s very believable, he has to admit. It’s too bad he knows better.

Sighing, he stands up and walks over to the lantern on the other side of her bed. With a quick adjustment of settings and a flick of his wrist, he lights the oil with the sonic. As the soft yellow light spreads through the room, he catches a glimpse Rose’s face before she has a chance to turn
away. No fresh moisture, but puffy eyes and blotchy cheeks.

“You can’t hide strong emotions from me anymore,” he offers.

“Sod off,” she bites back, her face still hidden from view.

“Well, you could,” he amends. “If you’d have worn that matricite stone I gave you.” He quickly scans around the room, and spots it on the floor by the front door, beneath a small dent in the wood. “The one you evidently threw against the wall.” He bends down to pick it up, hoping she can hear the smile in his voice. Of course she wouldn’t accept an alien device on the first try like that. Especially not when she was upset. He really is exceptionally thick for a Time Lord.

When she doesn’t budge or make a sound, he tries a different avenue.

“Rose, I am very sorry. If you don’t want me to feel anything, I can shut it all down right now.”

She finally lifts her head from the pillow, turning to look at him. A single fresh tear rolls down her cheek, and he stuffs his hands in his pockets, tightens his jaw so he doesn’t rush forward to comfort her with hugs and murmurs of affection.

“That isn’t it.” Shaking her head, she stares up at the ceiling, like she’s praying he’ll stop being so mind-numbingly thick and understand what’s going on. Maybe if he hadn’t been born a male, all this could’ve been avoided.

He decides to test his first, more optimistic theory. It’s worth a shot.

“Alternatively, it would…” he hesitates, clearing his throat and wiggling his toes on the floor. “It would be possible to learn how to shield your emotions from me. If you didn’t want to get rid of it yet.”

She perks up immediately, pushing a few stray hairs out of her face as she sits up on the bed, intrigued.

“It would?”

“Mhm.” He nods.

“Could you…” she squeezes the blanket in her hand. “Teach me more about it?”


“I do.” She nods, a tiny hint of a smile on her lips.

She is interested. She doesn’t hate him. Bloody hell.

Relief surges through his system so rapidly it makes him lightheaded. He exhales slowly and quietly, and fights down the urge to beam back at her. She still hasn’t been very clear on why she wants to learn more. For his benefit, or hers? As a temporary solution, or a permanent one? For once in their relationship, they need to talk something through properly. So he figures he ought to start from the beginning and tell her everything. It’s only fair that she’s as informed as he is. Her mind has already been unwittingly violated, after all.

With a small nod of his own, he steps forward and sits down on her bed again. She crawls forward until she’s near the edge with him, still clutching her blanket in her lap for security.

“What’s going on between us, it’s… rare,” he begins. “It normally only happens between spouses,
or occasionally other people in exceptionally close relationships. Of course, when I say ‘people,’ I mean Gallifreyans. It’s terribly rare for it to happen with a non-telepathic species like a human.”

“So, when you said that we couldn’t… before, on Krop Tor, you really meant it? You didn’t know?”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t know. What few times I’ve experienced this, it’s always been with a Gallifreyan.”

She ponders that for a moment, and nods silently to herself before prodding him again.

“But I also thought… you told me once you were a touch telepath. I thought you always needed contact to get in someone’s head.”

“That’s normally true.” He takes a deep breath. How to explain this to someone who’s completely unfamiliar with telepathy as a concept, let alone an experience? “In most cases, I do. But this is something different, something… unique that doesn’t require physical contact.”

“How does it work, then?”

He takes it as a very, very good sign that she’s so interested. Not in a frightened way, but an innocently curious way.

“It’s…” He combs a hand through his hair for a few moments, brainstorming for an analogy a human would understand.

“It’s like a storm. Rainclouds and strong air currents create a negative charge in the atmosphere that doesn’t match the charge of the Earth’s surface.” He gestures around his head and the space between them with his hands, illustrating the scene. “Physicists call it electrostatic potential.” Rose nods, and he continues. “Naturally, charges want to spread, to equilibrate themselves, to eliminate any spatial differences by transferring the negative charge back down to the ground. But air isn’t a very conductive path from the clouds to the ground, so it isn’t easy for the charge to transfer. But the longer it goes on, the greater the charge difference becomes. And if the potential builds high enough…” He snaps his fingers.

“Lightning,” she finishes his thought.

“Exactly. The static build-up will take the path of least resistance to the ground in the form of a lightning strike.”

“How does this relate to us?” she asks, eyebrows pulling together, not yet seeing the connection.

“Well, a strong emotion is like a storm in the mind. When there isn’t a path of low resistance for that electricity to travel, it generally stays put. In other words, most emotions stay confined to a person’s head. But when two people’s minds are compatible and form a deeper connection, they start to become attuned. On a level that isn’t even perceivable, for most. But when it happens, the other person’s mind eventually becomes a path of very low resistance.

“That’s been happening with you and me. At some point along the way, somehow, our minds became compatible enough for it to be possible. Every time you felt some emotion that didn’t belong to you was like a lightning strike. A short burst of electricity, straight from me.”

“Woah.” She rubs her temples, staring down at the bed. He has to make sure to give her due time to absorb and process all this. It’s quite outside the realm of human experience, and the last thing he wants to do is overwhelm her. That’d be an easy way to scare her away for good.
“So… you’ve been the cloud and I’ve been the ground…” she ponders aloud. He smirks, chuffed that she grasps his analogy enough to use it herself. “Have I ever been the cloud?”

Oh.

“Er…” He grimaces, rubbing his neck as a blush spreads over it. “Yeah.”

“Really?” she grins. “When? What was it??”

“We don’t need to go into those details,” he rushes out, waving his hand.

She frowns a little, but seems to understand that he doesn’t feel comfortable talking about it, and doesn’t press it.

“What I still don’t understand,” he continues, diverting the conversation as quickly as possible from that question, “is how it’s even possible. It’s happened all backwards. Normally, this process runs the other direction. A strong telepathic connection is established through the physical route first, and the weaker, long-distance one follows after it. Normally, someone telepathic like myself would have to initiate that stronger link through touch in order for these telepathic exchanges to be possible. Ours is quite an odd case. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” Rose insists. “Point is, it happened.”

She always has been one to cut through the superfluous analysis and get to the heart of the matter.

“So… what does it mean, though?” she asks, inching closer to him. “What happens next?”

He tries to ignore her proximity, and maintains a professional demeanour.

“Well, with time, these connections grow stronger. It won’t take as strong of a storm for lightning to strike, so to speak. A light breeze can cause a tiny zing of static shock. It happens more often, and milder emotions can trigger it. But it will never grow as strong as a connection maintained physically. Through touch, I can sense memories, dreams, timelines, the most fleeting emotions. None of those things will ever come through without direct contact. It is very useful to know when someone’s in trouble without having to pick up a phone. But it brings a sort of unparalleled transparency to a relationship.”

“But, how long have you known what was going on, then?” asks Rose, pulling on the fabric of his shirt. “If it’s happened to you before…”

“I only found out a few days ago.”

“The night you spilled your tea all over?”

Another rush of heat floods his face.

“Yeah,” he mutters.

“How could you not have known?” she asks. Normally, he’d be offended. Scoff and insult humans as a species and come up with a perfect excuse for why he didn’t solve the mystery sooner. But she’s dead on, this time. He really should have figured it out sooner.

He sighs, resigned to deducing his best explanation aloud.

“It hasn’t happened to me in such a long time. With the Time Lords gone I thought… I thought it’d never happen again. And like I said, it doesn’t usually happen this way. Normally it’s only once…
“Once a relationship has been consummated, he thinks to himself, whether emotionally or physically. With few exceptions.

“The subconscious is hard-wired to embrace such a connection, not to suspect or reject it. It’s meant to feel natural, like it’s a part of you that belongs. And normally that’s not a problem, because once you’ve connected with someone telepathically, you can recognize their mind’s signature much more easily whenever you feel it again, even from a distance. But without that, it was… Whenever when I thought I felt something weird was going on, I didn’t cross my mind that it might be something foreign. My conscious mind was questioning the emotional outbursts, yes, but my subconscious was demanding that I accept it freely. I was suffering an internal conflict of interest.”

“It was the same with me,” Rose chimes in. “I had no idea it was you. I felt like I was the one who was scared, or angry, or whatever. I thought I was possessed or somethin’.” She chuckles a bit, and he’s glad to see that she can find it amusing in retrospect, especially after seeing her so frightened by it before.

“Yes,” he pops the ‘p.’ “Mad. I’ve never experienced it like this before.”

“So, if… we could make it easier to tell?” It’s clear she doesn’t quite know the right questions to ask.

“In theory,” he hedges.

“How?”

“Well, it’ll happen on its own, if we don’t do anything. The intangible connection will strengthen with time. But the process is accelerated by forming a stronger telepathic connection through physical contact.”

“D’you want to do that?” she asks bluntly, no concept of how brazen such a question is.

“I… ah…” All the actual words he knows are suddenly stuck in the back of his throat. She still hasn’t made it clear what she wants his answer to be, and he isn’t sure if his response even matters. In his hearts, he wants to... oh, he wants to desperately, but in his much more rational mind, he knows they shouldn’t.

“Do you?” He turns the tables; she has to be trapped into giving him a real answer now.

“Sort of, yeah,” she offers, breaking eye contact in favour of staring down at her feet.

“Really?” His jaw drops.

“Yes, ’s that bad?” she looks miffed at his shock.

“No, it’s… I just thought… I figured you’d never…”

“Seriously, is that why you were trying to convince me to wear that stupid rock?” Her mouth twists down in anger, and her eyebrows stitch together threateningly. “You thought I didn’t want to do it with you?”

“Er…”

It’s really, truly pathetic how often this Earthling woman can render him speechless.
“You said you couldn’t believe I didn’t tell you.” He turns his palms up in defeat. “You sounded so angry.”

“Do you not remember our conversation on that black hole planet? When you said we couldn’t do something like this? And I said I wanted to be the first to know if we ever could?”

“I suppose I do, yeah.” He bites his cheek and tries to focus on breathing normally. “I just…”

“What?” she spits out. He certainly never saw this anger coming.

“The other day, when you said you didn’t want anything mucking about in your head…” She’d been so anxious about what she experienced, and so adamant about getting rid of the mysterious interference. Not that he’d ever admit it, but it was traumatic for him to witness.

“You thought that included you?” she asks, a bit softer.

He glares resolutely down at the blankets.

Rose sighs heavily. “Blimey, Doctor, you are –”

“All right,” he stops her insult. “I get it. But the thing is, Rose, either way… I don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” Her face falls.

He isn’t sure how to tell her.

“You make it sound so wonderful,” she adds.

“It is,” he agrees, physically unable to imply anything less. “It’s brilliant, it’s… something I never thought I’d have again.”

“Then what’s the problem?” she asks. “Is it me? Am I not good enough?”

“No!” he scolds, taking her hand forcefully in his, squeezing her palm. “No. Of course not. Why would you even think that?”

She shrugs, not meeting his eyes.

He waits a moment before going on, stroking his thumb over her knuckles, savouring the softness of her skin.

“Breaking a connection like that is one of the most painful things I’ve ever had to do. Not something I ever want to do again voluntarily.”

“What, you think I’m gonna leave you or something?” Her words are sharp.

“I know you will.” His are sharper.

“How many times do I have t –”

It only takes one harsh glare from him for her to leave the end of that sentence unfinished.

He never has to say the word to her face anymore, any variation of ‘death’. Not since that first time. And for that he’s grateful.
“Besides,” he continues, breaking the painfully heavy silence. “It’s quite a commitment to make. It’d be devastating if you were ever separated from me for too long. Not something to take lightly.”

“It…” She holds her tongue. Covers her mouth with her fist.

What was she going to say? That it already is?

Well, brilliant. That makes two of them, then.

This is dangerous territory. If he stays too much longer, she might confess something he really doesn’t want to hear. Something he absolutely cannot requite, no matter how badly he wants to.

“I should go,” he whispers. He drops her hand and stands up.

“Don’t,” she pleads, grasping his arm and tugging hard. “Please.”

One word he can never say no to.

He turns reluctantly around. Crosses both his arms and legs so he won’t crawl onto the bed and pin her beneath them (incidentally, another reason he should be leaving).

“Is that it, I mean, you’re saying no? We can’t…” she swallows, her eyes glistening as they bore into his.

“It not only my decision,” he explains. “It affects us both already. I can’t take it away unless you want me to.” No point in adding that the only reason anyone in their right mind would ever want to break such a precious thing is if the other person died. And in such a circumstance, in a morbid paradigm of irony, that would cease to be possible. The order in which things have occurred between them is certainly bizarre, but if she were a Time Lady, something so trivial could never warrant severing it voluntarily. He’d never dreamed of doing such a thing any of the other times he shared it with someone.

“You were going to,” she accuses, crossing her arms with an angry frown.

“No,” he insists, shaking his head. “I would have tried, but I wouldn’t have been able to. Not if you weren’t okay with it. Once I actually got into your mind, it would’ve been very obvious that you didn’t want me to. And I wouldn’t ever have gone through with it without your consent. No lies or miscommunications in here.” He taps her forehead gently.

“Well, I don’t give my consent,” she asserts.

“Take some time,” he offers, pretending not to notice how resolute she already is. “Think about it.”

She responds with something, but the words filter in one ear and out the other, unprocessed. The temporary relief that she doesn’t hate him wears off, and the deeper-seated fear underneath is exposed, a raw nerve. Rose’s presence in the room fades from his perception as his mind starts to close in on itself again, its only tested defence mechanism.

Honestly, why does she think he hasn’t done anything so far?

He thought she understood how hard normal relationships are for him. That she would never ask something like this of him because of everything he’s been through.

The universe does not allow him family or friends, or any sense of permanence; it merely loans him a home and companionship at a dire rate of interest, with a contract signed in blood. Like a
wraith, it haunts him quietly from the depths of his own shadow, waits until he’s finally found a shred of happiness in someone, or something. And only then does it slink back into the light to collect its debt, sparing nothing from its ghastly clutches. It pillages and raids indiscriminately until he’s alone in the TARDIS amidst the dust and wreckage, left with nothing two broken hearts and a stranger in the mirror. No choice but to start over. Again and again.

He can’t allow himself to be so invested and vulnerable when it emerges next, when it seizes Rose in its malicious claws and wrenches her from his arms. A stab of pain throbs in his chest at the very thought; even right this moment it seems a fate worse than death. But with a telepathic connection to strengthen their already unusually close bond, another layer of superglue binding them together? He won’t survive another loss of that magnitude. Losing his entire race in one magnificent blast was enough for all thirteen lifetimes.

“Let me know in the morning. Or whenever you want,” he rushes out suddenly, his tone brusque.

“But –”

Before she can convince him to stay any longer, he turns on his heel and rushes out the front door, closing it quickly behind him.

How can they ever preserve their relationship at the level it’s at now, if she doesn’t let him put a stop to this? How much worse will it be to lose her if they’re mentally connected like this for any substantial amount of time? Try as he might, he can’t put numbers or figures to such questions.

What will he do if she says she wants to keep it, and there’s nothing he can do to talk her out of it? It would be such a beautiful release to connect with a living, breathing person in that way again. There may be nothing he wants more in the universe than to share that intimacy with Rose. Teach her all the things it has to offer. She’s the only one he’d ever want to share it with again. But his stubbornly logic-oriented mind can’t ignore the fact that the well-established risks outweigh the perceived temporary benefits. His hearts ache for her, but his mind recoils at the thought of being plunged back into darkness when she’s gone.

He only makes it a few feet down the boardwalk before the tightness in his chest and stiffness in his legs makes it impossible to walk. Or breathe. He stops at a staircase down to the water and plops down onto a step, inhaling in the fresh, salty spray of the sea to open up his lungs.

Based on all prior experience with her, he has no reason to believe Rose will change her mind. And if she comes to him with a heartfelt request for something that he longs for already, he knows nothing will stop him from giving it to her.

As he stares out at the deep blue canvas of water and stars, he silently pleads for provisional clemency from his eternal debt. That if just this once, he opens himself up and allows some of Rose’s light to shine inside of him, the universe won’t snuff it out.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Safe to say there's something of a turning point in this chapter. I hope you guys like it!
I feel a bit nervous about it :S

Rose’s stomach sinks as the door clicks and thuds closed behind the Doctor.

For whatever reason, their situation causes him palpable emotional turmoil. And if there’s one thing she prides herself on, it’s being able to ascertain the fears he is most loath to share and soothe them. She should go after him. She wants to go after him. But, overwhelmed as she is by the world of possibilities that has just been opened for them, she can’t seem to move.

Since the Sanctuary Base, Rose has been convinced that this kind of connection is something the Doctor wants. Though he had tried hard to suppress it, the profound grief in his eyes that night is a sight that she can never forget. Losing the privileges of time and space travel and being stranded beneath a black hole were hard pills to swallow for them both. But it was the prospect of losing the last telepathic connection he had left that was the most devastating to him. With a mere taste of that despair – a lightning strike, as he’d put it – she had broken down into uncontrollable tears.

If that isn’t evidence that he values and desires telepathic contact, she doesn’t know what else could be. But if the desire is there, it’s one he keeps safely tucked away from anyone who would attempt to expose it. One he craves in quiet, solemn privacy.

From what she’s heard about the extinct demigods, Time Lords were not permitted to have any cravings, let alone to reveal them to others. They were purely intellectual creatures, most of whom didn’t even have proper families. And though the Doctor does his best to uphold the stoic, sanctimonious demeanour of a Time Lord, she’s always thought he seems to operate a bit differently from the supposed legends. Something in his nature, the same thing that makes him gravitate towards humanity, makes him vulnerable to emotions more than he would like to let on.

After all the things the Doctor has given her and done for her, it would be nice to return the favour every once in a while. What the Doctor has just described seems like the perfect means to do so, but he wants to close the door on that new realm, forever. Not because she isn’t qualified, but because he’s too afraid of losing it again.

It’s hard to relate to the level of catastrophic loss the Doctor has experienced. At first, she had always thought his severe trust issues and reluctance to commit were a result of one too many failed long-term relationships. As soon as she learned he was nine centuries old, she had to assume he’d been involved in relationships before – probably more than she could count. And given the fact that he was travelling completely alone when they met, she also had to assume none of those old flames were still a part of his life. She had always guessed that that many lifetimes’ worth of unsuccessful romantic endeavours would sour a person to the whole concept.

But her theory has been amended substantially over time. Soon after learning that he was an intergalactic war veteran, and delicately asking as many questions about it as he was willing to answer, she had mentally (and unprofessionally) diagnosed him with PTSD.
But it wasn’t just military comrades on the battlefield he lost; it was his entire species. She knows how death can devastate a person, can turn even the softest, kindest soul to something hard and brittle. She’s seen it with her dad and Mickey’s gran. When people closest to you pass, a little piece of you dies with them. And though she can relate to losing a loved one, she can’t begin to sympathize with losing everyone at once.

The Doctor is burdened with a toxic combination of all three – heartbreak, trauma, and loss – cranked up to the maximum level. She can’t begin to imagine what that’s like.

If she could, she’d pat herself on the back for reeling in such a catch. Talk about baggage.

But she knows all of that is irrelevant to her feelings for him, because the Doctor is so much more than damaged goods. Despite all he’s been through, his childlike zest for life and empathy for all living creatures never wavers. He’s brilliant, courageous… altruistic to a fault. In his eyes, she is as special and important as any Time Lord, and he’d sacrifice his life for her in a (double) heartbeat. In fact, he already did once.

He’s afraid. She can’t feel it right now, for whatever reason, but she knows he is.

She doesn’t want him to be afraid. And she especially doesn’t want to be the reason he is. All she wants is to absolve his fear and see him smile again.

They have a once in a lifetime opportunity before them. According to the Doctor, telepathic species like him are rare, and to further stack the odds, he seems to prefer humans (well-established as non-telepathic) as his traveling companions. By some fortuitous twist of fate, she’s been given the ability to offer him something he’s lacking in his life, and she wants more than anything to be able to. She’s already promised not to leave him, she’s already left her family and friends behind to live with him, and they’ve recently established that they share some level of requited attraction. At least by most of Earth’s societal standards, they’re as close to married as two people can get. Is it so much to ask to be able to help her practically-husband be happy?

She has to go find him.

Not to pressure him, but to offer him reassurance. He needs to know that she cares how he feels, too, and that she isn’t going to be selfish about this. Because like he said, this affects both of them already. He promised he wouldn’t get rid of it if she didn’t want him to, and she owes him the same promise: that she won’t force him to go through with it if he doesn’t want to. But most importantly, it’s never a good idea to leave critical decisions to fester in the Doctor’s head overnight.

She expects he has ventured back to the TARDIS for solitude, away from both her and the village, still aglow with nighttime activities. So she retrieves her sandals from out on the patio before she heads out the door.

But she has barely taken a few steps outside the hut when she catches sight of him on a nearby staircase winding down into the water. The orange glow of the nearest lantern on the boardwalk illuminates his wild, fluffy hair and the pale blue shirt on his shoulders, but his face and the rest of his body are shrouded in shadow.

Her sandals slap lightly with every step, and the wood creaks beneath her feet, warning him of her approach, but he doesn’t shift an inch. Even as she climbs carefully down the steps to sit down next to him, he just stares wordlessly out over the black water and twinkling, deep blue sky. His only acknowledgement of her presence is a brief flicker of his eyes in her direction. But she takes it as a good sign that he doesn’t scramble to his feet and flee her presence, or verbally reproach the
intrusion on his personal space.

“Do you want it?” she asks, soft and hesitant, biting her lip.

For a while, he continues to silently stare out at the horizon, his expression unreadable in the relative darkness. Even his breathing is drowned out by the constant, gentle churning of the tide. She thinks maybe he doesn’t plan to answer at all, that the conversation inside was the only discussion they would only have on the matter, and he expects her formal ‘no’ first thing in the morning. After a while, she gives up hope and follows the path of his eyes out to sea, watching the rolls of white foam light up the dark water along the shore.

“In a perfect world, maybe,” he says finally, even more quietly than she’d asked.

She’s taken aback by the delayed response, but hurries to engage the conversation, to work with what little he’s provided.

“But in this world?”

He turns to her, his face pale in the starlight, eyebrows stitched together.

“I don’t know.”

At least she’s getting honest answers from him – something she’s been praying for as long as she can remember. But it isn’t hard to piece together why he’s indecisive on the matter, and it’s not because he wouldn’t enjoy it. His own words described it as something ‘brilliant’ and ‘wonderful’ that he thought he’d never have again.

“You’re afraid of losing it again?”

He breaks eye contact, dropping his eyes down to the stairs before turning back to gaze at the sea. That’s the only answer she needs.

“I know,” she offers. She doesn’t know how to alleviate that fear without making promises she can’t keep. “Doctor… this consent thing, doesn’t it run both ways? If you don’t really want it, but I force you to do it anyway, isn’t that just as bad?”

He sighs.

“It doesn’t quite work like that. What I said earlier, about not breaking it unless you wanted me to, that’s not out of a sense of decorum. I really couldn’t do it without your consent. It would cause me a considerable amount of pain.”

“It…” She gasps a little as her heart skips a beat. “It would?”

He nods.

“Yours,” he clarifies. “If you genuinely wanted to keep it, even if you pretended to be okay with it, it would be painful. And while I was in your mind, with the intent to break the connection, I’d feel that pain. Only for a second, but… it would still leave a permanent scar. It’s worse than a breakup, or falling out of touch with a friend. It’s like… a little part of you dies.”

Rose is suddenly at a loss for words. The only way he can describe that pain to her is because he’s experienced it himself, who knows how many times. And she can only imagine how the effect was multiplied when so many of the people closest to him perished at once, taking all those connections with them.
“So I… I shouldn’t lie to you about whether or not I want it?” she asks.

“You shouldn’t.” He shakes his head. “I’ll find out the truth either way.”

Heart pounding in her chest, she places her hand over his on the wooden step.

“I do,” she confesses, her voice shaking. Best to get it out in the open in explicit terms sooner rather than later.

He squeezes his eyes closed, and his hand clenches into a fist beneath hers.

“Any chance you’ll change your mind?”

“You think that’s how it works?” she asks, not shying away from sarcasm. Why does he so fervently not want her to want this?

“No,” he admits. He pulls his hand out from under hers and rests his face in his hands, shaking his head.

She brings her legs up to a closer step, curling into a defensive position.

“I trust you not to hurt me,” she offers. “Can’t you trust me not to hurt you?”

He looks up from his hands with a hurt, confused expression.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Rose. I just already know how this ends.”

She had it figured out from the start.

“Maybe you don’t.” She flails for a thread of hope for him to cling onto. “Maybe you burn through the rest of your regenerations before I turn fifty. If the last one’s anything to go by, they don’t last very long these days, hmm?” She bumps him in the shoulder, trying to get him to smile. “I could just keep gettin’ into trouble and making you save me.”

“That’s the best solution you can come up with?” he chuckles, much to her delight. “Have me sacrifice a few more of my lives for you to even the odds?”

“It could work,” she shrugs, smiling back at him.

“I’d do it.” He swivels his hips and brings his hand down to hold hers on the step. “Without hesitation. But I’m trying to keep you out of harm’s way, not put you in it. It would be arrogant of me to assume I’d always save you in time. And I’d never gamble with your life like that.”

“You’re a Time Lord, aren’t you supposed to excel at doing things ‘in time’?”

Another light chuckle from the Doctor as he stares down at their joined hands.

“You’re sure about this?” he asks after a moment, looking up.

“I am,” she nods. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he admonishes. “You shouldn’t have to apologize for how you feel.”

“Okay.” She bites her lip. He’s looking at her strangely. Not just looking, but staring. Concentrating on her face like there’s a calculus problem scribbled on it.
“It isn’t like you orchestrated it, anyway. Somehow this connection bridged itself right under our noses without either of our conscious consent, and without either of us detecting it. Like it got tired of waiting for me to realize it was possible. Like it was sentient.” He breaks his focus and gazes behind her, staring nothing in particular, cogs in his brain visibly spinning.

What is he saying? Is he agreeing now? Is this the end of the discussion? Where do they go from here?

Before she can guess at answers to any of her silent questions, the Doctor shifts his eyes back to hers. Lifting their linked hands onto his thigh, he scoots closer to her on the step and leans in close. She closes her eyes, trembling with anticipation, as he inches closer until he brushes her nose with his and rests his forehead against hers. He lingers there for several long moments, his slow, steady breaths cool on her skin. After a while she wonders if this isn’t going to be a kiss at all, but rather something else entirely. If this delicate contact of their foreheads is the beginning of a physical bridge he’s about to construct to connect their minds more deeply.

Caught up in thoughts of other possibilities, she’s startled when he angles his head to bring his mouth to hers, and gasps against his lips. It’s hesitant, lips barely touching, and his jaw is tense against hers. He squeezes her hand in search of reassurance, and she squeezes it back lightly, an unspoken gesture that this is okay, but otherwise doesn’t move. Encouraged, he pushes forward slightly, soft lips moulding fully to hers in a dry, chaste kiss.

He separates their mouths too soon, and she mourns the loss of contact, but he doesn’t withdraw completely. Still ambivalent, he presses his forehead against hers again, and his mouth hovers close to hers, warm and inviting. It would only take one quick push forward to reunite their lips, but she knows how much he needs to regain some of the control he’s been lacking. She peeks open her eyes to find that his are still closed, indecision carved into his features. Carefully, she brings her other hand up behind his head, curling her fingers in his hair, and waits for him to decide how much he’s ready for.

When he finally tilts forward a second time, it’s more relaxed, the burden of uncertainty diminished. He dips just slightly inside her mouth to moisten their lips, and reaches up to cradle her jaw as he gently moves his mouth against hers.

He’s never kissed her like this before. In Rome it was quick and innocent; on Krop Tor it was lonely and anxious; in the weapons cupboard it was frantic and messy; on the couch it was spontaneous and desperate. But this is slow and achingly tender. A delicate, wordless promise of fidelity on the cusp of something that will change their relationship forever. A kiss of gratitude for what they’ve been given and dread that at any moment it could be taken away.

Their hands break apart in favour of holding onto each other, and the island paradise around them fades away. Her head spins as she melts against him, limp and sedated in a new paradise that’s only theirs.

Again, he pulls away far too soon, leaving her lightheaded and somewhat bereft.

He breathes out a shaky breath, his eyes on the step beneath them.

“You should get some rest,” he says. “You’re exhausted.”

No, no. No sleep. More kissing. They can move to the bed if he wants, but they should keep kissing tonight and worry about sleeping tomorrow. Or next week.

Before she can shake off the intoxicated feeling, he suddenly stands up, holding his hand down for
Disappointed, but unable to resist anything he asks, she places her hand in his extended one, and he hauls her to her feet. As soon as she’s vertical, she sways dangerously to the side and nearly tumbles down the stairs into the water, but he wraps his other arm around her waist to steady her.

“Woah,” he cautions, inspecting her face for signs she may be about to pass out.

Maybe she is a bit tired.

“M okay,” she mumbles. “Just… head rush, y’know.”

“Still got it,” he mutters.

“What?” she asks, shaking her head to entice blood to return to it.

“Nothing.” He smiles and nods his head toward the top of the stairs.

Hands clasped, they walk slowly back to the front door of the hut, but Rose is still in a bit of a daze. Returning to reality after a kiss like that is like remembering a dream after you’ve woken up: the mind resists. Channelling her focus to what’s relevant, she wonders whether he might take other leaps forward tonight. They can’t be finished talking about this telepathic connection thing. He basically said yes, and then he kissed her, but what’s the next step? And when do they take it?

The Doctor stops just in front of the door, but makes no move to open it.

The next step must not be tonight, then.

“I made a bit of a mess last night,” the Doctor begins his excuse to part with her for the night. “In the lab in the TARDIS. I’m going to do some damage control.”

“’Kay,” she nods, trying not to look crestfallen. She doesn’t want to push him to do too much in one night. They have plenty of time to discuss what it all means, and move forward accordingly. She’s confident they’ll be staying in this quaint seaside village for a while longer.

He tilts her chin up and touches his lips briefly to hers once more, gentle and curious.

“Goodnight,” he whispers, his mouth still hovering near her lips.

She wants to push up on her toes and steal another, proper kiss before he makes them part for the night, but she holds herself back.

Because as he pulls away, he looks as sad and nervous as she feels. But she can’t feel anything from him. He must already know how to block her from feeling things from him, now that he knows this connection there. Is he nervous of what they’re about to do? Of what it could mean for their relationship? Nervous of the expectations she’ll put on him? Is he sad for the same reason she is: that they can’t slam on the gas pedal now that they’ve both implicitly agreed to take this journey? Or is he sad that they have to pick up the pace now, when he’d rather slow down?

Tonight has already been quite the milestone. Rose is admittedly feeling a bit blindsided by how quickly things have changed between them in a single evening, so she knows he must be, too. He broke all of his implicit bans on emotional conversations and romantic gestures. He kissed her. Three times. She doesn’t want to overwhelm him with relationship drama right from the start and make it even harder for him. Whatever this is going to mean for them, they’ll figure it out together at a pace that suits them both. She can’t get desperate now.
So she doesn’t steal one last kiss, or beg him to come inside for more questions or promises he isn’t ready to make.

“Night,” she echoes.

She steps inside, but lingers in the doorway, touching her fingers to her lips, still in shock that his mouth was there only moments before. Leaning against the door it to hold it open, she watches him walk away, but this time he doesn’t look back.

She really is exhausted. Dragged out of bed at sunrise against her will, a day spent swimming and socializing and running around the village, and a night on an emotional roller coaster as barriers between her and the Doctor suddenly collapsed.

But even after she gets ready for bed and tucked under the covers, and her body begs for sleep, her brain simply won’t rest. Over and over, it replays all of tonight’s kisses in vivid detail, and she is all too eager to relive the memories.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Posting this is honestly such a weight off my shoulders. This chapter has been giving me H E L L since the beginning. I've just tweaked and tweaked and cut and pasted and added in whole sections and deleted whole sections... I guess it's just that it's a longer chapter, and there's a lot going on, and d/r are sort of still in this awkward limbo in between agreeing to start this thing and actually doing it. It was quite a challenge for me, in short. I hope you guys like it!

Thanks as always to Amber and Heidi for their help!

Before the Doctor has taken five steps into the sand outside the TARDIS, he turns back around.

He had done everything in his power to delay leaving this morning. Took a shower he didn’t need. Spent ten minutes picking up various square bottles of cologne, taking a whiff, and setting them back down before choosing which one to wear. Another twenty-three minutes on his hair. And then stood in front of the mirror for at least another five unfastening and re-fastening buttons on his white shirt until he decided he wanted to leave exactly four undone. And then took it off so he could iron it.

He ironed a shirt he plans to wear around the beach all day.

He’s gone completely mad.

But on the plus side, his hair looks immaculate.

When he pushes on the door, though, he finds it locked. Rolling his eyes at his ship, he pulls out his key, but when he jams it into the lock, it won’t turn.

“Open up,” he commands, banging his fist on the door.

The TARDIS wheezes out her refusal, and momentarily delves inside his head for a stern reprimand of his cowardly behaviour.

The Doctor grumbles as he shoves the key in the lock again, willing his mental strength to overpower that of the TARDIS. But of course, it does not.

He turns around and slumps back against the locked door, staring out at the waves. It’s far enough after sunrise that he’d be surprised if Rose was still sleeping. She’s probably waiting for him right now, and if he doesn’t make an appearance soon, she’ll only go looking for him and end up right here. And even if he could get back inside, the TARDIS is no sanctuary. She would never hide him from Rose. More likely, she would help her find him no matter where on the ship he sought shelter. The TARDIS has never not taken Rose’s side over his. The whole ‘Rose absorbing the heart of the TARDIS and becoming an all-powerful being to save his life’ incident is damning evidence of that.

But all the nightmares he’d dreamed up during his long, sleepless night alone are still plaguing his thoughts. The horrifying, if unrealistic, scenes keep playing out in his head. Rose kissing him in
front of Kalei or any member of his family. Using her unfair beauty advantage to pressure him for sex once they’re alone. Dragging him back home to her old flat once they leave this island, and newly introducing him to her mother as her… boyfriend.

He swallows hard, hearts racing.

“C’mon,” he pleads with the TARDIS, slamming his fist back into the door once more. He just growls when she doesn’t respond.

Suddenly, the door swings open. Outward. Hard. So hard, in fact, that it shoves him forward and knocks him off his feet, and he tumbles into the sand face-first. The door slams closed behind him even faster than it had opened.

He scrambles to his feet and whirls around, gaping incredulously at her while he inspects his hair for grains of sand. Thankfully, there are none.

“What the hell was that for?” he demands, rubbing his bum where the door slammed into it.

Rose would never do any of those things, she says. (And not for the first time.)

He sighs.

Rationally, he knows that. He spent most of the early morning telling himself the same thing. But irrationally, the fear that those visions will come to fruition will not subside. He’s ill-prepared for all this.

The TARDIS assures him it’s okay that he’s still learning how to trust. But it’s not okay to spend the day hiding out from Rose and leave her to assume he’s rejected her.

“No, the day,” he grumbles, dragging his foot in a circle through the sand. “Just a few extra minutes.”

He’s had enough minutes, she says.

“Fine,” he agrees, turning back to the shoreline. “Great, big bully,” he mutters under his breath.

The TARDIS isn’t physically capable of laughter, but as her engines let out a final, quiet groan of farewell, it certainly sounds like she’s laughing at him.

He’s had a whole night to prepare himself to face her again, and he’s still not ready.

He had spent probably half the night in various horizontal positions on his bed, taking advantage of his excellent sensory recall to relive each of those kisses with Rose. High on endorphins from the mere memories, excitement had been basically all he could feel for quite some time. He can’t lie to himself and pretend he isn’t excited by the prospect of deepening a telepathic connection with her. But he doesn’t let his imagination linger on it for long. It’ll only get him unnecessarily riled up and impatient to start, and she still does have time to back out, after all.

The other half the night, however, he was pacing back and forth in his room, tearing his hands through his hair while the aforementioned nightmares crafted themselves in his head. Too much, too fast was a bit of an understatement. The TARDIS had helped to assuage his fears, and eventually, he’d reassured himself that Rose would never do those things. She isn’t just desperate for someone with male genitalia to drag on dates; she genuinely cares for him.

Just before the break of dawn, though, the Doctor realised something that calmed him down more
than anything else. As he’s followed by death everywhere he goes, he seldom ruminates willingly on morbid thoughts. But there is one ugly way he can tip the scales of their alarmingly mismatched lifespans. The Doctor has one small measure of control over his own mortality: with a little bit of willpower, he can refuse to regenerate. Within the deepest, most heavily fortified barriers of his mind – where even the TARDIS can’t penetrate without his consent – he had quietly reminded himself that he could take that option if Rose was ever taken from him.

Recalling these tentative contingency plans, he breathes a little easier as he climbs the wooden staircase of the boardwalk.

The fears are still there, niggling in the back of his mind, but he does his best to ignore them as he ambles down the path, greeting several friendly locals who pass by as he goes. If there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s burying his emotions and putting on a happy face for strangers. He tries to place his trust in Rose as he approaches the door to hut nineteen. The previous evening, she confessed that she trusts him not to hurt her, and he owes her the same.

Taking a deep breath, he hopes to the stars that notwithstanding the new aspects of their relationship, the kissing and telepathy and excessive talking, today they can just spend the day together like they always have. Since the beginning, Rose’s companionship has been something precious to him. He doesn’t know how he could uphold the recent promises he’s made if going through with them would mean that friendship would be altered forever.

Before he can knock on the door, it swings open.

Well-rested and radiant, Rose is standing just inside the door frame, and a huge smile spreads across her face when she sees him standing there. Every inch of her white sundress is covered in multi-coloured flower blossoms, and a pair of big, pink-rimmed sunglasses is perched on her head along with a messy bun. The sweet and pungent scent of banana-coconut sunscreen wafts through the open door. She’s not wearing a lot of makeup today, looks like maybe just some shimmery lip gloss, but her cheeks are nonetheless a lovely shade of pink. He has to make a mental note to take her to warmer planets more often.

“Was about to come lookin’ for you,” she greets him, stepping through the door and closing it behind her. “Did you fall in the sand?” She chuckles as she glances down at the patches of it on his skin and clothes.

He smiles back at her dumbly, a peasant locked in the gaze of a goddess. Butterflies fill his chest with a rush of admiration, and it’s suddenly hard to remember exactly why he was panicking on the way over.

“Ready to go?” she asks when he doesn’t respond to her first question, nodding towards the village. “I’m famished.”

“ Took a little spill, yeah,” he lies, snapping out of his daze. “Famished!” he repeats. “We can’t have that. C’mon, then.” He holds out his elbow. “Allons-y.”

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Upon greeting the pair, Kenai hands the Doctor a loaf of sweet spiced bread for him and Rose to share.

“Mariko says there were still ruki washing ashore dead last night,” Kenai explains, leaning against the door frame to their home.
“Same sort of quantities?” the Doctor asks, tearing the loaf in two and offering one of the halves to Rose.

“I believe so.” Kenai frowns.

“Hmm…” the Doctor ponders aloud, biting off a large chunk.

“Didn’t you think the deaths would taper off right away?” asks Rose, prodding at her bread but not really eating it.

“V’ld’ve ‘spct’d’m th ew.” The Doctor nods through a mouthful.

“Beg your pardon?” Kenai’s thick eyebrows shoot up on his head, and he crosses his arms over his bare, muscled chest.

“Sorry,” Rose cuts in. “The Doctor sometimes forgets ‘is manners.” Rose slaps him in the arm with the back of her bread-bearing hand.

The Doctor shoots Rose an affronted look for the unnecessarily violent disciplinary action, but nonetheless resolves to swallow his bite of bread before trying again.

Kenai sighs with a smile meant only for Rose. “Kalei did this constantly when he was a boy. He didn’t learn not to talk with his mouth full until he was at least twelve.”

“Well, nine hundred years and counting and he still hasn’t learned.” Rose nods her head in the Doctor’s direction as she and Kenai laugh together.

Nearly finished chewing, the Doctor glares at her, but neither she nor Kenai appears to notice him.

“I would have expected them to,” he repeats more clearly, his mouth empty.

“So what does this mean?” Rose asks, returning her attention to him.

“Well, nothing yet.” The Doctor excavates some sticky bread from between his teeth with his tongue. “We should wait it out another day. It could just be taking longer than I thought for the virus to clear out of the ecosystem.”

“Another day, then,” Kenai agrees, eyeing the Doctor with some suspicion. He certainly does seem to have taken more of a liking to Rose than this incarnation of himself. That’s probably true of most people, though. Rose is incredibly likeable.

“You’ll keep me informed?” the Doctor asks.

“Of course,” Kenai agrees. “I’m sorry I couldn’t provide any fruit today,” he adds, pointing his thumb inside the house. “Our stock from the last harvest ran out yesterday. We should be getting more this afternoon.”

Rose waves her hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Not a problem,” the Doctor responds at the same time, and he and Rose glance over at each other sheepishly.

“In the meantime, feel free to explore the island,” Kenai gestures to the village spread along the beach. “But I have quite a bit of work to do today.”

The Doctor and Rose both bid him farewell with another round of thanks for the bread, and he
shuts the door behind him and heads up a nearby staircase leading into the village.

As soon as Kenai is out of earshot, Rose tears ravenously into her loaf of bread. He may need to get her some proper nutrition from the TARDIS soon; he isn’t sure how long humans can live on nothing but fruit, bread, and root vegetables.

“Ready for some exploring?” he asks, before taking another bite of his half.

“Mhm,” she nods, her cheeks puffing out, and the Doctor breaks into muffled laughter. Mouth stuffed with carbohydrates or not, she’s as lovely as can be.

She pulls her sunglasses back down over her eyes, and he reaches out his free hand, wiggling his fingers until she takes it.

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It turns out to be a rather interesting morning. They help an elderly, arthritic vegetable shop owner hang new signs on his wall. The Doctor helps to patch up the broken arm of a resident who slipped and fell off her roof trying to lay new tiles. They accidentally catch the tail end of the school’s ukulele practice, and one of the boys’ asks for their help fixing a broken string. While the Doctor had hoped to find a distraction from the previous night, he had not anticipated a job as a friendly neighbourhood handyman. But he supposes he can’t complain. He carries a screwdriver, after all; he’s always been sort of an intergalactic handyman.

Just as a blacksmith is offering them some freelance work digging out metal ores from the mineral caves at the opposite end of the island, Kalei’s voice rings out behind them.

“Doctor, Rose, hi!” he greets them, cheerful and boyish as ever.

They both whirl around to greet him, and Kalei jogs up to them, thumps the Doctor in the arm, and lightly touches Rose’s shoulder.

“You both have some time?” Kalei asks. “I’m on a break for lunch, was about to head to Nani’s to get a drink.” He points somewhere ambiguous behind him.

Grateful for an excuse to reject the offer to perform manual labour, the Doctor accepts.

“A drink? Sure! Right, Rose, we can get a drink with Kalei?” He nudges her arm with his elbow.

“Sure, yeah,” Rose acquiesces, a bit of confusion on her face.

“We’ll have to take a rain check, sir,” the Doctor informs the blacksmith. He’s a tall, thin man with a long face and a bowl of straight raven hair on his head, covered from his neck to his feet in thick, black rags.

“Suit yourselves,” the blacksmith shrugs. “Nice to see you, Kalei,” he adds, smiling. He waves at the young man with a wave of the rod of metal in his hand, and the Doctor notices he’s missing a couple of teeth.

“You too, Mr. Rykon!” Kalei waves back. “Come on, then, this way,” he adds, to the Doctor and Rose.

They struggle to keep up with the brisk pace Kalei sets down the rocky, sandswept village path. Kalei is in the middle of an animated tale of something he carved this morning, but the Doctor is having trouble listening to it, his attention fixed on making sure Rose doesn’t slip on the unfriendly
terrain.

“ Drinks… does that mean like… alcoholic drinks?” Rose asks. Kalei is several steps ahead of them, and likely can’t even hear her.

“Can’t be.” The Doctor shakes his head. “They don’t produce alcohol on this planet. Plenty of clean water, low levels of depression. The natives have never felt the need to create a time-consuming fermentation process they don’t need.”

“Hmm,” Rose nods, thoughtfully. “What d’you think the drinks are, then?”

“Don’t know,” the Doctor confesses. “Guess we’ll have find out.”

Suddenly, both of them realise they haven’t been listening to Kalei at all. He has stopped in the middle of the path to stare at them, and they nearly plough straight into his bare chest before they realize he’s waiting for a response to a question they didn’t hear.

“Hmm?” the Doctor questions, eyes wide.

Kalei laughs. “I said, what have you been up to today?” he repeats his question.

“Oh, we’ve just sort of been… wandering really,” says the Doctor, rubbing his neck.

“Helpin’ some people that needed it,” Rose adds.

“That sounds like you guys,” Kalei remarks, nodding. “Anyway, we’re here. Nani’s!” They’ve stopped in front of an unassuming building, white with a purple roof just like every other edifice built into the mountain. An old, chipping wooden sign above the door reads ‘Refresh With Sips’ in messy all capital letters. The Doctor chuckles to himself, noting that not everything translates perfectly from Kaelondaian.

As Kalei leads them inside, and a bell rings to announce their entry into the old little shop. Wooden planks buckle and creak beneath their feet and there’s a musty, vintage smell in the humid air. A handful of other patrons are seated at small tables that fill the room, most of them around Kalei’s age, all of them sipping from big, round cups made from some kind of light-coloured, polished wood. A woman just slightly older than Kalei stands behind a counter along the opposite wall, long, wavy black hair framing her thin face.

“Kalei!” the woman greets him. “ Haven’t seen you for a few days. You brought our famous guests!”

“Hey, Nani. Sorry about that. Been really busy at work, and with the ruki shortage…” Kalei trails off, staring guiltily down at the floor.

“Us too,” Nani sympathizes, without him needing to finish his sentence. “I might have to temporarily close the shop soon if we don’t get some more fish circulating.”

“I really hope not,” Kalei laments with a grimace. “But yes,” Kalei turns to the Doctor and Rose. “I did bring the Doctor and Rose.”

“So good to finally meet you.” Nani waves at them both. “I’ve heard so many rumours, I was hoping I’d get to see you with my own eyes before you disappeared. Thank you both.”

“Oh, don’t thank us yet,” the Doctor insists, stuffing his hands into his pockets. He’s never been one to accept gratitude prematurely.
“We aren’t positive that we’ve figured it out yet,” Rose elaborates on the Doctor’s behalf. “But we will, Nani. The Doctor’s brilliant at this stuff.”

“So I’ve heard,” says Nani, smiling. “Well, what can I get you three?” she asks.

“The menu’s here.” Kalei gestures to a piece of parchment nailed crudely to the countertop.

The Doctor and Rose hunch over the counter together to examine the offerings while Kalei and Nani catch up on the last few days of events.

“What are these even made of?” Rose murmurs quietly.

“My best guess is cazaut milk,” he replies quietly. “They’re seeds in the Arecaceae family, related to coconuts.”

“Think it tastes good?” she asks.

“Probably.” He shrugs. “We haven’t really eaten anything else here that was disagreeable, have we?”

“True.”

“Bastionberry, Rose…” the Doctor mutters, halfway down the list. “Where in the universe does a name like that come from?”

“You’re supposed to know the answers to questions like that.” Rose does her best to stifle a giggle.

“What about qocla bean. I dunno even how to pronounce that. What do you reckon that is?”

“Coke-la,” he corrects her pronunciation.

“Coke-la?” Rose repeats, and he nods.

“I think the it’s a relative of the cocoa bean, actually,” he offers, scouring his memory for intel on the word qocla. “It might taste like chocolate.”

“Ohhh, I’m getting that,” Rose decides suddenly. “Erm, Nani,” she straightens up and addresses the shop owner. “One of the… qocla bean drinks for me, please.”

“Of course,” says Nani. “And for you, Doctor?”

“Oh, let’s be adventurous, shall we? I’ll have one of the bastionberry.” The Doctor enunciates the last word with gusto.

“Coming right up,” says Nani. “The usual, Kalei?”

“Yes.” Kalei nods with a smile, and slaps a few coins onto the counter. The Doctor hopes they can resolve the fish issue quickly to repay his family’s continuing generosity.

They take a seat at a table for four while they wait for their drinks to be made.

“So, Kalei, tell us more about this bloke you like,” says Rose, presumably as a means of breaking the ice.

Blimey, of all the topics she could have chosen… she had to pick romance.

“Bloke?” Kalei doesn’t recognise the word.
“Boy,” the Doctor clarifies dully, slumping a bit in his chair. Chances are slim he will have any meaningful input to add to this conversation.

“Oh, Dakota! I haven’t seen him yet,” Kalei says, apparently ready to divulge any information Rose could request. “But I’m nervous to say something. I know everyone wants me to, but…” he trails off, staring down at the table and absently scratching at the wood with his thumbnail.

“I know, it is scary,” Rose agrees. “Do you two talk often?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s one of my close friends. I usually see him every day.”

“Does he, I mean… is he... do you think he might like you, too?” It seems like Rose is trying to ascertain the boy’s romantic orientation, but Kalei doesn’t take the hint.

“I don’t know. It’s hard to tell with him. He’s so shy sometimes, I never know what he’s thinking. He’s nice to me, but he’s nice to everyone else, too.”

“But he likes boys, though?” Rose says, and the Doctor blushes on Kalei’s behalf. Not very subtle.

“I don’t even know that,” Kalei admits. “As far as anyone knows, he’s never been interested anyone else before. Girls or boys. At least he hasn’t shared it with anyone, if he has.”

“Hmm.” Rose frowns a bit. “It’s worth a shot, though, yeah?”

“Well, what if he doesn’t feel the same way? We’ve been friends since we were kids, and I don’t want to risk losing that.”

“Yeah, havin’ a crush on one of your friends is tough…” says Rose, glancing in the Doctor’s direction.

This is exactly the kind of thing the Doctor has been afraid would happen all day. He stares up at the ceiling, praying to gods that don’t exist that this conversation will be over soon. Or that he’ll melt and sink in between the wooden boards in the floor so he doesn’t have to bear witness to it any longer.

But at that precise moment, Nani comes to their table with a tray of drinks, and sets each of them down with its corresponding name.

All three of them take the first sip at the same time. It’s not as cold as he would like a fruit-based drink to be, but it’s thick and creamy, and has little bits of seeds and berry skins floating through it to authenticate its freshness. The flavour is tart and sweet, like berry pie filling, but with notes of autumn spices that don’t normally belong in fruity drinks. Without a doubt, though, he approves.

“S’good,” Rose nods, licking a light brown moustache off her upper lip.

“Taste like chocolate?” the Doctor asks.

Instead of answering, she sets her cup back down on the table and pushes it in his direction. He sets his cup down, as well, and pushes it towards her, accepting the tasting exchange.

Rose hums as she gulps down a sizeable sip.

“Tastes like blueberries and cinnamon,” she announces as she sets it back down, little droplets of purplish liquid at the corners of her mouth.

“Remarkably like chocolate,” the Doctor nods in approval, returning her drink.
“What’d you get?” Rose directs her question to Kalei.

Kalei swallows down a gulp of his before he can answer.

“Plakava. It’s a root with lots of spices.”

“Can I try it?” Rose asks, and of course, Kalei is more than willing to offer a sip.

Rose takes a smaller, almost hesitant sip of this one, no doubt cautious about the ‘root’ component. The Doctor leans forward for a peek, and sees a pale orange liquid with tiny flecks of brown. Rose sloshes it in her mouth for a few moments, and smacks her tongue against her teeth a few times after she swallows it down.

“Ooo. Tastes like yams, that’s weird,” says Rose, pulling a face that’s half-intrigued, half-repulsed.

“Yams?” asks Kalei.

“Yeah, ‘s a vegetable we have back home. I guess it’s similar to plakava.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No, it’s not bad, I’ve just never had it as a liquid before. It’s different.”

Kalei nods, and takes another hearty sip of his yammy drink.

“Were you two friends first?” Kalei asks suddenly.

The Doctor glances over to Rose, only to find her already staring across the table at him. Panic in his eyes, he silently implores her to stall or divert or lie or do whatever she needs to do to get them both out of this.

“Me and the Doctor are friends, yeah,” Rose answers Kalei, in a much more casual voice than he would’ve been able to manage. She takes another sip of her drink like the question holds no weight whatsoever, but the Doctor doesn’t miss the disappointment that flashes in her eyes when they flit over to his once more. He only manages a small nod, and takes another sip of his drink for an excuse not to add anything.

“I figured. How did you tell Rose that you liked her?” Kalei directs his question at the Doctor, this time.

The Doctor promptly chokes on the milk and berry shrapnel in his throat.

Rose flails to try to help him, patting his back while he tries to swallow the regurgitated smoothie in his mouth without coughing it up onto the table.

“No, me an’ the Doctor, we’re not… we don’t…” Rose flounders for the right way to describe the complicated and amorphous status of their relationship to Kalei. She staunchly avoids looking directly at either of them, too, staring down at her chocolate instead.

“Oh,” Kalei grimaces. “Sorry, I just thought…” He laughs nervously. “Never mind that.”

The Doctor can feel his face turning red, both at the choking episode and the invasion on their privacy. The boy meant no harm, the Doctor is certain, but he’s still nosy and naïve.

But the Doctor suddenly realises two things. First, Rose knows him well enough to have expected his reaction, and she was prepared with an answer that took all the pressure off of him. But despite
her knowledge of his character, she looks even more disappointed now. She’s just exponentially downplayed their relationship, and the Doctor has not stood up to defend it.

Second, he realises that he’s been taking Rose’s patience for granted. Beyond even his highest hopes, their friendship is completely unaltered. Rose hasn’t been any more flirtatious than usual, searched for kisses in public places, used any pet names, or demanded they talk more about their relationship before she agreed to spend any more platonic time with him. He hadn’t brought anything up over bread this morning, or during any spare moments on their journey through the village, and neither had she. Rose was content with whatever pace he wanted to set, and didn’t try to push his fragile boundaries.

Only last night, mere hours ago, he promised that they could begin a new, meaningful telepathic relationship. But now push has come to shove again, and he’s being as cold and noncommittal as when she first became a passenger of the TARDIS.

“Actually, Kalei,” the Doctor begins, clearing his throat. He looks over at Rose, and her eyes widen in shock. “Rose figured it out on her own.”

A shy smile spreads across Rose’s face that makes it hard to regret breaking one of his rules. He cracks a small smile of his own, but can’t hold eye contact for very long, so he stares down at his drink as heat builds up behind his cheeks. He tries to remind himself the confession was for Rose’s benefit, not Kalei’s, but he can’t shake the acute awareness they’re both being closely watched.

Not completely without intuition, Kalei only mumbles a response to himself, rather than speaking aloud. Something about the two of them being cute. Abruptly, Kalei leans over to inspect the contents of both of their cups and, finding them mostly empty, he scoots his chair back and stands up.

“C’mon, and I’ll show you.”

“Show us what?” asks Rose, before taking one last gulp from her cup.

“Dakota.”

Rose leaps up from her chair excitedly. “Really? You can introduce us?”

“No, no,” Kalei shakes his head. “But I can at least let you see what he looks like.”

“Fair enough,” Rose concedes, still excited.

They both stare down at the Doctor expectantly, still sipping slowly from his cup.

“All right, I’m getting up,” he grumbles through a small sip. Getting to his feet, he chugs down the rest and leaves the empty cup with the other two.

Kalei leads them up several sets of crooked stairs, past several homes and establishments before he suddenly skids to a stop on a gravelly path and shoves them behind a large boulder.

“He over there?” Rose whispers.

Kalei nods, ducking down well out of sight.

The Doctor stands up on his toes and peeks over the top of their hiding place. Just outside a building whose sign reads ‘Clothing and Fabric,’ a man and a woman, both about Kalei’s age, are hanging up fabric samples for display. The samples all look fairly similar to the Doctor, the same
red and white hues and patterns that the entire village wears, but he concedes he is no fashion expert.

The man is probably attractive from an objective viewpoint. He’s a bit heavier built than their lanky friend Kalei, a bit of a soft belly and a thick chest, but he doesn’t look unhealthy. The muscle tone in his shoulders, calves, and biceps suggests he’s still a strong bloke. His brown hair is cropped down to only a couple of inches, shorter than most of the other men he’s seen so far, and it looks crunchy and messy as though freshly dried from a swim. He laughs at something the woman across from him says, and his rounded cheeks lift and soft eyes crinkle in a smile the Doctor can’t help but mirror.

The Doctor sinks back down, and finds that Rose had been peeking around the side of the rock. “He’s so cute,” Rose whispers, and the Doctor can’t help the jealousy that flares up in his gut over even this innocent remark. “You two would be adorable together.”

“Really?” Kalei asks, pulling at some of the curls atop his head, a blush evident on his cheeks. “Yes,” Rose insists. “If you don’t tell him, I will.”

“Okay, okay.” Kalei raises his hands up in defeat. “How should I do it, though?”

The Doctor thinks it best to stay out of this one, too, and trusts that Rose will offer all the advice Kalei needs.

“Hmm.. let’s see…” Rose taps her fingers on the rock and rubs her chin with her other hand. “You could make him something.” she offers.

“What?” Kalei asks, looking as helpless as the Doctor feels.

“Well, you work in a wood shop, yeah? Couldn’t you carve him something?”

“Something like…???” Kalei is still at a loss.

“Blimey, blokes everywhere are exactly the same as on Earth,” Rose mutters, shaking her head.

“Hm?” asks Kalei.

“S nothing,” Rose insists quickly. “Well, what sort of stuff does he like?”

“He likes making clothes and blankets and stuff.” Kalei probably doesn’t catch on, but when Rose purses her lips together, the Doctor knows she is losing her patience with the boy’s stereotypical male obliviousness. The Doctor presses his lips together to avoid laughing out loud. He’s been on the receiving end of that look so many times, it’s strangely satisfying to see it directed at a different man for once.

“Right, okay,” she says, calmly, hiding her impatience. “Anything else?”

“Um…” Kalei scratches behind his head. “He likes wolves.”

“Wolves?” Rose asks.

“How do you know about wolves?” the Doctor interjects. There aren’t any mammals that remotely resemble canines on this planet, or on Kaelondaia, where these people descended from.

“They’re just a legend here. All we have are stories and a few paintings. None of us even know
what planet they’re from. But Dakota has always been fascinated by them. He made me a wash
cloth that has a wolf on it, once, I use it a lot. I could show you…”

“No, but that’s perfect!” says Rose. “He made you something, Kalei. That’s not something to take
lightly.” Rose nudes him lightly in the arm.

“You think?” asks Kalei.

“I know!” Rose exclaims, a little bit too loudly, causing Kalei to flinch. “What about that necklace
he wears?” she asks, quieter. “Could you carve him a wolf charm for it?”

“Oh, yeah, I could do that!” Kalei’s eyes suddenly shine with excitement. “That’s perfect. Thank
you.” He looks up at the sky, presumably to check the sun’s position. “Oh, I really have to get
going though. I have to head to the palm forest to collect some more wood for the shop before I run
out of daylight.

“You go,” Rose nudes him. “And you let us know when you’re done with that charm so we can
see it.”

“You bet,” Kalei agrees. “See you later!” he waves before jogging off behind them.

“Wolves,” Rose muses quietly.

“Mmm,” the Doctor agrees. “Odd.”

“Seriously, what are the chances?” Rose chuckles.

Unsettled by the thought of just how slim the chances are that it is purely coincidental, the Doctor
promptly changes the subject.

“Well, we’ve still got half a day ahead of us. Still want to have a look at those tide pools?” Elated
to have Rose all to himself again, at least until dinner, he offers her his elbow.

“Yes, please.” Rose loops her arm in his, and they set off back down the earthy staircase towards
the sea.

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It turns out, a couple of hours hunched over tide pools, scooping up exotic sand creatures in his
hands, is an excellent palliative for anxiety. Even better, Rose seems to enjoy the little ponds of
marine life as much as he does.

They spend a while meandering through the straits of damp sand connecting the different pools,
trying to find as many unique species as they can, imagining aloud what sort of lives they might
lead. Rose starts to collect all the partially buried tiny yellow sea stars, carefully reuniting them
with a bigger sea star she’s assigned as their big brother. For a while the Doctor insists they can’t
all be related, but it’s only a matter of time before he joins her in hunting down the baby brothers,
using the sonic as a guide to bring the family back together. They crouch over one of the larger
pools, and make a game out of seeing how close one of them can get their finger to a crab-like
crustacean before it burrows itself back under the sand at the bottom of the pool (the Doctor wins).
They place bets on an anemone fight, and watch hunched over the water, fully engaged in the
slapping stings of the plantlike animals (Rose’s anemone wins).

And somehow, they end up on their stomachs on opposite sides of one of the smallest pools.
Elbows propped up in the sand, cheeks in their hands, they stare down at a pair of clams that are
moving their jaws occasionally so it looks like they’re talking. Back and forth, they guess aloud what they’d be saying if they really were having an underwater conversation.

But as the make-believe chatter of the clams dies down, and they’re left staring down at a fairly inactive pool of water, the Doctor grows apprehensive of the tense quiet between them. At any moment, Rose might ask him about what he’d said to Kalei, and prod him for another verbal acknowledgement that their relationship has officially progressed. He’s about to get up to search for some new marine creatures for them to ogle, but Rose breaks the silence.

“So… do you think maybe you might want to teach me more about the… well… erm… the… stuff?” She pokes her index finger into her head.

Is ‘telepathy’ a four-letter word now?

Truthfully, though, he’s relieved that’s the first thing she wanted to say. Most of his lingering irrational fears have subsided as the day has gone on, and the grim revelation he had in the wee hours of the morning is still fresh in his mind. Hesitant to bring it up on his own, he’s been secretly eager for her to ask about this all afternoon. The connection is an inevitability; it has been since last night. It’s a newly fixed point in their mutual timeline that he can no longer pretend is still in flux. So he may as well stop wallowing in the potential repercussions and allow himself to actually seize this opportunity. Enjoy it, even. They don’t have to do anything intense early on, anyway. He’ll need to take things slowly and delicately with a first-timer like Rose.

The Doctor glances up behind Rose’s head, where a few very young native boys have approached the tide pools. They’re staring at the foreigners with freakishly white skin more than the tide pools themselves.

“If you want,” the Doctor says. “But maybe later, when we have a bit more privacy.” He tilts his head towards the miniature spectators.

“Oh,” Rose frowns when she glances back at the little boys.

“Wouldn’t want those kids to think I’m hurting you.”

Rose’s jaw drops open.

“Wha’?” she gasps out.

It’s exactly the reaction he had hoped for, and the Doctor bursts out into laughter.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asks, punching him in the bicep.

“Ow!” he complains through the fits.

“What are you gonna do to me?” She can’t help from giggling even as she asks such a serious question, and he laughs a bit harder.

That is, until she splashes a bit of water from the tidepool beneath them onto his head.

The droplets soak through his hair and drip down his forehead and temples, and his laughter halts in an instant. He had done his hair perfectly this morning, and wasn’t planning on taking a swim today.

“You. Did. Not.” He glares at her ineffectually through his sunglasses.
“Think I did,” she teases him, her voice dipping into an oddly seductive tone. “What’re you gonna do about it?”

He dunks his hands into the water and uses them as a bucket to scoop up some water, but before he can throw it in Rose’s face, she’s already on her feet, kicking up mushy wet blobs of sand onto his clothes as she scrambles away.

Preserving the water in his hands, he leaps up and chases her down before she can get very far, dumping it over her head and watching it spill down her hair. She screams playfully before racing to another pool and scooping up some more water to throw in his direction. Both their battle modes engaged, they run around the squishy pathways between the tidepools for several more minutes, splashing water on each other’s hair and clothes. After landing a particularly big splash in the Doctor’s face, Rose flees the tide pools to try to escape across dry sand, but he pursues her nonetheless. With his much longer strides, it takes him hardly any time at all to catch up with her, and he envelopes her in his arms and hauls her up out of the sand completely, before throwing her over his shoulder and heading towards the waves.

“It was just a few little splashes! I hardly deserve to get thrown in the sea!” she laughs as she tries to make her case, pounding her fists on his back.

“You messed up my hair, Rose Tyler.”

“Oh, not the hair,” she grumbles, and he can almost hear her eyes rolling.

“Seems like you’re perfectly deserving to me,” he concludes, his feet wading through shallow water now.

Once he’s waist deep in the lukewarm water, he lets her drop into the water, dress, sunglasses and all. The Doctor expects some sort of retaliation, but he doesn’t expect for her to reach out of the water, grab his hand and tug hard until he has no choice but to fall in with her.

He resurfaces with a gasp at the same time as Rose, and after they both peel off their sunglasses, he glowers at her through the water still pouring from his hair over his eyes.

“Hair’s really ruined now, hmm?” she asks, giving him a sour look in return before staring down mournfully at her sopping dress.

“Quite.” He nods, and extends a wet hand out for her to take.

They wade, dripping wet, back to shore together, and lie down in the sand to dry their clothes in the sun.

“I’m sorry about your hair,” she confesses after a few minutes. She turns over onto her side so she can reach over to run her fingers through the limp, damp strands.

“I’m sorry about your dress.” He nods down to the wrinkled fabric, the pristine white blemished with a coat of lavender powder.

“Will you still come back to the room with me tonight?”

He mirrors her shift in position, propping himself on his elbow, and nods.

“Okay, that’s good, thanks,” she laughs nervously.

He stares at her for a few long moments, fascinated by her extraordinary ability to calm him
without expending any effort. Being with her all day has only taught him how stupid he was to have been so afraid of someone as warm and kind and accepting as Rose. She isn’t going to hurt him. And if the universe is planning to take her away from him in the future, well… like he established, regeneration is technically optional.

Rose starts to squirm under his gaze, and her eyes fall from his in favour of staring down at the sand between them.

Unable to resist teasing her, he asks: “Why, what did you want to do?”

She pushes his chest with enough force that he flops over onto his back.
Hey guys! Sorry I missed last week! I really hope this chapter is worth the wait. I took a different approach to telepathy in this fic than I did in CS, but I still really love it. I hope you guys do too. And don't worry, much more to come :)

Rose tiptoes carefully into the hut, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the relative darkness, or for her knees to hit the mattress, whichever comes first. But before she can get her bearings, the Doctor finds the lantern and fires it up with a quick whir of the sonic. In the rush of soft golden light that now illuminates the room, Rose shuffles the few extra feet to the bed and plops down.

The walk from Kalei’s house had been spent casually enough, chatting and holding hands, but stepping across the threshold of the hut is like stepping into an alternate reality. One where they’re blind dates who can’t find something they have in common, or a pair of virgins who scheduled their first time together. Something equally awkward and anxiety-inducing. It certainly doesn’t feel like they’re best mates at the moment.

Later, they had agreed. That’s when they would talk about their telepathic connection some more, lay down a few more bricks of this mysterious blueprint. Neither of them had been anxious up until this point, because the definition of ‘later’ had been so ambiguous. But now that the first indisputable moment of privacy has snuck up on them, Rose doesn’t feel quite ready for it. And by the looks of it, the Doctor doesn’t either.

She clasps her hands together and looks over to him, and he smiles at her awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck, but doesn’t step away from the lantern. Rose has no clue how to initiate this encounter. But she is also confident that, if it’s even possible, the Doctor has even less of a clue.

What on Earth can she even say? ‘Hey, want to put your hands on my face and come inside me, or whatever?’ She cringes at the thought. She’d never bring it up so tactlessly, or with such a crude choice of words, but it is basically what she’ll be asking him.

His eyes wander from hers in favour of roaming around the room, and his hands delve into his pockets purely for something to do. Biting the inside of her cheek, she watches him rise up on the balls of his feet a few times, even opens and closes her mouth a few times. But all potential questions and conversation starters she can come up with die on the tip of her tongue. Eventually, she decides that it’s looking at him this intensely that is making her nervous, so she turns away, fixing her eyes on a nick in the wall by the seashell curtain.

“So, erm…” she finally begins a sentence, but the rest of the words slip away before she can get them out.

The Doctor lets out a weak chuckle that lures her eyes back to him, because she knows it isn’t authentic.

“Yeah, I… suppose, actually, I should…” he takes a few steps towards the door, averting his eyes.

“No, don’t,” she calls, leaping to her feet, ready to run after him. “Look, I’m really nervous, an’ I
guess you probably are too, but… I dunno. Could you just… teach me how it works, what there is to it? I want to learn.” It all rushes out of her lungs so quickly, it takes her a moment to process everything she just said.

He doesn’t take any more steps toward the door, but he doesn’t move closer, either. Frozen on his feet. His eyes have trouble staying locked on hers; they stray towards the strings of shells and the window and ceiling several times, no doubt searching for a reason to postpone the lesson. Coming up blank, he sighs and nods down towards the bed, indicating she sit back down.

She sinks onto her bum reluctantly, poised to spring up again if he bolts, but he lumbers forward and sits down on the edge of the bed next to her.

“There isn’t much we can do about the… lightning strikes, so to speak,” he begins. “They’ll more or less stay the same, and eventually get stronger and more frequent.”

“Have you still been feelin’ me?” she asks, curiosity piqued.

His lips contort into a little, disappointed frown that makes her heart sink.

“Yeah,” he confesses.

“But I haven’t felt anything from you, not for days.”

“I have mental defences,” he explains, his fingertips tracing invisible walls in the air by his head. “Very strong ones. I can keep my emotions to myself if I want to. When I can sense something strong coming on, all I have to do is employ those barriers.”

“And you’ve been doing that since you found out?” she asks.

“Yeah.” He shrugs, like it’s not a big deal.

“Then couldn’t you just use your defences or whatever to block me out, too?”

“Yes, I can. And I do. But since it’s only you, it filters right through my permanent defences. I have to make a conscious decision to put those stronger barriers up to keep out something benign. In order to do that, I have to feel something from you first.”

“Since it’s only me?” she asks, derision in her tone.

“Not like that,” he shakes his head. “Just that you aren’t a malicious force. I would automatically deter something like that.”

“So basically, since I’m not a telepathic monster trying to suck the life out of you, there’s no way to block me out. ‘S easy for you to keep your thoughts to yourself, but I can’t do it at all.”

He nods.

“Until you learn how to construct your own barriers to keep yours to yourself.”

“That’s not fair,” she accuses.

“Suppose not.”

“You should stop holdin’ ‘em back, then.”

The Doctor scoffs, like the idea is ludicrous.
“‘Least until I learn how to do it, too,’” she insists.

He mumbles incoherently, a protest about different species and control and fairness. But she crosses her arms and glares at him, not backing down.

“Fine,” he finally agrees, his jaw clenching.

“You promise?”

He takes a deep breath, and exhales with a rumble in his chest.

“Yes.”

“Good.” She relaxes immediately. “So let’s start there. Teach me how to keep my emotions to myself.”

“We’re definitely not starting there.” The Doctor shakes his head with a sarcastic laugh.

“Why not?” she asks. Thus far, the Doctor has not shown much sensitivity to her sense of powerlessness in this respect. It’s not been easy to adjust to the profound lack of knowledge and control on her own.

“It would be very unpleasant, for starters. If you’re going to learn how to build your defences, you’re going to fail a few hundred times first. You have to get comfortable with me being inside your mind so it isn’t traumatic when you do.”

_Comfortable with him being inside her mind._

“Right,” she nods. Warmth flutters in her chest, and she subtly places a hand over her heart to try to calm the butterflies. Because he actually sounds ready to do this right now, to go inside her mind right now. She thought he’d need a few hours or so to actually get anywhere substantial, and the first little bit would be some lecturing on the concept and theory of it all. “So, you want to try that?” she adds, a bit hoarse.

“Are you all right?” he asks, suddenly alarmed. He reaches a hand out and rests it on her shoulder.

“Mhm,” she lies, nodding as another wave of disorientation floods through her. Why didn’t she mentally prepare herself for this possibility, of him wanting to dive right in?

“I won’t lie to you, Rose, you don’t look terribly all right.” He pushes the back of his hand into her forehead.

“Thanks.” She smiles sardonically.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, not understanding her tone at all. When she doesn’t respond quickly, his hand falls onto his lap. “Do you… not want to do this?”

“I do,” she exclaims, too loudly in the quiet hut, and he flinches. She reaches out and takes both of his hands in hers and repeats, softer, “I do.”

When she takes another deep breath before continuing, he raises his eyebrows expectantly, waiting.

“I’m just nervous is all. Never done anything like this.”

“I know. Which is why I’m suggesting we take it slowly, hmm?” He tilts his head forward slightly and squeezes her hands gently.
She just gapes at him for a moment, because it’s incredibly rare for the Doctor to exhibit this sort of behaviour. The patience, the gentle soothing voice, his thumbs drawing circles on hers...

“Rose?” he prods her again, a hint of worry in his voice.

“Yeah,” she nods vigorously and squeezes his hands again. “Slowly.”

“Now?” he asks, still uncertain.

“Yes. I’m ready,” she asserts, her voice no longer wavering.

The Doctor nods, and loosens his grip on her hands, so she lets them fall to her lap.

He brings both hands to her head and rests his thumbs just shy of her cheekbones, and two fingertips on her temples. He doesn’t press hard, but uses delicate pressure, like he’s checking for bruising.

Her heart climbs into her throat. Pulse racing.

“Once I’m inside, you’ll feel something that I can’t really describe. Something like you’ve never felt before. I won’t invade your privacy or search your memories, but I’ll hear every thought and feel every passing emotion. If you’re uncomfortable, I’ll stop right away. You won’t even have to tell me.” He smirks. “I’ll just know.”

Unable to return the smile, she just swallows hard and gives him a tiny nod.

“It’s usually easier if you close your eyes,” he offers, locking his brown eyes on hers.

She reaches her hands out to rest on his waist, and curls her fingers in the fabric of his shirt – something to ground her – then closes her eyes.

With the Doctor focused, the room is so quiet. Without sight or conversation to serve as a pacifying distraction, it takes all her energy to stay calm. She concentrates on the texture of his shirt and tries to remember to breathe. As she waits, she wonders how she’ll be able to tell when he’s started, what cues to look for. But she doesn’t have to wonder long, because it’s unmistakable when he does.

For one thing, there’s pressure. It’s not physical, like a migraine or someone is crushing her skull, and it’s not technically painful. It’s purely a mental pressure, like she’s staring down the first problem of a maths exam years above her skill level, or at the tail end of an emotionally draining argument about the meaning of the universe. More and more, every second, it feels like her brain is being stuffed with something that’s too vast to fit inside of it, and it’s about to bust at the seams. An overinflated bike tire about to explode.

She tries not to feel overwhelmed, or scared, but it’s difficult not to. Before long she can’t focus on anything except the foreign, persistent pressure.

But suddenly, the tire deflates, the pressure is relieved. The Doctor’s fingertips brush along her cheeks as his hands fall from her face.

When she opens her eyes, the Doctor’s demeanour has completely changed. His lips are turned down slightly, all the excitement in his eyes displaced by a sombre disappointment that he quickly tries to hide from her by averting his gaze to the floor.

“It’s all right,” he lies meekly.
“No, don’t. I wasn’t ready, is all. I didn’t know what to expect. I just need more time, please. Let me try again.” She reaches over and manacles his wrists to bring his hands back to the sides of her face, a gesture of her determination.

“You sure?” he asks. But he positions his fingers to their previous spot on her temples like they’ve always belonged there.

“Yes.” She closes her eyes. “I trust you.” She brings her hands up to his arms and squeezes his elbows.

It’s more gradual this time. He exhales into her mind, and she breathes him in. He performs telepathic CPR and she holds on and waits to wake up, to finally see and feel him on the other side. Her mind feebly fights against the foreign discomfort, tries to abscond to the darkness to be alone again. But she perseveres, and focuses on how important this is to him, so that the only thing he can feel is that in her heart, she wants this with him, despite how strongly her autonomic nervous system is rejecting it.

And after a few moments, the nebulous, thick fog in her mind begins to dissipate, and a real, sentient being takes shape in the clearing.

It’s him.

He’s warm and ancient and heavy, shouldering the weight of ten lifetimes, the burdens of many more. The wisdom of nine centuries floods her synapses; her IQ leaps a hundred points just being touched by his ethereal presence. Every second stretches on for centuries, and yet every century ticks by in a second. Hours and years and millennia in a million time zones align at once like she’s inside of a perfectly synced universal clock. She can feel how many Earth milliseconds have elapsed since he entered her mind, precisely what fraction of a Gallifreyan year she’s been alive. The rotations per minute of the spinning equator of this planet as it orbits its own star, and the precise velocity of this galaxy as it hurls itself further out to the edges of the universe.

But it isn’t just everything he’s seen and everything he can do that pierces her mind. The Doctor himself is there, his own unique concoction of superficial arrogance and deep-seated insecurity. His love and fascination for all living creatures and his essence of bravery and self-sacrifice. And there’s something distinctly masculine about his presence she can’t easily describe. Something that triggers attraction in the most primal way. The scent of a crisp, woodsy aftershave or a well-cut suit. A low, husky voice and a shadow of stubble along a chiselled jawline. Natural strength and a visceral protective instinct.

“I am very, very manly,” the Doctor suddenly says aloud, and she startles at the unexpected verbal interruption. A swell of pride glows bright red in her mind.

“Easier to tell when an emotion isn’t yours now, isn’t it?” he asks.

“Yeah,” she agrees, smiling. It’s disorienting, still being trapped inside her head with the Doctor, unable to even open her eyes, while trying to also pay attention to physical realities, to listen to his voice and move her own vocal cords. She still feels a strange, itching sensation, like she needs to scratch him out of her brain, but she stifles the impulse. For a thing that supposedly doesn’t belong, according to her brain, it is sinfully pleasant. Just about as wonderful as her best dreams had imagined it.

“The more we do this,” he continues, “The easier it’ll be to sense when it’s me, rather than you, even when we’re not touching.”
“That’d be nice,” she admits. She fidgets a little on the bed, because as satisfying and right as it feels mentally and emotionally, it’s getting harder and harder to ignore the physiological impulse to get him out. More and more, her brain is telling her she’s wearing a shirt and trousers that are too tight, a backpack that’s too heavy, and something is about to tear. Or break.

“And it’ll get less uncomfortable,” he adds.

She feels guilty for failing to mask her discomfort, but can’t help it. She trusts him that it will improve with time, and tries to distract herself with questions.

“Am I in your head, too?” she asks.

“Partially,” he replies. “Not much more than you have been the last couple months. My defences are much stronger than yours. I’d have to take them down to let you in completely.”

She doesn’t ask him out loud if he would do that for her, but it doesn’t matter, because the second she considers that she wants to try it, the Doctor hears it as a question anyway. It will definitely take a while to get used to sharing her every thought with someone.

“It’s all right, you can,” the Doctor, to her surprise, assuages her fear. “It’s only fair.” He takes a deep breath, and the sultry weight of him slowly recedes from her mind. Though the discomfort is quickly relieved, his departure also leaves behind an empty hollow in her mind. “Just give me a moment,” he says.

She nods, her eyes still closed. Clenches her hands a little tighter on his arms and listens to their dissonant, steady breaths to prepare herself for the next step. And within just a few moments, something opens in front of her. Nothing she can see, but more of a spatial sense. Like she’s been standing with her eyes closed mere inches from a wall and suddenly the wall has been removed, and the open air in front of her beckons her forward. Accepting the invitation, she nudges forward, mentally takes one step closer, and the Doctor’s fingers tremble on her temples. In the mental sphere, an invisible, chilled breeze blows past her, tingling her skin. In the real world, he shifts on the bed and lets out a shaky breath.

He needs reassurance.

She runs her hands down his arms to where his hands are resting on her head, and wraps her hands around his wrists, rubs her thumbs over his tense palms. Tries to send him thoughts of encouragement, not pressure or impatience. It seems to work, because more and more with the gentle motions of her thumbs, the atmosphere around her changes. Becomes more and more like him. The sensations are all familiar from when he was inside her mind, but the space around them is less cramped. It’s more like she’s in a spacious room designed by the Doctor, comfortably filled and decorated with his gadgets and Chucks and hair products, rather than all of him stuffed inside a shoebox.

His mind is racing to tidy the ambiance, struggling to hide errant thoughts and suppress the impulse to reconstruct his mental barriers. Fear and insecurity mingle discordantly with affection and gratitude. Rose thanks him wordlessly for allowing her in, and tries to exude the most peaceful and loving thoughts she can, to try to calm his frantic bustling about.

But the moment finally arrives that his mind relaxes, accepts her company and gradually embraces her mental presence.

Eager to catch her first glimpse of this encounter through his eyes, Rose holds her breath, and opens her mind as far as it will stretch.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I honestly don't know WHY but this chapter gave me such a hard time. I think it's just like... such a tricky situation, because of all the Doctor's baggage and hangups. And the mismatched nature of it, him being alien, her being human... It's hard to endure the rocky stuff, even though I know the things going through his head and the things he does are true to him (at least to the best of my ability). It's also hard just to put those struggles they would have into words and make it relatable and understandable... in short, words are hard. lol. But I can promise you guys, all the tribulations here will be worth it, in the end. It's going to make their relationship that much stronger, when they get through each of their individual anxieties together, rather than alone. Heh, sorry, I got sappy. These two do that to me.

I picked this apart and changed a LOT after my betas were done, so, mistakes are my own doing :P

For all the countless hours the Doctor spent dreading the deepening of this connection, he can’t for all his lives remember why. For all the months and years that he kept Rose at arm’s length, refusing to breach the friendship barrier, he can’t comprehend how he ever resisted. Now that the moment has come, the fears evaporate like fresh beads of water on a hot plate. The mere idea that he could ever have been reluctant to embrace this seems ludicrous. A few Reapers and the potential implosion of the universe almost seem reasonable risks to cross his own timeline and bring them together sooner.

Because it’s incredible.

_She’s_ incredible.

Splashes of bright, pastel colour in a world of grey. The earliest rays of a warm sunrise after a long, cold stretch of starless night. The deep breath of cool, crisp air just beyond a suffocating cloud of smoke.

His existence is suddenly anchored to mortality in a way he’s tried to emulate but never been able to achieve. Timelines vanish mysteriously beyond the present, the future looms ahead, unknowable and terrifying. Time passes randomly and unpredictably, warped by an innately flawed perception; seconds are lost to the void completely unnoticed, but somehow it’s _okay_. A moment is suddenly no more or less tangible for quantifying it in discrete units.

Being in the company of such a fiercely determined spirit is enough knock the wind out of him, but her gentle embrace of his mind keeps his vital signs steady. The intensity of every fleeting emotion still bewilders him, despite how he tried to prepare himself for the onslaught. Awe, gratitude, curiosity... just a little fear, all mingling together with electricity. And underneath the transient emotions at the surface, something permanent and powerful glows from deep within her that he does not want to acknowledge with a label. But it only grows more intense with everything she senses around her. Every brush of their minds together makes her single heart gush with it, and it becomes a bit intoxicating.
Before he can restrain himself, a soft moan escapes his throat, because it all just feels *so good.* The mental equivalent of a deep blush taints their connection, and Rose senses his regret quickly.

“It’s okay,” she reassures him in a gentle whisper, trying not to break the spell prematurely.

With her reassurance, the sense of embarrassment slowly dissipates. He really couldn’t have helped it, anyway. He had no idea just how severe his starvation for telepathic contact had become. After all the years he spent trying to forget his old life, somehow he had gradually forgotten just how vital it is to his wellbeing. But now that Rose has offered him a delectable taste, the craving has flared up again full force. The hunger for more is overwhelming.

The lapse in self-control behind him, he takes a deep breath and empties his mind of everything but Rose. The sultry mist swirling inside him. The beautiful feminine aura to her presence that radiates the intuition and nurturing instincts of a woman. It’s reminiscent of the one the corporeal Rose carries everywhere she goes, as though her mind and body are composed of the same delicate curves. The tendrils of her mind intertwine with his in the same way her hand might clasp his: warm and soft and soothing. But it’s more than just a biological pull of testosterone towards oestrogen; it’s deeper than that. She’s his perfectly designed, natural complement, the missing key to a lock he’s always had but never been able to open.

As she acclimates to the new environment, her mental wavelengths find a natural balance alongside his. And as she becomes more relaxed, more comfortable, another sentiment unfolds within the boundaries of his mind: her desire for him.

The early indicators of arousal start to course through his veins, and he can’t hold back another soft moan. Every cell in his body flushes with heat, his hearts thrum frantically with desire. The overwhelming desire to touch her – to kiss and pleasure and hold her and do anything else she wants him to – consumes him so rapidly that he can hardly keep up.

And that is precisely the moment the Doctor realises they need to stop. He had all but forgotten he has an instant ‘on’ switch located just inside his mind, and that anyone who has earned a ticket inside can flip it if they’re so inclined, with even the tiniest dose of lust, the most fleeting suggestive thought. How dangerous it is for someone he cares for (and is undeniably attracted to) to have access to that switch before they have discussed its implications.

In a panic, he summons his rationality and logic from where they have scattered to the furthest reaches of his brain, and forces himself to end this encounter. To push Rose out of his mind and hastily reconstruct his barriers, tier by tier. He is out of practice, so it several seconds pass before he can safely let his hands slip away from Rose’s face. Breathless, he slides away from her, putting a couple of feet between them.

Rose is temporarily incapacitated by the abrupt disconnection, a hand on her forehead as she struggles to catch her own breath. She gapes at him with wide eyes, swaying a bit on the bed, for a long moment before she gathers her senses.

“Doctor, it’s all right.” She promptly scoots closer to him on the bed, erasing the distance he had created. He tries to flee further, but he has already reached the edge of the bed, and she follows him there, extending a hand to grasp his own.

“Whatsoever you feel,” she continues. She doesn’t seem to mind that he pushed her out without her consent, too quickly for her first time, and that he hasn’t told her why. It seems strangely unlike her. “I actually sort of want to know what turns you on,” she adds, with a little smirk.
For some reason, that last remark provokes him. His hearts constrict in his chest, blood drains from his face.

With ragged, shallow breaths, the Doctor tries to analyse the reactionary sentiments warring in his mind. He doesn’t want to hurt Rose by backpedalling now, but he can’t help feeling a little betrayed, himself. He knows what humans can be like… walking bags of hormone soup. And he never thought Rose would use this connection as a means to an end, but it seems like she might be doing just that. Up until this evening, he wasn’t even certain yet if a physical relationship was in the cards for them. He didn’t consider it may be a prerequisite for Rose to partake in this with him, or he would have insisted they both toughen up and deal with the pain of losing it.

Vulnerability. That’s chipping away at the edges of his mind, too. Rose has cornered him into more vulnerable of a position than he can handle. He is not quite ready to relinquish his carefully cultivated control over this new aspect of their relationship.

It felt spectacular, of course, a kind of contentment he hasn’t experienced for countless years. And with someone he’s already developed a close bond with, it tends to leave him a bit stimulated in the aftermath. But he wouldn’t be feeling quite so suddenly and intensely aroused if not for her wildly contagious desire floating unchecked through his mind while they were connected. It’s unfair that she can do this to him, make his biology react this strongly before he’s ready. He needs to spend substantially more time acquainting their minds before they take that step, if they ever do. It’s how he has always operated, and he thought Rose would understand that.

His only tested defence mechanism to recoil, the Doctor pulls his hand a bit roughly from hers, clenching it into a fist instead. Rose had been quiet, still collecting herself, but this immediately puts her on alert.

“What’s wrong? I didn’t mean… I was just saying…” She rushes out, reaching for to him again.

Again, he dodges the contact. This time, he stands up, and takes a few steps away from the bed, distancing himself further to eliminate the possibility she will compromise his judgment with physical touch. Even if it seems as innocent as touching his hand or shirt, that isn’t what this is supposed to be about.

“Is this not enough for you?” he asks, failing to keep a tremor out of his voice. “Is it not enough unless…” The last few words get caught in his throat.

“What?” she gasps. “No, I… I just thought…” She stands up slowly, and starts to follow him, but he backs up further until he collides with the wall. Still, she pursues him, and he inches along the wall towards the shell curtain leading outside, ready to make a leap over the wooden railing for an aquatic escape if need be.

“When we agreed to this I didn’t think…” He doesn’t know quite how to finish his thought. Now that he isn’t under the spell of her blissfully encouraging presence, those fears he had earlier convinced himself were nonsensical are swiftly clouding his mind again.

“Doctor, please talk to me. If something’s too much, I want to know. I didn’t mean to scare you, or hurt you. That’s the last thing I wanted.” Her eyes glisten with moisture.

He takes a deep breath. “I didn’t think that doing this would include… physical aspects as well.”

“I didn’t do anything, though,” Rose defends herself, pointing her index finger to her sternum.

“You don’t have to do anything. All you have to do is think when we’re that close.”
“You mean you… felt…”

“I feel everything,” he finishes gravely.

“I’m sorry,” she offers, interlocking her fingers. “I didn’t mean to.”

He sighs, rubbing a hand down his face. It really isn’t her fault. That she’s attracted to him, or that she couldn’t control errant thoughts when they were so intimately connected. She’s never done anything like this before, she has no training or practice. Given her confusion at the moment, he knows she had flipped that pesky ‘on’ switch completely unintentionally, without even realising it.

“I know. It’s not your fault. It’s just… I’m not…”

“I understand.” She nods, before he has to finish his amorphous thought aloud. “I’m not trying to pressure you.”

He gives her a subtle nod, though the fears are still roiling around in his head.

“But you’ve got to understand,” she adds. “With the kissing, and the closeness it’s… hard for me. Sometimes my body just… reacts on its own, y’know.”

Somehow, he had managed to forget one of the key reasons he avoids engaging in anything telepathic with humans: they tend to perceive any prolonged physical contact as something sensual.

“Mmm,” he acknowledges with another nod.

In that moment, a grey ache of dejection infiltrates his mind.

He takes a deep breath, softening his expression.

“You’re sad.”

She glares up at him indignantly, belying the emotion trickling through their link.

“Well, you’re still turned on.”

His eyes nearly pop out of his skull.

“You can feel that?” he croaks out.

“Mhm.” She crosses her arms with a smug grin, and he swallows hard, his stomach swooping unpleasantly. “‘S not just me.”

“No,” he agrees reluctantly. “It isn’t. But when it’s just mine it’s about a hundred times easier to suppress.”

“‘S that right?” she asks with a scowl.

He just scowls right back.

“Well, welcome to humanity.” Her sarcasm is evident.

“Thanks,” he bites back, trying to match her acerbic tone.

She sighs, and lets her arms drop back to her sides, fiddling with the hem of her dress.

He can hardly look at her without mentally undressing her.
“I should go,” he says, glancing over at the door.

“No, don’t.” She rushes to block the path between him and the door. “I can wait, an’… I’ll try not to think about you like that, yeah?”

“I’m not upset with you,” he insists, gently. “I just don’t think my staying here is a good idea.”

“Doctor, please.” A single tear leaks from her eye and rolls down her cheek.

A stronger dose of her sadness cuts through him, a stab directly in his chest that he swears can bleed straight through his clothes.

Hands outstretched, he walks up to her, and she rushes up to meet him, clasping both her hands in his, meshing their fingers together.

“This was lovely.” He caresses his thumbs in circular designs on her palms in an attempt to comfort her. “I can’t explain how…” Words fail him again. Describing an experience like that using language, or any medium except telepathic contact itself, is next to impossible. But she discerns what he means again without the need for elaboration.

“Me too,” she smiles, but the happiness doesn’t reach her eyes.

“I’d like to do it again,” he offers. “And we can. But… I usually need more time to connect with someone this way before I can…” he leaves the concept ambiguous again, and stares down at the floor with a grimace.

“It’s okay. It can wait,” she assures him, squeezing his palms.

“But even then,” he adds. “I can’t be one hundred percent sure that I’ll ever…”

“What?” She looks crestfallen.

“It’s… there’s a certain level of commitment –”

“What, an’ this isn’t a commitment, what we just did?” A hint of anger enters her tone. “You said this telepathic connection thing was meaningful, that it only happened once in a blue moon. Was that just rubbish, then?”

“No,” he asserts, a flash of fury in his eyes. “It is important. It’s the most important thing…” he trails off again, afraid of revealing too much. “I just know, for humans, the physical is…”

“Well, stop it, all righ’t,” Rose interrupts him. “Because it’s not. This is more important to me, just like it is to you.”

He lets it all sink in: her words, the intense, pleading sincerity in her eyes, the set of her jaw that demands to be taken seriously. After a moment, he nods, a subtle affirmation of trust.

He lingers close to her for a few deep breaths, staring down at their joined hands, relieved that they were able to find some resolution through honesty. Continuing to draw patterns on her skin with his thumbs, he apologises for lashing out in his native tongue.

“I should be going,” he says again, nodding towards the door. It shatters the quiet moment even more unpleasantly than he thought it would.

“’Kay,” she mumbles.
“Goodnight,” he breathes, softer. He squeezes her hands lightly one last time before he releases them, and she doesn’t try to stop him.

But as soon as his back is turned to her, she calls out in a small voice.

“I’ll miss you.”

His breath catches; every muscle in his body goes rigid.

She must want him to return the sentiment; any sentient person would. But his lips can’t seem to form the words.

Instead, he swivels back around and takes a few slow paces forward. Reaches out his hand to brush his thumb along her jaw, then leans closer to rest his forehead against hers, nuzzling their noses.

“See you in the morning,” he promises quietly. Rose makes an unintelligible whimper of protest, but doesn’t do anything more to try to persuade him to stay. Tilting her chin up with his thumb, he bids her farewell with a lingering, tender kiss on her lips before he turns to the door.

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The TARDIS is predictably angry when the Doctor bursts through the door. She takes it upon herself to berate him both for leaving Rose alone so soon after forming a connection, and for feeling ashamed that he was aroused by it.

He’s flushed from head to toe, sweating in places he doesn’t normally sweat. He unclasps a few more buttons on his shirt as he approaches the console, and rolls up his sleeves before he slumps into the captain’s chair. His pulse rushes loudly in his ears, but the rest of his normally hypersensitive senses are dulled by the pleasure circulating through him. The real world is still being drowned out so he can prioritise the acute mental stimulation. His biology truly works against him in these sorts of situations.

He knew it was going to be good, but… blimey. A warm shiver runs down his spine at the memory of how wonderful Rose felt, how desperately she wanted him. Gallifreyans certainly weren’t susceptible to such overwhelming physical cravings. It can be arousing in itself, being intertwined with a person you care about, especially when that person also happens to also be breathtakingly gorgeous. But rarely to a degree that it gets out of hand (unless, of course, that’s the goal of the encounter).

He should have been more aware of what he was signing up for, initiating a connection like this with someone as young and human as Rose. Of course she would have her affection and desires on display as openly as anything else. Of course it would douse petrol on the patient, crackling fire of desire they both normally keep contained. He should have been prepared for it to hit him this strong, but he was too busy worrying about mortality to properly consider it ahead of time.

He just can’t stop thinking about her. The warm, comforting embrace of her mind inside his, the sweet taste of her full lips.

As long as he’s in this sort of state, his rational mind past the point of no return, the evening can only end one of two ways.

He can sprint back to that hut, inform her he’s changed his mind, and implore her to let him to join them together in a very different way. Kiss her until she melts in his arms. Lift her dress up and over her head and explore every inch of her perfect, smooth skin with his lips. Delve inside her slowly as she wraps herself around him, soft and encouraging. He’ll whisper her name in her ear as
they move together and she’ll cry out his name into his neck when she comes apart. And they’ll make love again and again until morning, or until she passes out in his arms. Whichever happens first.

Or, option number two, he can just take care of this little problem himself.

Whether or not he would like to be, he is not quite ready for the former, and in fact, that is the singular reason he left Rose alone tonight. It’s glaringly evident that they are telepathically compatible, so that is no longer a concern. But they have hardly developed their immature connection at all. Mixing in physical aspects too soon is like jumping into bed before you’ve ever held hands or kissed. It’s too much, too fast.

And on top of that, there are only so many emotional ties he can make in one night. The more conventional relationship milestones they cross, the more expectations he will certainly be held to. Public displays of affection, flowers, holiday cards, verbal declarations of feelings… all that. And he’s the furthest thing in the universe from boyfriend material.

He’ll have to settle for option two.

He promised Rose that he wouldn’t keep his emotions from her until she learned to rein in her own, but just this once he’s going to have to break that promise. The TARDIS may still be within the working range of their nascent connection, and he can’t risk Rose inadvertently finding out about this. She’s definitely better off in the dark about this particular incident.

The TARDIS, it turns out, would be better off left in the dark, too, but unfortunately she is already well aware of his plan as soon as he’s made it. Rather than support his decision, she demands that he grow up and return to the hut to spend the night with Rose, regardless of what they do. Directing a white-hot flash of irritation back at her, he insists the time isn’t right (and that he would know), and that she isn’t giving him enough credit for the progress they’ve already made.

He allows her a couple of rounds of rebukes and insults, but quickly tires of her dramatization. Did he do anything so terrible? He merely requested a postponement of physical intimacy. Aside from that, he and Rose shared what he thought was overall an enjoyable first telepathic exchange. With a few exceptions towards the end, he behaved like a perfect gentleman, even said goodnight by kissing her. Is that not what decent romantic partners do?

The TARDIS simply does not see it that way.

Tired of the pointless squabbling, the Doctor storms out of the console room with a stern warning not to follow him into his room. The TARDIS mentally thumps him in the head for good measure on his way out, but nonetheless slinks out of his mind and leaves him to business.
Hey all! I have an update for you this week! Enjoy it, because I will more than likely go back to my every-other week schedule for the foreseeable future, as I've fallen behind on writing lately. But this chapter was so close to done last night, I figured I'd polish it up and post today, especially since I left you guys in such a tense spot last time :) Hope you guys enjoy. <3

It’s not a surprise that the Doctor left. It really isn’t. Rose never expected him to stay the night. Sticking around after something like that, whether to talk or cuddle or snog or do anything that remotely implied courtship, wouldn’t be like him. Dipping their toes into the waters of this telepathic connection wouldn’t suddenly transform a skittish ascetic like the Doctor into a romantic archetype. He has never been the sort of man to take more than one tentative step at a time. In most cases where their relationship is concerned, there’s a step backward for every step forward.

This is no exception, and Rose anticipated that going in.

What comes as a surprise to her, however, are the tears streaming down her cheeks upon his departure.

She sways on her feet, disoriented by the rush of emotion.

One hand steadying herself on the bed and one over her heart, she takes a few slow, deep breaths. A few moments of hyperventilation have made her lightheaded, is all.

Wiping the fresh tears from her eyes, she quickly resolves to distract herself from spiralling further. She looks down at her wardrobe. Grains of sand are still sprinkled over her dress, and lodged in uncomfortable places like inside her bra and between her toes. She smells like rocks and seawater and her hair feels crusty with dried salt. But she thinks if she tries to shower tonight, she may pass out in the tub. Best to shower in the morning. She’s certain that, given his unique connection to the textiles industry on the island, Kalei can provide fresh linens for the bed tomorrow if need be.

To give herself a few more minutes to occupy her mind, she heads briefly into the loo. Exhausted and still a bit wobbly, she only manages to washes off her face and haphazardly brush her teeth. Everything else will have to wait. Returning to the main room, she lifts her dress over her head, and uses her hands to try to brush off as much of the lingering sand stuck on her skin as she can. Satisfied that she’s removed enough that it won’t keep her awake, she crawls onto the bed and slips under the covers. Resting her head on the pillow, she pulls the duvet up to her nose, and lets a few of the tears she’s been holding back spill over.

It isn’t out of shock at his sudden departure that she’s crying, though some degree of disappointment may have tipped her over the edge. It’s the sheer emotional overload she’s been left to deal with on her own.

Her heart flutters and swells with joy, yet every robust beat aches in her chest. Her fatigued muscles demand rest, and her head is fit to burst like she just attempted to split an atom on her
own, but she is too keyed up to sleep. Bereft of his company too soon, she clings onto little details
of the evening, replays them in her mind. The welcoming, alien sensations from the Doctor’s mind;
the gentle pressure of his fingertips on her temples; every precious moment he cradled her hands in
his; the single, chaste touch of his lips before he disappeared.

With his flighty instincts, Rose knows patience is crucial. They can’t move too fast. But she never
expected a mere sampling of this intimacy to instil such an insatiable desire for more. The most
pervasive thought in her mind is to bolt out the door to find him, kiss him beneath the starlight until
his will to resist melts in her arms, and invite him back into her mind permanently.

The Doctor claims it only improves with time, but Rose is already enchanted by the process. It’s so
much more special than any snog or shag she’s ever had, because he’s the only person she would
ever want to share it with. It’s exclusive and uniquely suited to them in a way purely physical
relations never could be. There can be no miscommunications, no lies, and no hiding. It’s just the
two of them, offering their souls to one another in the ultimate trust exercise. It’s raw and terrifying
to be so bared to another person, but to use one of the Doctor’s favourite terms, it’s brilliant to be
seen just as you are and still wholly accepted.

She thought she knew the Doctor (and she did – it wasn’t like he was hiding anything massive), but
she never knew him like this. Tender… even loving. The entire time they were connected, and in
the moments leading up to it, he was more affectionate than she had ever seen him. He assuaged
her every fear with patience, confessed the truth even when he was loath to do it, allowed intimate
contact that wasn’t strictly necessary, and kissed her to express remorse. It was a whole other side
of him. A beautiful side.

Exposed and vulnerable as he was, Rose had expected a certain level of resistance from him, once
they started. But quite to the contrary, he was so at peace and at home in her mental presence.
Serenity and pleasure radiated from his very being, and it took her breath away. Before tonight, she
wasn’t quite sure he was capable of it: letting go of the anchors of guilt and responsibility weighing
him down for long enough to find some semblance of peace.

Since their encounter with the Face of Boe, Rose has wondered just how significant of a role
telepathy once played in the Doctor’s past relationships, but has been too reluctant to dredge up old
wounds to ask him. Since his revelations on the Sanctuary Base, she has quietly mourned for him,
that no one from his world lives on to share it with him.

However much he values and treasures his bond with the TARDIS, and however badly he may
want it to be enough, it alone has clearly not been adequate for him. Perhaps there are limitations to
the fact that the TARDIS is a bodiless consciousness, and she cannot meet all of the needs of an
intrinsically telepathic but corporeal being such as the Doctor.

Rose had no idea the extent of his deprivation. He has needed an intimate connection like this,
something deeply mental but shared with a living, breathing person in physical dimensions, for
such a long time. He was starving all this time, wasting away in a famine of sustenance for his
mind, but too crippled by insecurity to ever ask for nourishment. His craving for it only became
evident to her as it was finally being satisfied.

As much for his sake as hers, she wants him back.

Losing that deeper connection with him so abruptly, the edges of her mind feel weak and frayed, as
though someone had used an improper tool to sever the organic wires binding them together.

She briefly considers leaping from the bed and searching for him outside, but she’s so exhausted
she doesn’t know how she could survive a manhunt around the island without collapsing in the
sand.

Objectively, he probably made the right decision tonight. If he isn’t ready for physical intimacy, then a night when they are both feeling a little randy perhaps isn’t a good one to spend in bed together. It’s a little rude of him to assume neither of them can control themselves, but now that they have already crossed several boundaries of intimacy, sleeping in close proximity would invite far more temptation than it used to. Willingly putting him in that kind of situation purely for her own personal gain would be gravely selfish.

When she was still in school, her sod of a boyfriend had enticed her into sex before she was ready. It was easy for him to convince her that she was, because she was in love with him. But five years later, she still regrets the circumstances in which she lost her virginity.

The Doctor is no virgin, but the situation is analogous at least on some level.

She really ought to give him some more credit. They’ve taken several big steps in a window of only a few days, and he hasn’t run for the metaphorical hills or grown cold and distant around her like he once would have. Earlier in their travels, she wouldn’t have put it past him to withdraw to the depths of the TARDIS for hours if he accidentally revealed a hint of feelings for her. If he needs some time to himself to process all the things happening between them, that is perfectly understandable.

They can discuss tonight’s unexpected intimacy snafu tomorrow. Lay down a few expectations and boundaries for a physical relationship, if he eventually wants one. Tomorrow. After a good night’s rest. A clear-headed conversation is preferable to the emotionally charged argument they’d be likely to have tonight, when they’re both already stretched a bit thin.

She leans over and blows out the oil lamp next to her bed, and closes her eyes as she settles back into her pillow.

It hurts how much she misses him.

Like he’s been gone for weeks rather than minutes. Loneliness permeates her mind, drains her spirit. Like the depressing, quiet emptiness in a home in those first few hours after beloved guests depart. He wasn’t exaggerating about it being painful for them to be apart. They’ve only just begun exploring the connection, and he says it will only get stronger with time.

She can’t imagine what he must experience all the time, with everyone he once shared a connection like this lost to him.

Gathering as much of her blanket as she can, she rolls onto her side and snuggles into the thick folds of fabric. She’ll see him in just a few hours. As soon as she wakes up, or shortly thereafter, he’ll be there, knocking on the door. And damn it, she’s going to be the one to kiss him this time. An arm around a roll of the blanket, and her cheek nestled comfortably into the fabric, she pretends it’s him she’s cuddling into, and it helps her to drift off.

*Morning is just around the corner,* she repeats to herself as she slowly succumbs to her body and mind’s exhaustion.

A few minutes later, she is nearly asleep when something jerks her from unconsciousness.

She gasps into full alertness as a powerful wave of heat washes over her. The flames quickly converge just below the waist, making her pulse throb *just there* as pleasant tingles spread down her legs and over her stomach. Visceral fantasies of her and the Doctor explode in her mind: a
trembling whimper on her lips as his teeth latch onto her neck; her fingers twisted in his hair as his tongue delves between her legs; a deep groan from his chest as he buries himself inside her. The friction of hot, damp skin, fists clenched in the sheets, whispers and cries of their names in the air.

How did this happen? Did she fall asleep without realising it, have a randy dream and wake up desperate? She doesn’t think she did. She was a little turned on from before, but this is extreme.

The Doctor was absolutely right not to trust her tonight.

She rubs her thighs together, hoping it will tide her over. But even this small movement brings a wave of pleasure that makes her cry out into her blanket, back arched and legs rigid.

Rose starts to feel a bit alarmed. She hasn’t been this turned on for ages, probably not since that arms closet. Because that’s exactly what it feels like – like a long, enjoyable session of snogging and foreplay has led her to this point. As though Doctor’s tongue was in her mouth for several minutes, and it’s on her breast now, painting slow circles around her nipple.

He may as well be here doing exactly that, with how insanely far gone she is right now.

But the Doctor is not here, and even while he was, he did nothing to elicit this sort of response. Logically, she knows how mental this is. She ought to ignore her biology’s immature nonsense and go to sleep; she was nearly unconscious before this started, anyway. But pooled moisture seeps from between her folds and trickles down the inside of her thigh. A singular, persistent desire infiltrates her brain and overrides any feelings of lethargy, one that she can’t ignore much longer. It doesn’t matter how she does it or what she uses, but she needs to satisfy this craving right now.

She decides it isn’t worth it to stay up all night fighting it; might as well give her body what it wants now so she can fall asleep without further fuss.

Thankful she’s already taken off all her clothes, she runs a hand down her stomach and between her legs, shivering as she does. She slips a finger between her slick folds, and gasps as it brushes over her clit and little jolts of electric pleasure sizzle through her body. One touch, and she’s already close to the edge. With the same gentleness, she presses down again with a strangled cry, and it nearly brings her past the point of no return. A few more seconds of this languid contact is all she needs to hurtle over the edge. She has never expended so little effort to satisfy herself.

Breathless, she tries to prepare herself properly before she starts again.

With only a feather-light touch of the tip of her finger, she gives in to her body’s plea, swirling tight circles around the swollen bundle. Burying her face in her blanket, she calls out his name and imagines it is his hand or his tongue on her clit. With a slightly firmer touch, she dreams what it’d be like to share this with him. To watch his face twist with pleasure, hear the sounds he would make as he drew close to the edge, feel him tense and release inside of her. It can’t possibly be as wonderful as she’s imagining it is, but for just a few moments, she convinces herself it would be.

Spiralling higher, she writhes against the sheets and her hand as she chases after her climax. Her thoughts only of him, she half-screams his name as she stumbles over the peak, inner walls fluttering and every muscle in her body shaking. She carries herself through it, prolonging the pleasure with little rocks of her hips until she shudders under her own touch, and pulls her hand away.

Throwing the blanket down to her waist, she smears a sheen of sweat on her forehead with the back of her hand, panting. Intoxicated with feel-good hormones, she closes her eyes and continues to dream of the Doctor as she slowly catches her breath. Of the lazy kisses and cuddling and pillow
talk that should accompany the post-orgasmic haze.

But as the warm, fuzzy feeling begins to wear off, as her breathing returns to normal and the flush on her skin dissipates, something occurs to her. Sitting up and gathering her thoughts, she realizes how unlikely it is that this ‘random’ episode of arousal and the longing thoughts of the Doctor were coincidental.

Suddenly, it becomes very obvious what just happened to her. Or rather, to them both.

The Doctor had promised not to hide his emotions from her until further notice, but now she is regretting that she asked him not to. She wasn’t quite aware he was heading off on his own to have a bloody wank.

But her anger is quickly overtaken by vanity. She had turned him on enough to want to act on it. Had learned how to turn him on in the first place, an achievement that seemed so elusive for so long. Little aftershocks of pleasure course through her veins because, in a way, they just did something deeply intimate. Something more intense than her world’s cyber or phone sex: mind sex. Telepathic sex, maybe. Whatever the official name for it may be, the point is they got off on each other, at the same time. They might have even come at the same time.

“Oh, my God,” she murmurs to herself as she flops onto her back.

This thing is even more powerful than she thought.

What kind of bloody idiot is he, though? To not even think about the repercussions of his actions, given what’s going on? She has to admit, it would’ve been better for them both if he had kept this particular moment to himself. It isn’t fair to expect her to take this in stride. He knows that she wants that kind of relationship with him, and she isn’t skilled enough to block out those feelings once she feels them coming on.

Rose also realises she will likely never be able to touch herself in true solitude again, at least for the foreseeable future. There’s a downside to this she hadn’t considered before. If she was so suddenly and intensely aroused when the Doctor was… pleasuring himself, then it’s logical to assume this particular cocktail of emotion is powerful enough to be transmitted. There’s no reason to hope the pattern wouldn’t hold true in the reverse direction.

With these new revelations in mind, some of Rose’s anger flares up again. It isn’t fair to expect her to go on being respectfully abstinent. Given what happened tonight, she’d be hard pressed to convince anyone (any human, at least) that they don’t already have some form of a committed, physical relationship. Because the moment either of them can’t take the tension anymore, the other will be dragged into carnal release with them. Granted, she expects that in most cases, she would be the one dragging the Doctor down (human hormones and all), rather than the other way around. But though tonight may be a fluke, if the Doctor caved once, it’s not inconceivable it could happen again. Especially if they continue exploring their nascent telepathic connection, as it seems to kindle that fire inside of him the same way kissing and touching does hers.

She ought to go and confront him about this right now. He deserves a good slap in the head and a scolding for toying with her like this.

She fidgets a little on the bed, testing how it’d feel to stand up, but her legs are limp and useless. Eyes are heavy. There’s still a dull ache in her head. Exhausted from everything that has already happened, plus the unexpected, all-consuming climax she’s still coming down from, she’d never make it to whatever hiding spot he chose to do the deed.
Resolved to confront him first thing in the morning, she pulls her blanket back up to her chin, rolls onto her side, and lets the elixir of hormones lull her to sleep.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Yo! Super sorry it's been a few weeks. Life has just been roughing me up lately. I hope you guys like this one, it's a little bit longer at least! <3

Amber helped look over it last minute, but I changed so much after she was done with it. Blame me for any mistakes :P

It doesn’t take the TARDIS kicking him into the sand to get the Doctor outside the next morning.

Understandable beginner’s discomfort aside, Rose seemed to actually enjoy their first proper telepathic encounter. She’s also willing to try it again soon, which he takes as a promising sign. The dread of initiating the first contact had been an ominous cloud looming over his head. But now that Rose has been through her first session, the first few rays of sunshine have emerged from behind the grey.

Though he’d never admit this to her, he is also incredibly relieved she isn’t using this telepathic connection as a means to an end. A way to coax him into whichever acts her idea of an intimate relationship would entail. He had a substantial amount of faith, of course, that that wouldn’t be the case with someone as selfless and genuine as Rose, but the fear nonetheless crept up on him the previous evening.

Okay, ‘crept up’ may be an understatement – there may have been a little bit of an overreaction on his part – but he’s having trouble berating himself much. He was in such emotional overload of everything that had happened; and this regeneration has always had something of a flair for the dramatic.

Quite contrary to his unfounded anxiety, Rose has thus far treated the experience as a form of intimate expression all its own, and it’s more than he could’ve hoped for. Despite the hiccup at the end of the evening, those few minutes they got to enjoy their first glimpse of one another have left his perpetually heavy hearts just a little bit lighter.

He can hardly wait to try it again. Maybe Rose will even want to give it another go before breakfast.

He finds himself humming Elvis again as he perches his sunglasses on his nose and strolls out the TARDIS door.

Speaking of the TARDIS, though, she’s been awfully silent since she left him alone last night.

With a shrug, he chalks it up to her still being upset with him over the whole ordeal and carries on. Mumbling the chorus of ‘All Shook Up,’ he does a few little twirls in the sand before rushing onward at a half-jog towards the pier. When the TARDIS finds out what a brilliant day they’ve had (as is bound to happen), she’ll forgive him for his romantic blunder. He has no doubt about it.

Only held up by a couple of curious, friendly islanders he hasn’t met yet, he makes it to the hut in no time, and taps out a happy rhythm on the door with his knuckles.
But when Rose opens the door, she doesn’t have quite the salutation and smile for him that the Doctor anticipated. His own smile falters when he catches sight of the rather pronounced frown on her face, and he reaches up to curl his fingers in the back of his hair nervously.

“Hi,” he mumbles, a hesitant greeting halfway between a statement and a question.

“Come in,” she sighs, exasperated, opening the door all the way and stepping aside.

Suddenly, every anxious thought he’s had in the last week swarms back into his head at once. He hides his hands in his pockets and gulps down some air before following her instruction. Had he cocked all this up last night with his hasty accusations? Has she changed her mind about this whole thing? His stomach turns sickeningly at the thought. That can’t be it. He wouldn’t survive the rejection.

With a flood of nausea, he realises just how invested in this he already is, that the mere suggestion of having it taken away pulls the metaphorical rug out from under his feet. Swiping off his sunglasses and clipping them to his shirt, he tries to hastily prepare himself for the worst.

As soon as the door shuts behind him, Rose whacks him across the head with her palm. It’s not enough to hurt, but it startles him.

“Oi!” he exclaims, rubbing the spot where her hand had struck (and surreptitiously checking to ensure his hairstyle is intact).

“What were you thinking!?” she demands, gesturing dramatically with her hands.

“What?” he asks sharply, bewildered by her ambiguous indictment.

“D’you think it’s funny, teasin’ me like that?” she continues without pause.

“What?” he repeats, even more confusion in his voice. He doesn’t think he’s ever been this bewildered by a scolding in his life. And he is unjustly scolded quite often.

“Did you think I wouldn’t mind, or wouldn’t be affected or something? ‘Cause I mean, if I had known ahead of time what you were gonna do I wouldn’t have asked. Or I at least would’ve made some exceptions…”

The Doctor stares at her in disbelief as she paces back and forth, still gesturing wildly with her arms. She doesn’t appear to notice that he is nowhere near on the same page as she is.

“Rose,” he tries to get her attention as calmly as possible. But she doesn’t respond to her name.

“An’ you’re gonna have to teach me awfully fast so I can have some privacy too, I mean, blimey…” She shakes her head.

“Rose.”

“I really won’t be able to go on like this, it’s more than teasin’, it’s torture.”

“ROSE.”

“What?” she spits out, upset at being interrupted.

He balks at her attitude, but takes a deep breath to compose himself. Removes his hands from his pockets and opens his palms outward cautiously, like he’s trying to calm down someone with a dangerous weapon.
“What are you talking about?” he asks calmly.

“What am I talkin’ about?” she repeats, eyes wide in disbelief.

“Yes,” he insists.

She looks him up and down suspiciously, her eyebrows pulled together, and it reminds him of the way she first looked at this body after he regenerated. Like she’s afraid he’s been replaced by another.

“You really don’t know?”

He shakes his head, and bites his tongue for fear of saying something caustic he would soon regret.

“Last night?”

He crosses his arms over his chest with a frown, his patience running dry.

“You were…” She struggles to get the words out. “And I…” Her eyes fall from his in favour of staring at the floor, searching for answers there.

“Yes?” he prods. What on earth is she on about? Is she trying to freak him out? He knows as well as she does what happened last night. To his knowledge, he hadn’t done anything to hurt or offend her. Until this moment, he thought she had a nice evening with him.

“Blimey, Doctor, are you really gonna make me spell it out for you?” She seems genuinely angry about this, whatever it is: her cheeks are tinting pink.

“Whatever it is, Rose, I’m sorry. Really, I am. You don’t have to tell me, if you don’t want to. But I honestly thought you enjoyed everything we did last night. I wish you’d told me sooner that something upset you.”

He wishes she’d just tell him. Whatever it is, he can take it. With nearly a millennium of experience behind him, he’s basically heard it all by now.

“It’s not that,” she raises her voice, exasperated again. “Of course I enjoyed it!” The anger in her voice belies the sentiment of her words.

“Then what?” he bites back, raising his voice, too. Her distress is contagious.

“You…” She shies away from finishing her sentence again, and the blush on her cheeks grows more pronounced. “Touched yourself.” The words are barely audible, but he hears them loud and clear.

“I’m sorry?” he squeaks, two octaves higher than normal.

“Don’t be thick,” she commands, glancing up at him with a threat in her eyes. “I’m not repeatin’ it.”

“I… huh… what makes you… er,” he stutters, rubbing behind his neck. He doesn’t know how she fabricated this theory, but he needs to think of a way to throw her off course, and quickly.

“Don’t try and lie to me, I felt it,” she accuses, commanding eye contact.

Suddenly, their cheeks may very well be a matching shade of magenta.
“You… ah…” He squeezes his eyes shut, like it’ll make the entire situation disappear or allow him to melt into the floorboards. “Oh.”

This is actually worse than anything his brain had concocted she would say. Far worse. Bolting out the door and never returning suddenly seems like an appealing option.

“I’m sorry,” he confesses, covering his eyes with one hand and staring down at the planks on the floor. “Terribly sorry. I…”

What can he really say? How did this even happen? Had his barriers slipped while he was in the throes of self-stimulation? That’s inconceivable. His barriers don’t ‘slip.’ And he was careful to ensure his thoughts were safe from transmission before he even started. Is she making this all up? How could she have known, though? For all she knew, Time Lords didn’t engage in that... activity.

“You don’t have to apologize for that,” she offers. “It’s just…”

“I, erm… don’t… understand how this happened.” He removes his hand, but continues to hang his head, counting splinters in the wood beneath his feet to keep from exploding outright.

“What d’you mean?”

“You shouldn’t have been able to feel that. I was… not… allowing it.”

Rose sighs.

“You broke the promise you made, like, half an hour earlier, you mean?” Disappointment laces her tone.

“I thought, under the circumstances, it wouldn’t bother you.”

Rose is silent for a moment.

“You’ve got a point.” She sighs in defeat. “But it doesn’t matter. It didn’t work.”

She’s quiet for another moment, and the Doctor is tempted to look up at her.

“Have your special powers stopped working?” she asks. “Can you not hold back anything from me anymore?” Horrifying as the thought sounds to him, Rose sounds almost delighted by the prospect.

“Of course I can,” he interjects, glancing up at her at last. Hesitant excitement is indeed evident on her face. “It doesn’t work like that. I’ve been honing these defences for centuries. They can’t be undone in a single evening.”

“How else do you explain what happened, then?”

“I don’t know,” he growls out, clenching his fists. “Even if somehow I was a little out of practice, it’s a little far for an immature connection like ours to reach. I’d say we only get a few hundred metres right now, at most. But the TARDIS is almost a kilometre away.”

His jaw drops, but no further words come out.

_The TARDIS._

He thought she was uncharacteristically silent through the morning.

Now it makes a little more sense why.
He grumbles in frustration, and pushes all ten of his fingers through his hair, forgetting about the product in it.

“What is it?” Rose asks.

“The TARDIS,” he responds.

“What about the TARDIS?”

“She did this, not me,” he insists, pointing in the ship’s general direction.

“You expect me to believe the TARDIS fancies me?” She crosses her arms.

“No.” He starts pacing in frustration. “It was me, but it wasn’t. The TARDIS just… made sure that our connection stayed viable in spite of the distance. And my attempts to mute it on your end.”

“Oh,” she breathes.

_The TARDIS_, he thinks derisively to himself, calling her attention. Even from the substantial distance, he knows she can hear him. _What a little meddling pervert._

He’s the pervert, she says. She only ensured he couldn’t hide it from Rose.

He narrows his eyes.

_I wasn’t hiding for the sake of hiding. Or being some sort of prick. I just wasn’t ready._

He is ready, she says. And it’s time to stop lying to himself.

“Oh, what do you know?” he accidentally says aloud, the words bitter on his tongue.

“Oh, Rose bites back. “Don’t be condescending, you bloody alien ar—”

“No!” he interrupts. “I wasn’t talking to you. I was just… talking to myself.” Rose looks suspicious, and unsatisfied. She doesn’t know quite the extent of his intimate friendship with the TARDIS, the little details like the fact they can have full-on mental conversations from miles away, and he thinks it best to keep it that way for the time being. “Sorry,” he adds, with a conciliatory frown.

“Oh…okay.” She certainly doesn’t look okay, but she lets it drop.

“What were you saying?” he offers, blocking out thoughts of the traitorous time ship.

“I mean, just that… it isn’t that much different than the real thing, is it? I mean, if anytime either one of us…” she trails off suggestively. “And we’re both just thinking about each other doing it…”

“You were thinking about me?” he blurts out, gazing at her.

Rose rolls her eyes.

“Who else would I be thinkin’ about, you nutter?”

He shrugs apathetically, belying his thoughts, and takes a moment to mull it over internally.

Somehow, since the start of this dreadful conversation, he had this image of his head of Rose being dragged through the experience against her will. Had endured it kicking and screaming, wondering
what was going on. To learn that was not the case, and that instead she was thinking of him, *imagining* him, does wonders for his confidence.

He never dared to hope she ever fantasized about him.

“‘I’ll have a word with the TARDIS,’” he assures her, keeping his now-buoyant ego in check. “See to it this won’t happen again.”

“Still, not very fair to me, is it? Considering I can’t exactly do that?” True, she lacks his ability for discretion. He’s all too familiar with the consequences of that.

“I…” He’s about to say he won’t let that happen again, either, but holds his tongue. She doesn’t know that happened at all. And if they stay on the subject too long, he may end up revealing it anyway. He can’t offer a better solution than to promise that once he feels anything of the sort, he’ll tune her out. She already knows that much, and it doesn’t seem to be enough privacy for her liking. But he can’t really blame her.

He frowns, stumped.

“I’m not trying to pressure you,” she continues upon his reticence. “It’s just, under the circumstances, I dunno how long I’ll be able to go on like this.”

Her stance is perfectly fair. They’ve been dealt a rather unique hand. To expect her to sacrifice her privacy in any respect would be unfair.

“You’re right,” he concedes. Rose looks shocked that he agreed so quickly. “What do you suggest?” he asks, opening the floor to her ideas.

“Well, aside from the obvious…” she trails off again, shrugging and hugging her arms against her chest.

The obvious. Right. Of course.

She means just doing it for real, right? Because an incident like this likely won’t happen again if they simply give in and satisfy each other’s needs, rather than their own?

She must mean that. It's obvious. Isn’t it?

“Right,” he says simply, nodding. Logical or not, this all feels sprung on him rather suddenly.

“Well, we can talk about this later, hm? We’d better go and check on the fish.” He nods his head towards the door and makes his way for it, suddenly desperate to escape this discussion.

“Doctor,” Rose calls just as he swings the door open. He stops in his tracks and turns around, holding the door open. “I’m not angry. Well, not anymore. It’s just… I’m not a Time Lord. There’s only so much a human girl can take.”

He offers a little smirk. When she puts it that way, it sounds so simple. So nonthreatening.

“An’ I’m not sayin we do anything now, just that it’s a bit mad to go on this way, if this is what it’s gonna be like.”

He nods again.

“I understand.” He doesn’t commiserate, or agree with her deductions, or admit to feeling the same, but at least acknowledges her feelings. He needs some time to process all this before he can give
her a definitive answer one way or the other. Damn it, though, that she had to go and get all logical on him. He doesn’t foresee himself coming up with a reasonable rebuttal to either of her last two statements.

When he lets out a sigh, she shuffles her feet to walk out with him, disheartened by his lack of verbiage. Taking his hand in hers, she squeezes it lightly. It’s always been a comforting gesture for the two of them, a sign that everything is still okay. Squeezing her hand lightly in return, he thanks her for allowing the conversation to drop for now.

“The ruki await us,” he announces, leading them through the doorway to face the day.

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According to Kenai, the number of fish corpses washing ashore has still not noticeably decreased. Removing that single patch of vegetation clearly has not eradicated the disease, and they can hardly scavenge the entire ocean floor that surrounds the island for the next incubus for the marine plague. The Doctor decides they will have to take a different approach to conquer this obscure virus.

The only issue is time. The people of Tarohanda are quietly starving, both physically and economically. They need something to tide them over until their natural resources are replenished. Though the Doctor takes credit for the idea to bring the island an interim supply of a seafood commodity, it’s Rose who devises the specifics of the plan. While thoughts of intergalactic markets and far-away planets overrun with exotic fish species fill the Doctor’s mind, Rose quickly comes up with a more efficient solution. One he likely would have overlooked completely, if left to his own devices: to go back in time to catch an abundance of ruki from before the Kaelondaians crash landed here. That way, she says, it won’t affect the ecosystem long-term, and the people won’t have to adjust to a new food source they’re unfamiliar with. Simple, yet brilliant.

Executing the plan turns out to be a little more difficult (and messy) than anticipated, because neither of them has experience with commercial fishing. They end up drenched in seawater and soiled with bait and fish slime, and they lose their entire catch to poor timing and lack of fishing finesse a couple of times before getting it right. All in all, it takes nearly half a day to collect the single barrel it would take proper fishermen a couple of hours to reel in.

But the hard labour and fishy clothes turn out to be worth it for the look on Kenai’s face when they wheel the barrel out of the TARDIS. Struck with disbelief, he smells a couple of fish, and even slices one open with a knife he was hiding somewhere in his skirt (is that what they’re called on the island?) before he believes his eyes, and proceeds to alerts the whole town with a combination of shouting and messengers.

With a grin stretching his cheeks wide and a new glimmer of hope in his crinkled eyes, Kenai instructs Rose and the Doctor to return for a feast at sundown. A substantial appetite worked up from the day of fishing, they agree without hesitation.

Much of the remainder of the day is spent in the lab aboard the TARDIS, manufacturing an antidote to this virus. Notwithstanding her lack of biochemistry training, Rose is an invaluable colleague through every step of their rushed research to development, whether as an extra set of eyes to read through immunology texts or an extra pair of hands during DNA preparation. Her determination to help despite being so new to the field, and her positivity in the face of the first few failures, are nothing short of inspiring. Her smile, and the fact that she’s wearing the extra lab coat and spectacles she pilfered from his desk, certainly make the entire process more enjoyable. And though he pretends to be indignant of her running jokes about his so-called ‘thinking faces,’ he is
secretly chuffed that she knows him well enough to discern minutiae between them (if discrepancies truly exist at all).

They track down an antiviral medication from Umabelie Sector C in the medicinal archives that he thinks should do the trick, and only have to find a way to infuse it into the plants the ruki are eating, and hope it works.

It should, and hopefully without any long-term evolutionary consequences that could result if he were to attempt such an anachronous salvation from microbes on a more ubiquitous species like humans. With any luck, the virus won’t know what hit it and it’ll flicker out of existence, never to be seen by mother nature again.

The TARDIS is, of course, conspicuously overjoyed that he and Rose are getting along. But the Doctor doesn’t hold back from (privately) reprimanding the ship for her behaviour the previous evening any chance he gets.

With such meticulous tasks to occupy their minds and hands the rest of the afternoon, the Doctor’s thoughts never even get a chance to wander to the conversation they had this morning. But concluding he’s better safe than sorry (and somewhat out of force of habit), over the course of the day, he does his best not to give in to any strong emotions. He never wants to endure another embarrassing revelation like this morning again, or to have to break his promise again. If he never feels anything strong enough to transmit, then he’ll never have to do either, right? And the whole argument is moot?

Thankfully, the afternoon passes without a single awkward incident between them. And since Rose doesn’t bring anything up, he assumes she isn’t thinking much about it, either. Either that, or she is equally motivated to strive for some level of stoicism, and agrees that rehashing the conversation would elicit some kind of emotional response from one or both of them.

Regardless, the Doctor is grateful that they have once again been able to fall back into their platonic routine without much trouble.

The treatment ready to go in half the time it would have taken him on his own, they gather up their supplies and head for the ocean to distribute it.

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By the time they emerge from the water, the treatment infused as far as they could swim, the sun is just beginning to set over the horizon.

At the base of the village, a bonfire roars in the centre of a circle of makeshift benches and several impromptu tables of what looks like fish and vegetables. A sizeable crowd of islanders is already gathered around the blaze, some holding spears of food out over the fire, others seated on the scattered logs, waiting for their meals to be prepared. The crackle of burning wood and the clamour of friendly conversation and celebration echoes off the mountains and drifts out to the sea. A welcome invitation to some hard-earned hospitality.

The Doctor and Rose wade briskly back towards the pier to drop their gear back at the hut and reunite with a few items of dry clothing before heading over to the festivities.

Indeed, the crude table setups are laden with countless fresh ruki, falling stacks of whole root vegetables, and mounds of something green and leafy. One of the tables is dedicated to dish preparation, with a task force of culinary-inclined island residents taking freshly cooked fish and vegetables from the spears and pans around the fire and making it presentable for a plate.
Among the chefs is Kenai, a large grin on his face as he greets them and happily hands them both a steaming plate of fish fillets, what looks like a heap of roasted chips in assorted colours, and green salad. The Doctor is glad Rose will finally get a substantial amount of protein in tonight, especially with all the physical and mental exercise they’ve been doing.

It’s not a huge event with the entire village, though the Doctor ensured each and every resident got their share of fish, but Kenai and his family are in attendance, as well as several of their closest friends and community leaders with which they’ve been introduced.

A few people meander up to the log on which the Doctor and Rose have chosen to dine (the one with the best view of the sunset over the water) to thank them, but none of them linger for long, sensing they’re both fatigued from the day. Kalei joins their log after a time, thanking them personally for the ruki and asking them a few questions about the treatment they’ve implemented. The Doctor explains in terms he thinks Kalei will understand, but Rose has to step in a couple of times to translate some of his more technical explanations. (She’d spent many of the hours in the laboratory getting him to simplify the biochemistry down to a more basic level until she was confident she understood the basic principles they were using.)

Kalei soon escorts Rose back to the serving table to get a second helping of chips for her plate (which has been polished clean), but the Doctor has been so busy chatting away about fish and biochemistry he’s barely touched his serving.

But before he can tuck in, a blur of a person jogs into his periphery to take Kalei’s space on the log. The Doctor whirls to the stranger to tell them the seat is taken, but finds it to be none other than Kalei’s secret romantic interest, Dakota.

“Hey, I’m Dakota,” the slightly pudgy, cheerful bloke introduces himself.

He nods in affirmation. “I’m the Doctor.”

“I know,” Dakota says with a little chuckle. “You’re the one who’s trying to save the ruki. And who got us enough for this feast.”

“Well,” the Doctor tilts his head to the side. “I’ve heard a little about you, too.”

“Really?” Dakota’s dark eyebrows shoot up on his forehead. “From who?”

“Oh, erm…” Bollocks, he should not have said that. “Kalei speaks highly of you. You two are friends, right?”

Nice save.

“Yeah,” Dakota agrees with a smile. “Kalei is really great, isn’t he?”

The Doctor raises an eyebrow at his choice of adjective.

“Mmm,” he agrees simply. “So tell me, Dakota, which one’s your favourite?” He gestures to his plate of as of yet untouched multi-coloured chip-looking things.

“The purple ones, definitely.” He nods down to the plate. “They have the best texture.”

“You got it,” the Doctor nods, pulling a purple chip out of the pile with his fingers and popping it in his mouth. “Mhm,” he nods, closing his eyes. Starchy, salty, not too dry or too greasy. A hint of sweetness in the flesh and tanginess on the skin. “Brilliant.” He chews down the last of the large bite before instigating a conversation that doesn’t remotely pertain to Kalei.
“So, how’d you get interested in textiles?” The Doctor thinks better than to use the word ‘fashion’ when speaking with a male.

“My grandfather, actually,” Dakota explains, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “He never used to make clothes, but he made blankets. I always loved helping him pick out the colours and stuffing and everything when I was a kid. He passed away last year.” He gazes into the fire without really seeing it.

“I’m sorry,” the Doctor murmurs, precisely when something catches his eye. The plain, black cord of twine around his neck holds a wooden carving of some kind near the hollow of his throat. Curious what it is, the Doctor leans forward surreptitiously, angling for a better look at the design. But he can’t be certain of his suspicion.

“What’s that on your necklace?” the Doctor asks, abandoning the pretense of subtlety.

“Oh!” Dakota deftly unties it from behind his neck and holds out the carving for the Doctor by the two ends of the string. “It’s a wolf charm.”

It is, indeed.

The Doctor takes the carving gingerly, balancing it on the fingertips of one hand and pulling on his specs before he inspects its surface. It’s far from the flawed, primitive impression of a wild canine that the Doctor expected. Especially considering the residents of the island have never seen a wolf, or even a likeness of one upon which to base such a work of art.

Its noise points to the sky, the bloodcurdling howl from its slightly parted jaws nearly audible amidst the commotion of the gathering. Though its body is frozen in deep brown wood, it seems to possess all the power and majesty of a living wolf. Each strand of its fur seems to ripple in an invisible breeze, and its closed almond eyes seem ready to open and zero in on its prey any second. Though it is seated back on its haunches, one of its front paws is raised, as though reaching for something nearby, or preparing to run when the call for its pack has finished. The Doctor turns the carving over in his hands, inspecting the other features. Down to the paw pads, claws, nostrils, and corners of sharp teeth, the level of detail is astonishing.

“This must’ve taken him all night,” the Doctor mumbles, stroking the shape of one of the ears, tucked back against its fur.

“Kalei made it for me,” Dakota says, sounding a bit confused by the Doctor’s statement. “He gave it to me just a little bit ago, when I got here. Did he tell you about it?” he asks.

“Yeah, just yesterday. He spoke with Rose and me. He hadn’t even started it yet, though.”

“I didn’t realize he finished it so quickly,” Dakota marvels. “He is quite the craftsman, though.”

“Quite,” the Doctor agrees. “This is magnificent.” He gives it one last turn over in his hands before surrendering it back to Dakota.

“Tell me, though, Dakota, how exactly is it that you lot know about wolves?”

“Just stories some of the elders have passed down. Everyone says there were no such things as wolves on Kaelondaia, where we descended from. Some say they made them up. But others believe they exist out there, somewhere. That there’s truth behind the legend. But either way, no one knows where the stories came from. They just suddenly appeared in our history one day. Or, so they say.” He’s quiet for a moment, tying the string back around his neck.
“What do you think?” the Doctor asks quietly, eyes focused intently on Dakota’s.

“I think they’re real. It just… feels like they are. And sometimes…” He’s quiet for a long moment, lost in memories. “Nah, never mind,” he waves an arm, and scoffs a little, like whatever he was about to say is absurd.

“What is it?” the Doctor prods.

“You’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Try me.”

Dakota hums to himself, pondering the Doctor’s expression.

“Every now and then, some of the islanders have said they can hear strange howling sounds at night. The chief and my father say it’s just the wind in the rocks, but some of us believe it’s more.”

“Is that it?” asks the Doctor, unimpressed with the vague anecdote.

“Well, there was one night. I went with Kalei into the forest because he needed to collect some emergency wood for a fire. We heard something. Both of us.” Dakota leans in closer, glancing around them for signs of eavesdroppers, then lets out a low and ferocious, if quiet, growl from his chest. “And not just that. When we were trying to find where the noise came from, we saw something, too. A shadow with golden eyes between the trees.” He points to his own eyes with an ominous gesture.

“We told the whole village, and the chief conducted a search for the mysterious creature. But nothing was ever found. Well, nothing except regular old rodents we see every day. We both got punished for making up stories. So we don’t talk about it anymore. But I think it was something. I don’t know what. The spirits were upset, or trying to tell us something. Who knows.”

The Doctor just gapes at him, unable to keep the horror from his expression.

“See? Told you you’d think we were nuts.”

“I don’t,” the Doctor stammers, contorting his face back to neutral. “I do not think you’re ‘nuts’,;” he uses Dakota’s choice of adjective. “I believe you. Stranger things have happened to me. Just sounds frightening, is all,” the Doctor lies. He can hardly frighten the bloke with a complete history of his chronicles with wolves.

“Psh, oh man was it. Kalei threw his axe at it, and it got stuck in a tree.” He chuckles at the memory. “We didn’t find it until the next morning.”

“When did this happen?”

“About a moon ago, or so?”

“And when did the howling start?”

“A few moons, maybe. Not very long.”

“Hmm.” The Doctor rests his chin in his hand, pondering. What on Earth else could all this mean, other than the obvious? Indigenous people with no prior knowledge of or experience with wolves suddenly adding them to their collective lexicon? Howling at night? Hulking creatures with golden eyes looming in the shadows?
A shiver runs down his spine as a bright yellow light flashes in his mind, whispering ethereal words.

_I can see the whole of time and space … All that is, all that was, all that ever could be …_

“What do you think it means?” Dakota asks, but the Doctor hardly hears him. He shakes his head, trying to dispel the harrowing memories.

_I bring life._

“I don’t know,” the Doctor finally responds, perplexed.

“Yeah, me either.” Staring up at the stars, Dakota lets out a resigned little sigh that indicates he’s content to drop the subject.

All this talk about wolves can’t be a good sign. Something bigger than the two of them is going on here. Bigger than the fish, or even the Kaelondaians. And the Doctor only has one frame of reference for it, but the last time they crossed paths with a Wolf, there was a genocide, the creation of an immortal human, and he ended up dying. Is something equally apocalyptic on the horizon? And this tiny little insignificant island the setting for another mass genocide? Another regeneration he’s burned through too quickly?

Blimey, just when he thought they were taking a break from disaster.

“Did Kalei say anything to you about it?” Dakota asks suddenly.

“How would he make something like this for me? I mean, you said he must have stayed up all night…”

Just as the conversations steers in precisely the direction the Doctor had hoped to avoid, Rose, much to his delight, returns with more chips and overhears what Dakota said.

“Oh, my God he finished it!! Look at it, that’s amazing!” She comes right up to Dakota and reaches out to stroke the wolf charm with her index finger.

Dakota looks shocked by the gesture.

“Sorry, that was rude.” Her face twists into a grimace. “Hi, I’m Rose.” She extends her hand, and Dakota takes it gladly.

“I heard Kalei was making that for you, I was so excited to see it finished.”

“Oh, yeah?” Dakota responds enthusiasm.

The Doctor, thankful for the excuse not to partake in yet another discussion about potential romance, digs into his still mostly full dish of the island’s version of fish and chips. The ruki really does have a remarkable taste; he can understand the island’s obsession with it over all other edible marine creatures, at least to an extent.
Though he’d never admit it, the Doctor had intended to at least eavesdrop on the conversation. But before he can, Kalei runs up and sits to the other side of him.

Rose and Dakota’s voices grow much quieter as a result, barely audible.

“Brought you something,” Kalei announces as he sits down. He holds up a small flower by the stem between his thumb and index finger. Its three swooping petals, and the long filaments extending from its centre, are brilliantly purple. A few tiny green leaves and a cluster of bluish round buds waiting to bloom surround the blossom on a woolly, pink stem.

“What is it?” the Doctor asks, leaning closer to inspect the flower before touching it.


“A what?” he asks, eyes going wide.

“You know, just a little performance booster. Our way of repaying you for your service. I guarantee you two will have the best night of your lives if you share it.”

Presumably, by ‘you two,’ Kalei means him and Rose.

“I… ah… hmm, well…” the Doctor stumbles over a real response as all the blood rushes into his head.

“Enjoy your night,” Kalei says simply, patting him twice on the back before returning to the group of youngsters from whence he came.

The Doctor immediately swivels around to Rose seeking solace, but her conversation with Dakota isn’t quite finished.

“I’ve never even liked anyone before this,” Dakota says in a hushed tone. “I thought maybe I never would. All my friends have had… I mean, they’ve been with people, but. I never really found anyone I wanted. Not until I got to know Kalei.”

Well now. That is something a Gallifreyan such as himself can relate to. The Doctor always been staggered by how quickly humans fall in lust, how little substance there is to attraction for them. For him these things take time, they happen on a much deeper level… perhaps he should have indulged Dakota in the conversation after all. Perhaps it’s not the superficial crush he assumed it to be.

Before Rose, the Doctor hadn’t felt this way about anyone in centuries.

“Sounds like he’s really the one,” Rose chimes in.

Dakota doesn’t comment on that one way or another. “He’s my friend, though. I don’t want to lose that.”

“I know. It’s really scary. But this is such a rare thing for you, it sounds like. Do you really want to miss your chance to have something special with him just because you’re afraid?”

The Doctor really doesn’t.

Despite the nagging fear that something terrible may be about to happen here, something
cataclysmic enough to carry a supernatural warning, the Doctor doesn’t want to dwell on it. Whatever it is, he and Rose will make it through together. There’s been nothing so far that they haven’t been able to conquer as a team. It isn’t the fear of a grave, cosmic accident that plagues him. Never has been.

What Rose said this morning, regarding the inevitability of a physical relationship if they continue this telepathic endeavour, comes to the forefront of his mind once more. The Doctor would never willingly ingest an aphrodisiac, but he is starting to wonder just how much longer he can stave off what they’re obviously headed for. With everything that has been brewing between them the past few days, simmering beneath the surface as they’ve kept busy with other things, it’s getting harder and harder to deny that it’s something they both want.

Tuning back into his surroundings, the Doctor realises that Dakota hasn’t yet responded.

“’Sides, I really do think he likes, you too,” Rose continues, not bothered by his reticence.

“Really?” the boy perks up.

Rose nods. “You should go an’ talk to him. See where it goes.” She tilts her head in the direction of a group across the fire, where Kalei’s curly hair sticks out above the rest. “You don’t have to tell him tonight, but, start giving him clues, you know?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno you could just… tell him he’s strong or handsome or something. In a subtle way, though. Blokes love that. Or I know! Tell him you love the carving and compliment his woodworking skills. A good compliment goes a long way.”

“Okay, yeah, that’s good!”

“Go an’ get ‘im,” she nods over to Kalei.

Dakota leaps to his feet.

“Thanks Rose,” he beams at her. “See you!”

The Doctor watches as Dakota walks off, affecting a swagger (no doubt to impress Kalei), and can’t help but wish him luck. He’s quite a likeable bloke, much like most of the people they’ve met on the island.

“Ready to head back?” he asks Rose when she turns to him.

“Yep,” she agrees, and they both get to their feet. “What’s that?” she asks, gesturing down to the flower still in his hand.

“Agh,” he calls out with revulsion. He had completely forgotten about the flower while listening to Dakota and Rose. Suddenly paranoid the compounds will be absorbed through his skin somehow, with a quick flick of his wrist, he flings the flower into the wind to be carried off into the ocean.

“What was it?” she asks again, watching it swirl through the night breeze in the firelight.

“A flower, is all.” He holds out his hand for hers. “Kalei told me it was good luck to throw it in the sea.”
Um so I got really excited and posted before I went to bed? Technically it's after midnight now though so it's okay ;) I really love this chapter guys. I really hope you do too.

I am going to jokingly recommend putting on katy perry's "E.T." at some point as you read this. Okay 60% jokingly.

... 50%. Okay I'm not joking.

Also, kudos to anyone who spots the not-super-subtle Pixar reference embedded herein.

The Doctor is uncharacteristically quiet as he and Rose amble towards the pier, hand in hand. The attendance and noise level of the gathering behind them dwindle as residents head home stuffed with food, so there is little more than the softly crashing waves and their lazy footfalls in the sand to interrupt the silence.

But each time Rose glances over at him, dreading to see his expression tainted with the melancholy that would normally accompany such silence, he looks neither upset nor forlorn. He looks merely… pensive. A little nervous. She knows the look fairly well: it’s the one she often sees when he’s been given new information he doesn’t know what to do with. When he’s faced with a decision he can’t make on the fly, a problem he can’t solve with a flick of a screwdriver setting. It makes Rose morbidly curious about what he and Dakota discussed while she was absent.

“Dakota’s a sweet bloke, isn’t he?” Rose muses aloud in an attempt to broach the subject.

“Yeah,” the Doctor responds simply, more as an acknowledgement than an agreement.

Undeterred by his lack of enthusiasm, Rose continues.

“I hope he and Kalei can give it a go.” Rose is quite taken with the prospective pair, she has to admit.

The Doctor is quiet for a few paces, staring down at the sand with his eyebrows pulled together.

“Mmm,” he eventually concedes, nodding infinitesimally.

Guessing he may not relish the subject matter, she tries a different course as they trudge up the stairs to the boardwalk.

“Mad about the wolf charm, though, hm?” she asks.

“Oh, yeah,” he perks up a little. “Wasn’t it brilliant?”

“I dunno how he finished it so fast.”
“Nor me. I can’t imagine the sort of tools he had to use.”

“How does he know about wolves at all, though?” Rose prods.

“I don’t know,” he confesses, shaking his head with disappointment.

“You don’t think…” she trails off as the two words that followed them around for over a year flash in her mind.

The Doctor slows their pace further, falling quiet again. In the flickering light of the torches that line the boardwalk, she catches a hint of apprehension in his eyes.

“It’s a bit unlikely.” The admission sounds strange, almost forced, without the usual air of certainty he bolsters his theories with. Normally, in such a circumstance, he’d be saying it was ‘impossible.’ It’s one of the Doctor’s favourite words, and for him not to use it now feels significant somehow.

But before Rose can press him on it, they’ve reached the door to the hut, and she becomes less concerned with the answer. For a short awkward moment, they loiter a few feet from the door, and Rose wonders if the Doctor is working up the courage to take his leave, or brainstorming for an activity to occupy the remainder of the night. She is fiercely hoping for the latter, but she isn’t yet sure how much their conversation this morning may have set back their progress.

“I was wondering, erm…” the Doctor begins, staring at the door rather than her face. “Would it be all right if I… stayed with you tonight?”

Oh!

After a quiet moment of initial shock at his request, Rose quickly agrees.

“Yeah.” She beams at him. “I’d like that.”

He smirks a little in response.

“Good.”

She nods and lets them both inside. Before they can stand uneasily by the bed waiting for the other to suggest something to do, Rose remembers how badly she needs a shower before she gets anywhere near the clean linens. Certainly before they do anything more intimate than hand-holding.

“Is it all right if I have a shower, though? I still feel a bit gross from all the… fish and everything.”

“Oh, erm... Sure, yeah.” He scratches behind his head, not making eye contact.

What, is he worried she’s about to invite him to join her?

“You’re welcome to use it after me,” she offers as she gathers some of her clothes from the suitcase by the bed. Making it clear she doesn’t intend for it to be a joint activity.

He lets out a breathy little chuckle and rubs behind his neck.

“Better go and get a change of clothes then.” He points his thumb in the direction of the door.

“’Kay,” she nods, resigned. There are no clothes in her suitcase remotely appropriate for a man his height she could offer to prevent him leaving.
“Right, then, enjoy your shower. See you in a tic,” he promises, and is out the door before she can say another word.

Rose can’t help but fear he won’t return. But she shakes her head to dispel the intrusive suspicion as she slips off her sandals and pads into the loo, because there is no precedent for that. The Doctor may be flighty, but he isn’t heartless. If he was going to leave for the night, he would say so. She’s certain of it. With everything that’s happened the last few days, she trusts him now more than ever to tell her the truth.

Besides, he’s the one who asked to spend the night. It’s not like she laid out an argument to convince him.

In all honesty, Rose hadn’t spent much time considering what the evening could have in store before it snuck up on them. For much of the day, any stray thoughts were focused on pushing down inklings of arousal and proclivities for romance, on the off chance the Doctor would pick up on the smallest frequency. But in the brief moments that she did ponder tonight, she assumed things would go down much the same as the night before. They could maybe practice telepathy some more, but they’d part ways before anything got too intimate. She thinks she may have finally gotten through to him this morning, but didn’t allow herself to hope he’d only need a matter of hours to reconsider anything else.

It’s only when Rose is covered head to toe in suds that she realizes the Doctor could have intended something more than sleeping when he asked to stay the night. What if he did take everything she said this morning to heart, and, finding no flaw in her logic, genuinely changed his mind? Has he, in his own subtle, unconventional way, asked whether she’d like to sleep with him? Should she be prepared for some kind of Gallifreyan courtship ritual after they’ve both showered? Or will she have to instigate the whole thing, introduce him to any uniquely human aspects of sex that he may be unfamiliar with?

Escalating into a panic she desperately hopes he won’t be able to detect, Rose scrubs over her hair and body a second, and then a third time, until there is no chance whatsoever that any fishy smell remains in her pores. After applying conditioner, she realises that her legs, though recently shaven, are not nearly smooth enough for the Doctor to touch. Whether they’ll be shagging or just cuddling, the two-day-old stubble imparts an unacceptable texture. Glancing under her arms, she finds the same situation there and sighs to the ceiling. Turning off the faucet, she covers herself in shaving cream from toe to hip and sits on the edge of the tub to get to work.

After an eternity spent in the shower, she approaches the single mirror in the loo. Her skin looks terrible from all the salt and sun exposure. She plucks a few strays from her eyebrows before applying some face mask. While the white gloop hardens, she reaches for her lotion – a sweet citrus cream she always uses after a day in the sun – and applies it over her whole body. Once the mask is rinsed off and a touch of lotion applied to her cheeks, too, she examines her reflection once more.

The twisted-up towel atop her head has to go. She pulls it off and shakes out her hair, wet and scraggly. She runs a comb through it to tame it, only for it to look sadly flat and lifeless. Stepping back from the mirror, she takes a violent bow towards the floor and snaps back up again to toss her hair quickly back and forth, giving it some volume. She twists some of the tendrils around her face with her finger, giving a general ringlet shape to the damp mess. Not like she can run a hairdryer or other styling appliance in a bathroom with no electricity.

With a sigh, she realizes she’s still naked. She brought only four items of clothing into the loo with her, aside from undergarments: a pair of vividly red cotton shorts, a white camisole, baggy black
sweatpants, and a holey, threadbare The Clash t-shirt. She’d been planning on wearing the latter two to sleep before the Doctor turned the night upside down. But on impulse, she had brought both outfits, thinking it would be easy to decide what would be most appropriate to wear once she had cleared her head in the shower. And she can hardly go scour her suitcase for more options; she took so long in the shower that the Doctor may have already returned. He could be out there waiting on the bed right now. Walking out of the loo in nothing but a towel is not an option anymore.

But she still has no idea which to choose.

The skimpier selection, to help his imagination along? She can certainly play it off as normal, with the temperate weather on the island. After all, she’s worn similar clothes as pyjamas on the TARDIS before, and the Doctor has never seemed distracted, bothered (much to her chronic dismay), or disappointed by the choices.

But maybe she should go with the sweats, just so she doesn’t seem presumptuous? Surely it’d be rude to make assumptions about what he meant, and parade around those lewd assumptions under his nose. There’s a chance it could make him incredibly uncomfortable if she isn’t dressed for the correct occasion.

But what is the correct occasion? Sleeping? In which case she’s a bit overdressed for a tropical island in sweatpants? Or if they continue to practice the telepathy, shouldn’t she be wearing something more indicative of the importance of that event to him? Something appropriate for a date?

Blimey, she’s going completely mad.

It’s not like they haven’t shared a bed before. It’s never been horribly awkward, and he’s never even commented on her choice of sleepwear, much less made an issue of it. She’s turning something that should be simple into something stressful and complicated. Funny, he’s normally the one with the knack for that.

No matter what happens tonight, it’ll be great. This is her best friend in the universe she’s talking about. Just sleeping next to him is a simple pleasure she cherishes each time.

As a compromise with herself, she pulls on the sweatpants and the camisole. Cute, but not presumptuous. Last minute, she brushes her teeth while she musters the courage to emerge from the loo.

When she finally pulls aside the curtain to the bedroom, the Doctor is lying on his stomach on top of the duvet, glasses perched on his nose, sonicking a small device with an intense look of concentration. Fresh product glistens in his damp hair, pristinely styled, and his clothes are different. A baby blue shirt and brown shorts to replace the dark blue ones, both crisp and dry.

He must have showered at the TARDIS while she was in there. She should’ve guessed. Sharing a bed for the night is one thing; sharing a shower, even at separate times, is another entirely. To be honest, though, she’s glad she doesn’t have to sit on the bed and wait for him knowing he’s naked and wet in the next room.

She shakes her head and forces out the thought. Good mental behaviour tonight is the goal. She’s certain, after all, the only reason he brought along a project is to keep his own mind busy to avoid similar thoughts.

“What are you workin’ on?” She asks as she approaches the desk tentatively.
He pats the mattress next to him, and she comes around and flops onto her stomach, careful to leave about a foot of space between them.

“A prototype of artificial gills that will work in any water. It’s easy to filter breathable air if there is enough dissolved oxygen. But I know of several planets where that isn’t the case. I have so many of these lying around, thought it’d be worth experimenting on one.”

The device is barely identifiable, deconstructed on the bed, but now that Rose knows what it is, she recognises a few of the pieces. She watches him work for a few minutes, mesmerised as always by the determined focus in his eyes and the tireless precision of his hands.

“Trouble is,” he suddenly continues, as though he hadn’t taken several minutes’ pause. “How to perform electrolysis on a nano scale without electrocuting the user. And how to sequester and re-release the molecular hydrogen without affecting the oxygen supply.” He quickly reassembles a few of the pieces, but deliberately leaves the cover off.

“Hold on.” He suddenly leaps off the bed, leaving the device behind, and skips out onto their private terrace.

He emerges from the shell curtain mere seconds later, his hand cupped in the air.

As he gets closer, Rose sees that he has a little pool of seawater in his palm. He climbs onto the bed carefully on his knees and picks up the device, holding it up near his face. Carefully, he lets a small stream of water drip onto a network of clear noodles mixed with coloured wires. As soon as the first drop hits the inside, the Doctor yelps in pain and the object falls from his hand, sparking and sizzling as wisps of steam trickle out of it. In the process, he must have flinched his water-bearing hand, because there’s a new dark stain of water spreading on the blanket.

“That is exactly what should not happen,” he laments, shaking out his shocked hand a few times.

“You all right?” she asks.

“Yeah.” More cautiously, he flicks the device to ensure it isn’t still carrying a charge. “That’d have hurt a lot more if it were someone’s lips, though.”

“Yikes.” Rose touches her hand to her lips as she feels a psychosomatic tingle just thinking about it. Before she can help it, a huge yawn escapes her, and though she tries to cover it with her hand, the Doctor notices quickly.

“Little sleepy?” he asks jokingly.

“No,” she lies, just as her lungs betray her and she lets out another yawn.

He just smirks.

“You can sleep,” he suggests, gathering the pieces of the gills in his arms and climbing off the bed.

“’M not tired,” she insists, this time successful in holding back another yawn.

“It’s all right,” he says, setting the pile of things on the desk against the wall. “I, erm… I’m not actually that tired yet, so I may just… walk ‘round a bit until I am.” He clasps his hands behind his back, rocking on his heels. “Join you a bit later.”

Here is the escape plan she’s been anticipating the past hour. Her first theory is definitely correct,
then: not ready. Already second-guessing the whole thing. He can bypass the entire temptation if he waits until she is actually asleep to lie next to her. The safest way possible to progress forward without disappointing her, or so it seems he has convinced himself. But the best parts of sharing a bed don’t happen while you’re asleep. It’s the stuff leading up to sleep that counts the most: the whispered conversations about the future, snuggling close under the covers, nuzzling noses and sleepy kisses. But perhaps all that is precisely what he’s trying to avoid.

She thinks he may just be falling back on his old fear that she’s going to somehow force herself on him, uncontrollable ape that she is. But she thought they put that myth to rest the previous night, when for once, he was the uncontrollable one, and she was the innocent victim. But rather than bring up an incident that causes him clear embarrassment, she decides to offer him some reassurance.

“Nothing has to happen,” she says softly, and the Doctor redirects his attention away from the door and back to her, intrigued. “You know that, right?” He doesn’t speak, but shifts his eyes from her face down to the bed a few times, pondering. “We can just be together. We’ve done that before, yeah? Lots of times.”

He opens his mouth to speak, but thinks better of it, and closes it again without a word.

“I don’t want to push you, but you asked to spend the night, and so you can. That can be all there is to it, if you want.”

Finally, he exhales with relief, tension leaving his body with the expelled air.

“Oh,” he agrees, nodding. “To be honest, I am knackered. I haven’t slept since we’ve been here.”

Rose scoots to the far side of the bed and wriggles under the covers before patting the other side with a tentative smile.

He starts unbuttoning his shirt, and Rose tries to play it cool. It’s not like she’s going to explode. And it’s definitely not like she’s imagining watching him continue in this fashion until he strips off everything and prowls onto the bed completely nude.

He’s got a shirt on underneath, of course. Rarely without his superfluous layers. A plain white tee that barely meets up with the hem of his brown shorts. Swiping off his glasses, he quickly folds them up and sets them on the bedside table before pulling back the duvet and climbing into bed next to her. She fidgets around trying to find a comfortable position while he gets situated, distracting herself to keep both her hands and mind from wandering. Moving things along too quickly in any respect would likely leave a bad taste in his mouth over the whole concept of intimacy. And a stray randy thought could accomplish that in a second flat.

Finally finding a comfortable spot on her back, she pulls the covers up to her chin and glances over at him. He’s lying on his side, propped up on his elbow, staring down at her with curiosity in his eyes. She thought it safe to assume the Doctor would want a stereotypically platonic sleeping arrangement, to minimize pillow talk and ease him into the habit. But finding him amicable to interaction, she forgoes that plan and turns over onto her side too, matching his position.

Does he want to talk? Stare at her for a while? She has wanted all day to reunite their minds, but after this morning’s debacle, has been too afraid to ask. She had come to terms with the fact that he would almost certainly need time to recover from that before he’d be willing to give it another go. But the way he’s looking at her now, she thinks he might be as impatient to get back to it as she is.
“I was thinking, I mean, if you wanted we could...?” She touches her temple with a few fingers.

“Oh, I’d love it.” He grins. A real, contagious Doctor-y grin.

Rose smiles back, ecstatic that he’s still invested in this. But, she’s still unsure of where to begin in these situations, so she waits for him to initiate properly.

“There are a few things I think we need to practice,” the Doctor begins, taking a more serious tone. Oh.

“Okay,” she agrees, hesitant. Does he have a lecture planned out this time? A syllabus for what he hopes she will learn tonight?

“Aside from what we... erm... discussed earlier,” he says, pulling on his ear. “I’d like you to become more comfortable with this. To an extent, it’ll just take time, but there are a few things we can do to help speed the process along.”

“Right.” She nods. “Sorry, again,” she offers, still wracked with guilt that he had to witness any level of discomfort from her. It felt like her body was betraying her by rejecting him on any level.

He shakes his head, though.

“No need to apologize. It doesn’t say anything about your intentions. Most people who lack intrinsic telepathic abilities experience some discomfort. And I’d rather you were honest with me.”

“Sort of impossible not to be, isn’t it?”

“Quite.” He chuckles softly. “Is it all right if I...?” He reaches out a hand tentatively.

“Yeah,” she rushes out. “D’you want me to... erm, how should I...?”

“However you’ll be most comfortable.”

She’s won’t be comfortable like this for long, propped on her side. But she hardly thinks she can lie on her back and invite the Doctor to roll on top of her to get started. So she pushes the blanket down and pulls herself up into a sitting position, crossing her legs and angling her body towards him. In response, he mimics her movements, sitting up and sliding closer to her, until his bony knees bump against hers.

Closing her eyes, she gnashes her teeth to keep them from chattering as she waits for him to start. She can’t bear to look at his face, so close to hers, without imploding. Palms already slick with sweat, she reaches out to rest her hands on the fabric of his shorts, resisting the urge to climb higher. She takes a few deep breaths through her nose, but this, too, is to her detriment: she inhales a big whiff of his frosty pine cologne, the fruity mist of his hair products, and a hint of mint on his breath. (He must have brushed his teeth, too.) It makes the thought of snuggling up closer to him that much more appealing.

Lost in thoughts of his scent and her sweaty hands on his shorts and fantasies of what it’ll be like this time, she flinches a little when his fingertips finally brush the sides of her face, hypersensitive to the sudden touch.

“All right?” he whispers, stroking his thumbs ever so lightly back and forth on her skin.

“Yeap,” she blurts out, an accidental cross between ‘yeah’ and ‘yep.’
He takes just a few more seconds to prepare himself, then the tempest begins.

Centuries of time and space trickle through his digits, until the Doctor is everything around her, a warm, heavy blanket that envelops her in its secure embrace. No less so than the previous evening, however, the familiar inflating sensation pervades her mind until it suddenly feels fit to explode. She can’t find a place to settle and focus, overwhelmed by two dissonant trains of thought, too many memories and sensations. The heightened anticipation of the moment is quickly shattered by the unpleasant push-pull in her brain: her subconscious trying to eject the foreign consciousness while her conscious mind clings onto it. Her hands clench into fists on his shorts as she grits her teeth and fights to use sheer willpower to defeat her body’s automatic reaction, tugging back on tendrils of the Doctor’s mind as her every instinct tries to send them away.

“You’re going about this the wrong way,” the Doctor says aloud, and it startles her.

The pressure recedes as his hands fall from her face, and her eyes fly open to see consternation written across his features. It’s not disappointment so much as… a bit of remorse? It must be horribly difficult for him, to not have this be easy and natural for her, as it probably was for everyone else he’s done it with. It’d be like her trying to show him how to enjoy something simple like a hug or kiss (if, hypothetically, Time Lords didn’t do that sort of thing) only to discover it caused him physical discomfort.

“Lie back,” he nods his head towards the pillows.

“Wha –” She hesitates, searching his face for an explanation.

“You’re very anxious.”

Hearing him say it that way doesn’t help matters. She swallows hard as her heart races in her throat, but nonetheless heeds his advice, sliding down the sheets until her head rests against the pillow.

“Now just close your eyes. Try to relax.”

It’s not easy to relax with him right beside her, on the bed, but Rose does her best.

“Take a few deep breaths,” he instructs. “Let go of the tension in your muscles.”

Really? Is this telepathy or meditation?

“Why is this –” she begins to ask.

“Your body and mind are connected,” he explains. “If you’re holding tension in your body, you’ll be carrying it in your mind, too.”

With a sigh, she tries to heed his advice. Checks in with each of her muscle groups to ensure they aren’t clenched up or tense anywhere. Takes a few more slow breaths. Loath though she is to admit it, she starts to feel a little less anxious.

She hears him readjust on the bed, and feels him lean over close, his chest hovering close to hers, before his fingers come to rest on her temples again.

“Trying to defeat your body’s natural response with brute force won’t be effective. The more you try to fight it, the more you tense up, the more uncomfortable it’ll be.” He quiets his voice further. “Just relax. I’ll go slowly.”
When his presence starts to infiltrate her mind again, distending and invading, Rose keeps breathing deeply, focusing on keeping her body relaxed. And, to her surprise, the sensation changes with the Doctor’s advancements: she feels her mind stretch and expand to accommodate him. The painful pressure from before doesn’t flare up again as he pushes in further.

“That’s better, hm?” he encourages. “Almost there.”

Despite her valiant attempts to ignore the recurring sexual undertones in his advice, at this point her mind finally slips, and she can’t help but imagine the words spoken in a different context. It’s only for a fleeting, guilty moment, but it’s unmistakable, and she bites her lip and waits for his wrath.

He sighs aloud.

“Humans. Everything has to be sexual.” She can hear the condescension in his voice, feel the low current of disappointment from his mind.

“You still like us though, don’t you?” she asks sheepishly, hoping he’ll remember the last time she asked.

“Still love ya,” he answers quickly.

Her thoughts bend towards Rome on cue, and in the rush of memories, they both quickly forget about the incident.

For a few more moments, she continues to adjust as he pours his mind into hers, and she’s surprised that she doesn’t feel any discomfort this time. Could it really be that she’s been too stressed out, and it’s her own fault she hasn’t been able to enjoy this to its fullest potential?

“Don’t think of it that way,” the Doctor responds to her musings. “It’s my fault. I should’ve been more proactive. Taught you how to prepare yourself properly.”

She mentally shrugs, unsure how to respond without either piling blame onto him he doesn’t deserve or berating herself a little more.

They linger for a few moments, and she feels even more comfortable than yesterday.

“How does it feel?”

Rose can’t help but giggle.

“Oh, blimey.” She can’t see the Doctor roll his eyes, but she can easily translate the annoyance that suddenly flashes inside her, the mental equivalent of an eye roll.

“Don’t you already know how it feels, anyway?” she asks.

“Well, yes. But you’re new to this. I figure it’s easiest if we supplement with verbal communication, at least until you’re more adjusted.”

If you prefer, though, we can speak in here, his voice echoes quietly in her mind.

What do you prefer? she asks, trying to adjust to the unfamiliar task. So often, her inner thoughts are jumbles of pictures and memories and words, rather than strings of coherent speech. Thinking consistently in complete sentences will take some getting used to.

I find this way a bit more immersive.
He’s right. Without the distraction of noise in her ears, it’s easier to stay focused on the mental, how he feels. How they fit together.

She blushes at yet another double entendre, ruining the stillness anyway.

*Can’t blame me for that one, says the Doctor.*

*All right, that one was on me.*

They’re both silent for a few moments, acclimating themselves to their environment. She can’t feel much of his emotions or thoughts, only flickers and murmurs as long as they’re primarily in her mind, but it’s still lovely, having him so close. With him, she’s freer than she’s ever been, but she’s secure. He’ll take her to the edges of the universe and ask nothing in return, but he’ll throw himself in front of a Dalek sooner than let her get hurt. As the moments go on, he settles comfortably in her mind, filling every tiny recess of idle thought with his presence. It’s a presence that screams incongruity with life on Earth. Alien. Close to infinite. It’s bold and courageous yet so insecure, nerdy but unbearably sexy in a way that’s distinctly the Doctor. It’s a little bit brown and blue, a little bit tall and skinny, but it’s also military cropped hair, a leather jacket and arctic blue eyes. Her ruler of time, her friend, her heart. Her Doctor.

Abruptly, the quiet, calm ambiance inside her mind explodes.

Thousands of memories flash behind her eyes at once: emotions, faces, environments play in rapid sequence, turning to ashes as quickly as they’re formed. The first time she spit up pureed vegetables onto a bib; the day she scraped her knee falling off a skateboard; the night she first kissed a boy; the horrible anachronous day when her dad died; the previous night, when she touched herself thinking of the Doctor.

Some of the memories she couldn’t have remembered if her life depended on it: she was too young. But suddenly she remembers them all with clarity, though the recollections only last a split second apiece.

And the landscape transforms again. Suddenly she’s seeing things she’s never lived through. Sitting with her mum and dad in a large sitting room, a fireplace crackling in the background. Sprinting down a street littered with collateral damage, a huge gun slung over her shoulder. Sitting with the Doctor out on a balcony, drinks in their hands, hair speckled with grey and faces wrinkled with decades of aging. Another image of the two of them just as they are now, on a planet she doesn’t recognize, a landscape with brilliantly blue grasses and trees and a sparkling crystal castle inviting them forward.

A bright flash of golden light pollutes the last image, and suddenly her head is killing her.

And then it’s all gone. The visions, the pain, the Doctor.

He’s broken the connection again.

“Sorry,” he rushes out, chest heaving. “I’m sorry. I… I took it too far.”

“What happened?” she asks, bewildered by everything she just saw. What were those things she’s never seen before? Glimpses into a parallel universe? Visions of the future? Mere manifestations of her brain’s ambiguous desires for what she wants her future to be?

“You were thinking of me. That has… a very strong effect on me.” He gasps out a few more breaths before he regains his composure. “Mentally, I’m much more powerful than you are. And if I don’t keep myself under control, I can access things fairly easily. Not just thoughts but… deeper
“Was that stuff… was that the future?”

“Possible futures. Nothing is set in stone yet,” he explains in a rush, purposely staying ambiguous. “Rose, I’m so sorry. You shouldn’t have seen those things. I shouldn’t have gone deeper like that without asking. It’s unacceptable. Please forgive me.”

“It’s okay,” she reaches out her hands for one of his.

He takes them greedily, and bows his head down to kiss her knuckles, wordlessly grateful for the forgiveness.

“When you think about me, it… I can’t describe it how it feels, but it’s… incredible. And I got caught up. I wanted more. I’m sorry.” He exhales warmly onto her hands, shaking his head in disappointment at himself.

“Doctor, it’s okay. Trust me. I’m fine. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is. But I promise, it won’t happen again. Not without your consent.”

“Okay,” she agrees, figuring it’s better to agree than to keep on uselessly arguing about it. He’ll never change his mind. “I forgive you,” she emphasizes, this time without downplaying the transgression. “Maybe, since I’m workin’ on staying relaxed and getting used to it, you can work on… that?”

To her surprise, he nods.

“Of course.”

He’s treating this so seriously. If she had a better background in telepathy, she’d probably already know all these rules, but it’s difficult for her to feel scandalized about something she didn’t know was wrong. The truth is she relates to his struggle to control himself fully, because she’s having trouble doing the same thing, if in a different respect. She wants to go too far physically, he wants to go too far mentally… they’re quite the pair, aren’t they?

“Anyway…” He clears his throat, gathering himself still. “I think another thing we should work on is emotions. Getting used to experiencing them through each other’s eyes. I know it sounds tedious, but…”

“It doesn’t sound tedious,” she says.

“Well,” he pauses. “It will be useful to us both, I think. To be able to differentiate whose are whose, when we’re going about the day. Normally, like I said, something like this isn’t necessary, because the sort of longer-distance connection that we have would never be active at this early a stage. But…” He shrugs.

“Sounds good to me,” she agrees.

“Right. I’ll go first, then, only fair.” He lifts his hands carefully, bringing them to either side of her face. “Ready?”

Rose closes her eyes again, inhaling and exhaling slowly to try to ease back into a more relaxed state.
It’s easier, this time, when he invites her in. He beckons her forward with open arms, and she runs to him. Once she’s there, embraced in the vast, ticking expanse of his mind, it suddenly becomes clear to Rose that the Doctor never wants to see her depart. In her presence, the machinery inside his head almost kicks up a notch, like it was chugging along missing a gear but now it is complete.

Suddenly, the comfortable atmosphere around her warps into something else entirely. Flames burn from beneath her skin. Her heart pounds wildly in her chest. Hands clench into fists and molars grind against one another. The urge to growl, to punch something, to exact revenge foams up inside her. And yet, she knows the feeling doesn’t belong to her. It’s a fury like she’s never experienced on her own: it feels old. Violent. Powerful. Tinged red with blood.

She does remember a time when she felt this way before. That night in the library, after the Wire, when she had stormed out on the Doctor when he might’ve been about to kiss her.

_Anger_, she says.

_Yes_. Somehow, even in his head, he’s able to pop the ‘p.’

_I’ve felt this before. In the library, when I left you…_

_That’s why you left?_

_I felt so angry, Doctor. And I had no idea why! I couldn’t explain it._

_I didn’t realise this went back that far… is that the first time you felt something?_

 _Yeah, think so._

They’re both quiet for a moment, organising their own thoughts and memories in light of the new information.

_But if it was you… she begins. Why were you angry, then?_

_I was thinking about what they did to you. The Wire had taken your face, and they just put you out in the street like that, defenceless… they basically left you for dead._

The fire of rage courses through them both anew like molten iron: glowing orange, hot, rushing through their veins… seeking an outlet. Demanding vengeance.

But as soon as it came, it’s gone. The Doctor douses the flames in water, squelches it out.

Enough of that, _hm?_

_Yes_, she agrees. Feeling angry really is damaging to a person’s soul.

The environment around her changes again, becomes warm and bright and tranquil. A smile spreads across her face, and she wriggles her toes and hums aloud because it’s so pleasant. It’s that electricity that hums in your veins when you listen to your favourite song on loud; it’s punching the air after scoring a perfect 100 on an exam; it’s ice cream cake with your best friend on a perfect day. It’s the Doctor’s hand in hers as an endless day stretches out before them, filled with new wonders and sights yet to bring them joy.

_Happiness_, she guesses.

_Easy, isn’t it?_
Yeah.

*It can be difficult when we’re apart, to recognise an emotion isn’t yours. But once you learn what these things feel like to the other person, it’s easier to differentiate between theirs and your own.*

_Between yours and mine, you mean?_  
_I was speaking generally._

_An ’I was speaking literally._

_Clever._

They carry on in this manner for a while, the Doctor summoning an emotion for Rose to get acquainted with in this close context. They can’t cover every single specific emotion he will ever experience, but they cycle through the biggest players, dedicating a sufficient window of time to each: sadness, fear, disgust.

Rose begins to realise how heavily the negative emotions outnumber the positive, joyful ones. But it’s an important thing they’re doing, getting to know one another better, so she endures each one without complaint. When the Doctor feels they’ve covered enough of the spectrum to start with, he starts to push back against her mind.

_Your turn?_

She doesn’t answer him directly, but allows him shift their positions, allowing herself to be led backward, retreating from his mind, leading him into her own. The transition is wonderfully seamless compared with the first time they did it. Rose suspects it’s because they’ve been connected for some time now, and she is more accustomed to him now. Once he is comfortably situated inside her mind, she feels one of his hands slip from her head, but their connection doesn’t falter.

_Don’t need both anymore_, he explains.

_How much do you need?_ she wonders.

_Some contact will always be essential for deeper things like this. Touch telepath, after all. But with time, I won’t always need to touch here._ He indicates her temple. _This is where your electrostatic signature is the most intense. But once I’ve become more attuned to you, any skin contact will suffice._

A few awkward moments pass where neither of them speaks, and Rose isn’t sure where to start. Introducing him to every one of her most private emotions is quite the daunting task.

_I already know what nervousness feels like_, the Doctor quips. _No need to show me that one again._

_Oi! I don’t even know where to start. I mean, what do I do, exactly?_  
_Well, which one do you want to start out with?_  
_I dunno, I guess the same one you did?_

_Okay. Anger. Well, it’s quite simple. All you really have to do is recall the last time you were really, properly angry. The mere memory of an emotion can invoke it anew, with an intensity comparable to that which was initially experienced._
A time she was really, properly angry… well, that’s easy. When she found out the Doctor had willingly jumped into the pit with the Devil-creature. Could’ve died because of his own morbid curiosity, and she would have been left in the middle of bloody space with no way back home. Abandoned by the last person she could count on. He’s right: just remembering it now, and how he had been so cavalier about it afterward, saying ‘well, Rose, it’s a good thing I did!’ makes her blood boil. Reckless sod of an alien.

Woah, the Doctor interjects. *You didn’t have to choose a time you were angry with me.*

Well, she maintains, *I was very cross.*

*I remember. Though I don’t remember it being quite so intense.*

*I held back.*

*Ta.*

They go through some of her emotions in the same manner they did the Doctor’s, hitting the same major ones to maintain a sense of continuity. To have a reference for comparison for each of them.

*Were those Choulal bugs really that revolting?* he asks, after witnessing her chosen reference for disgust.

Yes. *When we got back to the TARDIS I threw up just thinkin’ about it.*

*Weak stomach.*

*You’re the one who used my mum in yours. Pretty pleasant, as far as disgusting things go.*

*She kissed me on the lips, Rose!*

*All right, all right. Fine.*

*Thank you for sharing with me,* he says, steering them away from the little tangent.

*‘Course. You did the same.*

*Most emotions are variations on the ones we’ve already been over,* he explains, without commenting on her observation. *Or combinations of them, with different intensity. Recognising the more complex ones will be trickier, but you’ll get it with time.*

*Really, you think it all boils down to these five?*

*Well,* he draws out the word like he would out loud. *With a few exceptions, yeah.*

*Excitement?*

*A variation of happiness.*

*Jealousy?*

*Anger, sadness, disgust.*

*Nervousness?*

*Variation of fear.*
What about if someone’s turned on?

It always comes back to this with you lot, doesn’t it?

Oi! What do you mean ‘we lot?’ she asks, affronted. Just curious.

Well, that’d be one of the exceptions I mentioned.

Okay, she acknowledges, weary of the twenty questions.

There’s one more thing I’d like to try, if you’re up for it.

What’s that?

I’ve been inside your mind, and you’ve been inside mine. But it’s possible to do both at once. The re’s a sort of... spectrum that exists between the two extremes, along which we could both be inside one another’s mind.

Oh, yeah?

Generally, it’s more convenient for the link to be more balanced, it makes for quicker exchanges of information and sensations. I personally prefer it, save for times when a focus on one person’s mind is needed. Longer, complex memories, that sort of thing.

You want to try it?

I’d like to, yes.

The Doctor slowly pulls back from her mind, and invites her forward. But he doesn’t go too far, doesn’t completely slink out of her mind. She can still feel him, around the edges, and as she cautiously reaches out for him, she finds that though the Doctor hasn’t left her mind, she’s beginning to see inside his, as well. As much as she can still feel his presence, hovering along the edges of her mind, patient and reassuring, she starts to hear his passing thoughts, feel the surface emotions. Nerves simmering with excitement and wonder... and underneath it all, fatigue.

It’s challenging to maintain herself in this in-between state, a balancing act of the passive and the active, opening her mind for its guest and reaching forward, searching for him. It’s a bit like a tug-of-war match out of control, the rope being jerked in opposing directions whenever she slips and accidentally pushes the Doctor further away, or lets her guard down too much and loses her grip on the Doctor’s consciousness. In both cases, though, the tugs of the rope seem to be her fault.

It’s also a challenge to sustain her sense of independence as a person. To separate the thoughts and emotions originating from her own head from the ones coming from his. She’s also quickly losing all sense of certainty which ones are uniquely her own, and which are merely springing up as a reaction to his.

It can be disconcerting, at first, he tries to assuage her concern. It can feel like you’re no longer your own person. I tried to warn you, Gallifreyans never took this lightly. Agreeing to form a connection like this meant sacrificing a measure of individuality.

I didn’t mean for you to hear that, she confesses guiltily.

But I always will, when we’re doing this. The way he says it is almost threatening, like he’s trying to cast some uncertainty on her resolve.
I don’t think it’s a bad thing, she cuts off his negative train of thought. I’m just not used to it, yet.

Mmm, he agrees, accepting her explanation. It’s nice, not having him doubt every affectionate thing she says, since he has a direct line to her thoughts. He can’t assume she’s lying for his benefit, when he can see for himself she’s being genuine. She could really get used to this.

Rose? he asks.

Yeah?

I think we’re done for the night. You’re exhausted.

I am. I’m sorry. She’s a bit relieved, though. It’s the mental sort exhaustion again, a dull ache deep in her head that makes her remaining independent thoughts slowly flicker and die. One by one, all unnecessary mental wavelengths are shut down in her mind’s low power state. She doesn’t know how much longer she can provide hospitality to him, as much as she desperately wants to. She loves having him stay.

Me too.

Slower than last time, more gradually, he pulls out of her mind, patching and sewing up the edges as he goes this time, to make the loss easier to cope with. He does leave behind a bit of sadness, once he’s gone and she’s alone in her mind again. But it’s nothing like the pervading loneliness of the night before, because this time the Doctor is here to stay.

Still hovering just above her, he smiles shyly down at her. He shifts his hand from her face down to her hand, linking their fingers together.

“All right?” he murmurs.

“Mhm,” she nods.

“Tired, though?”

“A bit,” she admits, stretching out her stiff legs.

He moves, just slightly, as though he’s going to let go of her hand and pull away, so she squeezes his hand in an iron grip and tugs his arm. Too hard. He has to catch himself on his other arm before he collapses on top of her.

“I won’t go anywhere,” he promises, guessing it’s what she was trying to avoid.

“Promise?”

For a moment she feels pathetic, begging him like this.

But he smiles as he gently squeezes her hand again, and the fleeting insecurity vanishes.

“Promise.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Ok so, a few things I guess!

- I know it’s not Wednesday, and I’m a couple days late. But I figure it’s better to surprise you guys with a slightly late update than to wait a whole other week when I need to be working on other things!

- Most importantly, my ss fic. I need to get that written/posted asap! So I wanted to post this chapter up so I could focus on that this weekend/next week.

- This is a shorter chap, and it’s sort of a quiet one. But don’t worry, 20 will be a lil longer and there’s exciting stuff on the horizon there! I like to have a balance. But to be fair to myself, this sort of introspection is among my favorite things to write.

- This chap is unbeta’d by others. I did my best to iron out the kinks but I had to call it quits at 2:30. I really just had to get this chapter out there and not push it off any longer because I’ve been really neglecting writing and posting this fic and I miss it like crazy. I think getting a chapter published will help me get back on track. So, it may not be the highest quality ever but I hope you still enjoy.

- It's been a very tough week/month, so go easy on me, even if you don't :P

- Thanks to my readers for your patience and support. <3

Rose must be knackered, because as soon as the Doctor has promised to stay, she’s as good as asleep. Eyes closed, muttering little sighs into her pillow.

Intoxicated as he is by the bonding hormones saturating every cell in his body, he doesn’t think much of it, at first. He’s too busy replaying the last couple hours in his mind. Even his superior Time Lord neurobiology couldn’t process all of it in real time. He spends several minutes floating amidst the bright memories and emotions, drinking in each precious second like a luscious elixir.

Eventually, though, the pleasant inebriation begins to wear off. His galloping heartbeats slow to a more normal rhythm, and the joyful melody chiming in his head gradually fades. Tuning back into the real world, he hears Rose breathing next to him, soft and slow, through the waves quietly crashing against the pier. But rather than soothing him to sleep, too, the peaceful sound sends a sudden wave of panic through him. She must truly be asleep now, or at least close to it.

If she’s asleep, their evening together is officially over.

She hadn’t tried to move closer to him, or asked for a kiss. And somehow in the last few minutes their loosely linked hands were disconnected, too. Now that his head is slightly clearer, the Doctor finds that odd. Is it because she expected him to make a move to elevate this normally platonic bed-sharing experience to the next level? Or it because she’s simply too tired? Though it would be more logical to assume the latter, his stomach sinks with dread that it might be the former.

She said that they didn’t have to do anything tonight, and he trusts her implicitly. But did she really...
mean ‘anything,’ or was she referring to sex, specifically? Was she still expecting other gestures of affection, an unspoken agreement made when he asked to stay the night?

He didn’t even give her a kiss goodnight before she fell asleep.

And since he didn’t make some sort of ‘move’ tonight, will they have another horrible confrontation about his ineptitude tomorrow, perhaps even worse than the one they had today?

She was not only upset this morning, but also very clear about her intentions going forward. About what she wanted. If that exchange was any indication, she’s frustrated, maybe even disappointed, with his hesitancy.

He supposes she’s rightfully frustrated, given everything that’s transpired. She’s been plunged into a serious emotional commitment that’s completely outside the human experience, and on top of that, he’s given her the impression that he’s unwilling to compromise. To use a phrase contemporary to Rose’s time: she’s scratching his back, but he’s not scratching hers.

Then again, the only reason they’re going through with this is at all because Rose wants to. If she had not fallen into despair at the idea of losing this, he would have neglected his repressed desire for it and closed the book on this possibility before it began.

But there’s no use dwelling on a timeline that could have been, because this one is already well under way and he’s too invested to turn back. And anyhow, putting blame on her for a desire she can’t control is hardly fair. Truthfully, all the blame should be on himself: he didn’t catch this thing while it was still nascent and harmless; and thus far he’s been the one in charge of each step forward they’ve taken. He decided when and how they could start. He controls when and how long they interact for. Rose hasn’t been given much choice in any pertinent matters of their relationship (one heart palpitates in his chest at merely thinking that word to himself).

How much longer can she walk this tightrope he has her on? One of these days she’s going to lose her balance, and it won’t be up to him which way she falls.

“Mhh, Doctor?” Rose mumbles blearily, cracking an eye open.

She’s still awake, after all?

“Hmm?” he murmurs back, meeting her one, barely open eye. Nervous that the lecture about his inaction may be starting earlier than he thought.

“You all righ’?” she croaks out.

“Yeah,” he reassures her. But then he sighs. There’s no use lying. Damn, how quickly can he possibly forget that she can pick up on potent emotions now? He must have woken her with his incessant anxiety.

“What is it?” she forces both her eyes fully open and props herself on her elbow, rubbing her fist over one eye.

He matches her position, resting his temple on his fist. For a moment he stares down at her mouth, beautifully pinkish-orange in the soft firelight from the torch, and wonders whether he should skip spilling his hearts out and just kiss her goodnight instead. (A little less conversation, a little more action, he muses to himself.) But for their new telepathic link to function healthily, he’s going to have to start being honest around the clock. And he’s fairly certain that leaving her in the dark with respect to his thought processes would be lying by omission.
“Are you okay with this?” he finally asks.

“With what?” she asks, trying to listen intently despite her lagging alertness.

“Sleeping.” He nods his head towards their pillows.

“Am I okay with sleepin’?” Though she’s tired, she’s sarcastic as ever.

“I mean without…” He swallows hard. “Anything else.” He hopes desperately she will deduce what he means.

But she just squints her eyes, bemused.

“What are you on about?”

“You were,” he clears his throat, “rather upset with me this morning.”

Awareness lights in Rose’s eyes at last.

“’S that what this is about?”

To him, the question comes off as somewhat pejorative. As though he’s making an issue out of a non-issue.

“Were you not?” he retorts, defensive.

“I was. But not…” she trails off.

The Doctor is quiet, chewing the inside of his cheek. Rose takes a deep breath, eyebrows pulling together.

“I wasn’t upset because we didn’t shag last night. It was just… so unexpected what happened, you know? Blimey, I had no idea what was goin’ on. And I just needed you to know, if that sort of thing happens much more, I won’t be able to handle it very well. That’s all.”

“It wasn’t even me,” he argues. “I tried to prevent it. It was the TARDIS!”

“I know, you said that. And I understand. But you just ran off so quickly. I s’pose I was partly upset about that.”

“I tried to explain.”

“I know. It just happened so fast. I thought we had a nice time, an’ then you wanted to just bolt out of ‘ere.”

She had him there. He absolutely ran off. But what should he have done instead, is the question?

“What would you have done?”

She exhales a little angrily, stumped for a moment.

“Well, I wouldn’t have run off. I do have a little bit of self-control.”

“Oi,” he snaps back. She’s probably only teasing, but it’s still a low blow. “I couldn’t help it! That was the Gallifreyan equivalent of foreplay, what you were doing in my head.”

“Foreplay, hm?” she raises an eyebrow.
“Yes,” he insists, disregarding her attempt to joke about it.
“I didn’t know I was doing that, though,” she adds, softer.
“Neither did I.” He shakes his head.
“Well, then, you’re forgiven.” She taps him in the shin with her foot, unhappy to concede so soon.
“So are you.” He bows his head politely.
“Ta.” She smirks a little at his theatricality, but then brings her hand to her forehead. “This is all a bit mad.”

A little bit of that old panic bubbles up in his gut again.

“Not in a bad way, I hope?” he asks.

She gives him a proper, broad smile this time. “Not as long as you’re here to make sense of it all.”

Whew.

“As long as you want me.” He shrugs one shoulder lightly, as though his hearts wouldn’t stop in his chest if she ever decided she didn’t want him anymore.

“Forever,” she assures him quickly and quietly, like it’s no bigger commitment than making lunch plans.

He skips over the word, like he always does. He knows better than to question it and sour the mood, but he is nowhere near prepared to indulge her with a promise of his own.

“Don’t worry about me,” she assures him, moving them past the potentially awkward moment. “I want to wait for you. Any more alien sex quirks I should know about, though? Just so I’m prepared?”

Heat floods his face as he breaks eye contact in favour of staring down at the blanket.

“Er… nope,” he mumbles. “That should be it.”

“Kay.”

She snuggles a little closer to him.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

“Of course,” she whispers back, eyelids drooping.

Not wanting to miss his second chance, he leans across the short distance to press his lips softly against hers. He intends to make it a quick peck of gratitude, but he lingers several seconds longer than he meant to. In a way, every time he kisses her is like the very first time. His memory just never does the experience justice. The lush, velvety warmth of her lips, tender and curious as they conform to his. The way her hand comes to rest on his jaw, thumb brushing over his skin, asking him to stay a little longer. The small hum of pleasure in the back of her throat he can’t help but return.

If he had it his way, he’d go on kissing her until he was too tired to move his lips, and they fell asleep with their breaths intertwined. But he knows that would send a hell of a mixed message. For
him, foreplay might be the right combination of sexy thoughts during a telepathic encounter, but for Rose, it’s kissing. He’s learned that lesson by now. Lots of snogging with no follow-through wouldn’t be fair.

Rose breathes out a happy sigh as he gently separates their mouths, and he grins proudly as he settles into his pillow. He isn’t completely romantically inept.

But contrary to his expectation following this small success, Rose abruptly turns over onto her other side, facing away from him. The Doctor’s hearts sink for a fraction of a second, thinking she wants some space to herself, but then she scoots back until she is flush against him. Her back resting comfortably against his chest, bum teasing the seam of his shorts. Instinctively, he snuggles up to her, bending his knees to fit with hers, wrapping his arm around her stomach. Her skin is smooth and warm wherever it touches his, her soft curves conforming to his lean embrace.

He nuzzles his nose into her hair, still damp from her shower, and breathes in the clean, tropical scent: fruity, sweet shampoo and crisp, mineralized water. It’s divine just to be close to her again; they haven’t cuddled properly since the night after Krop Tor. Wrapped around her like this, it’s hard to remember why he was so afraid of Rose being pushy or feeling disappointed in him if he couldn’t follow the the mythical dating manual his demons had fabricated during her brief quasi-slumber.

The Doctor of course realises that his judgment is clouded by the slurry of love potion still simmering in his brain right now, but he is starting to wonder why anything should be off-limits anymore. Despite his jokes to the contrary, Rose was exceptionally well-behaved tonight. Sure, she considered the notion of sex several times, and her thoughts teetered on the threshold of provocative on occasion, but it was remarkable how quickly she learned to restrain it. As for himself, though it’s nothing close to the unmanageable lust of the night before, he can’t deny certain parts of his anatomy feel… stirred. It’s been a long time since his mind was stimulated quite like this, and it’s a bit difficult to come down from it now.

Without question, Rose’s beauty transcends much of the known universe, but aesthetic appeal alone simply can’t arouse him in that way. It has never been how his system was wired, regardless of which reincarnation he’s in. It was only after he came to know Rose’s character, saw the compassion and determination in her spirit, that his rigid heartstrings began to soften. That his long-dormant physical desires were rekindled. And the more attached to her companionship he became, the more the sweet, dark honey in her eyes; her golden tresses of hair; her full, pink lips; and the perfectly sculpted curves of her body began to call out to him. Entice him in a way that no one has for a very long time.

And when he was born into this body, that established attraction was burned into his genetic code by the fires of regeneration. Though he could doubt and stifle it in his previous body, there is no fighting it, no second-guessing it in this one. Gallifreyans were not peculiar among telepathic species in their strong biological predisposition to mate for life. His vow to abstain from intimacy has held strong until now, but he’d be kidding himself to pretend it matters anymore whether they consummate their relationship physically or not. With their telepathic connection growing stronger every moment they’re together, he’s hopeless either way.

Regardless of which romantic acts they do or don’t partake in, his hearts are irrevocably taken, literally ‘til death do them part. His own death. Only regeneration can even begin to dull the pain of losing someone a Time Lord has allowed himself to love.

He doesn’t make a habit of reflecting on the word, even in the privacy of his mind, but after an evening like this, it’s hard to substitute anything else in its place to describe how he feels about her.
Everything that is so irreplaceable and remarkable about Rose is contained within, and to have finally had these glimpses of her beautiful mind, his attraction to her is blazing inside of him like it never has before.

Though he is still inclined to hold the TARDIS responsible for what happened last night, it was really only the beginning, wasn’t it? The more he connects with Rose’s mind, the more his own desire will grow. It may even outpace Rose’s before long.

Even before he knew this connection was sprouting between them, he often struggled to control himself around her. Certainly, in the past he has consistently established a telepathic relationship before contracting into a physical one, but that is by no means obligatory. The only true prerequisite is developing some degree of sexual attraction on his end. Normally, he achieves that level of attraction through cultivation of a telepathic relationship. But with Rose, no such path was available (at least not until several days ago), and yet the attraction developed all the same. Not that he has never felt affection for humans or other non-telepathic species before, or cared deeply for them. But before Rose Tyler, a non-telepath had never made him feel that magnetic pull only an intimate partner can inspire: that small, desperate voice inside him saying touch me. Kiss me. Stay with me forever.

It’s as mystifying as it is extraordinary.

If he thought he was hooked yesterday, he is really in trouble now. He can hardly comprehend how incredible it’s been to finally connect with a real, living person after all this time. He thought the possibility of this kind of intimacy died with his race; he had already taken steps to grieve and accept that loss. To now have the privilege granted to him again – and from someone as kind and full of light as Rose, no less – is nothing short of miraculous.

A person can survive on nothing but nutrition bars supplemented with protein and vitamins, provided their caloric intake is adequate, but it’s nothing like sitting down to a hearty, home-cooked meal. The two are incomparable. Since the war, he’s been surviving on his own version of protein bars: the occasional telepathic chatter with the TARDIS and the odd telepath they come across in their travels, pretending they’re adequate sustenance. But has not been fully, properly satiated until now. Moreso than ever, he is filled with excitement at what the future of this fledgling connection holds. Gratitude that Rose is open-minded and trusting enough to be willing to try it with him.

She has given him a gift that he not only doesn’t deserve, but that shouldn’t be possible. And suddenly, more than anything, he wants to repay her for this gift.

Though vital for optimum mental health, telepathic contact is not a biological, life-sustaining need, but Rose is determined to fulfil it anyway. Eager to, even. In the same way, perhaps, sex isn’t an essential need, not a matter of life or death as are food, water, or oxygen (he’ll fight Maslow tooth and nail over that one). But for many species, it can feel like one. And he is, of course, intimately familiar with how intensely Rose experiences that need. He likes to use humans as a base example for anything sexual, but it’s true among certain Gallifreyans, too. Once they’ve met the right person, sexual desire can flare up just as potent as ever. And in the mental presence of that person, it can often feel overpowering until it is satisfied. The Doctor himself has experienced that very recently.

The question he can’t stop asking himself now is: why wait any longer? Rose has been gracious and understanding, offering him what he needs while being endlessly patient to have her own needs satisfied. But as became evident this morning, that patience is beginning to slip. Could it really do any harm to give her what she wants, especially when deep down, he wants it, too?
He strongly prefers intimacy when a strong telepathic component is involved, and has been reluctant to break tradition and forfeit that component when it has been so valuable to him in the past. Because Rose isn’t ready for a telepathic encounter of that magnitude, he has recently made a silent pact to wait until she is. But can he not sacrifice a few of his expectations of their first time together, if it means doing something for her, for once? She deserves it, doesn’t she? After all the things she’s done for him, especially in the last few days? He wants a way to repay her for the gift she’s given him. Being close to her, making her feel cherished, giving her pleasure… would those acts not be a fine expression of his gratitude?

Though his initial plan was to wait and do it properly, the way he has always done, his desire to stick to personal convention hardly outweighs his desire to make her happy. Besides, their relationship has been unconventional since day one. Maybe it can be unconventional in this respect, too.

Reaching into his pocket for the screwdriver, he reaches behind him to quickly snuff out the torch, then curls his arm around Rose once more and resigns himself to sleep.

Though he’s ecstatic to see what the day ahead of them may hold, there are myriad things he needs to ponder while he dreams tonight.
Chapter 20

I’m baaaack! ;) This chapter is one of my favorites in the story, at least conceptually. It was incredibly difficult to execute the way I imagined it, though. I tweaked and revised and edited it to death. My own death. Seriously I’m dead I need to sleep so bad. I hope I did an adequate job bringing it to life so it's somewhat worth it. Thank you guys for your patience! Enjoy!

Thanks to Heidi for the beta! I did pick at it for a few hours after she was done, so, my fault if there's anything amiss.

When the first signs of awareness coax her from slumber, Rose is disoriented.

Warm light beckons from beyond her eyelids, the muffled sound of the morning tide filters through her ears, stiff legs plead to be stretched. Senses seem to be functioning normally, but every part of her brain not involved in perception lags behind. Her thoughts are scrambled, recent memories unprocessed. She can’t even say for certain where she is right now. The hut? Lounging on the beach somewhere? Or has she imagined this entire trip, asleep in her bed on the TARDIS? Curious to verify her location, and to assess whether it’s acceptable to sleep for a bit longer, she peeks one eye open, at the very least to get a sense of the time of day.

The first thing to catch her eye is a fuzzy mass of brown amidst a sea of white linens. Blinking her eyes a few times to rid them of the blurry sleep, the Doctor’s face slowly comes into focus.

Her head spins as the events of the previous evening flood back. Wave after wave of memories crash over her, sweeping her off her feet and into a steady current of nervous excitement. She must have been in quite a deep sleep, to have awoken without immediately remembering what happened. Talking, telepathy training, cuddling… kissing. In bed, no less.

And the Doctor hasn’t left.

Even more curiously, he’s still asleep. The few times they’ve shared a bed (for some utilitarian reason or another), he is usually already gone by the time she wakes up. And on the rare occasions when he hasn’t vanished, he has always been awake, impatiently awaiting her return to consciousness.

He’s flat on his stomach, but his neck is craned towards her, his cheek smushed into the pillow that both his arms are stuffed beneath. The white duvet is rolled halfway down his back, still clad in only a plain white t-shirt. His skin is tinged slightly pink, too warm from the superfluous hours tucked under blankets (well, superfluous for his standards). With the millennium of wisdom in the depths of his eyes gently concealed, and the way his hair is simultaneously sticking out in all directions and matted against his head, it’s one of those moments he looks like a regular bloke.

Though she can’t hear him breathing, she can see his ribs expanding and contracting beneath the thin fabric of his shirt, slow and regular. He must really have needed rest; he never sleeps this long.

Glancing back over her shoulder to look out the window, it’s bright, but with the pink and orange
hues of sunrise, rather than the yellowish rays of mid-morning. It’s too early to wake him without bringing about suspicion. She had passed out fairly early the night before, only a couple of hours after sunset. Her body is a bit achy and tender from all the swimming and trudging through sand they’ve been doing, but with her alertness and recent memories restored, her mind feels perfectly rested. Or, to be more candid with herself, plenty rested enough to open itself to the Doctor again as soon as he’ll allow it.

In the back of her mind, there’s a tiny voice warning her how dangerous it is that she’s already addicted to these extra-terrestrial encounters. But the caveat is drowned out by the cheers and praises the rest of her mind is singing, captivated and keening for more.

The same way new lovers crave second helpings of intimacy in the early morning, waking each other too early for a languid shag beneath the covers, she’s craving another dose of telepathy enough that she wants to wake the Doctor.

She knows it can’t be a good idea to wake him solely on account of this inopportune neediness. If she were bold enough to rouse him, she’d have to think of an alternative (and believable) excuse for doing so. But her brain is utterly devoid of potential ideas, focused as it is on staring at him. It’s quite a sight, him asleep next to her. The soft orange glow of the sunrise on his fair skin, the way the rays of light filter through his hair, highlighting its state of disarray. The subtle constellations of freckles dusting his nose and cheekbones, his lusciously pink bottom lip, still and dry and begging to be kissed to life.

The only other time she was this close to his face, free to analyse it without him chiding her for staring or recoiling from the intimate scrutiny, was when he was in a post-regenerative coma. And at the time, looking too closely only evoked sorrow for what she’d lost, and fear that the change may jeopardise their future together. Every time she looked at him, that fateful day, she had felt like she was beholding a stranger, an unwelcome guest who displaced the man she loved without her permission.

But now, she’s fallen even harder for this version of him than the first. And this time, he doesn’t look ominously blacked out and clammy; his face isn’t scrunched up in unconscious pain. His features are serene and relaxed, soft and inviting in the morning light. The sight elicits a very different reaction: a syrupy warmth in her chest and a tension coiling deep in her stomach. She’s never seen him look so peaceful and human, and for the briefest moment she finds herself wishing that he was. That it was that simple.

But then, if he were human, they’d likely never have met. Their lives wouldn’t be what they are today, and the fledgling telepathic connection in which she is so invested would be both unattainable and unknowable.

Still, she can’t help coming back to the fact that this is the first time he’s ever purposely fallen asleep next to her simply because he wanted to. Not out of necessity, or fear, or because she’d asked him to.

The urge to touch him while she has this rare chance suddenly overwhelms her. Before she can rein in the audacious impulse, her fingertips reach out, hovering over his temple.

The air close to his skin makes her fingertips tingle, that tangible current when a statically charged balloon raises the hair on your skin. It makes her ponder what he’d said about electrical storms and compatibility. She can’t help but wonder whether he’s dreaming about something stimulating now, or if the sensation is all in her head, wishful thinking coupled with overexcitement. Regardless if it’s real or imagined, it’s a timely reminder that he’s not human, and rekindles her desire to touch his mind again. Pushes her hand forward.
The first contact with his skin doesn’t bring a shock, or any sensation out of the ordinary. His skin is warm and hums with life, the short, rough hairs of his sideburn tickle. She lets her fingertips ghost down his cheek to his chin, and, emboldened that he still hasn’t stirred, shakily inches a single digit higher until it just grazes his bottom lip.

“Mmm,” the Doctor hums, a soft, sleepy sound that her ears nearly miss. A sound that doesn’t confirm if he’s conscious or not. He could be completely asleep, the sensations interpreted as part of a dream, or beginning to fade into awareness, but she has no way of knowing which. He doesn’t move, though, and his eyes are still peacefully closed, so she draws out her moment for as long as she can. This time, she brings her hand to his forehead, combing back any rebellious locks twisted the wrong way, or stuck to his forehead with stale product. As she pushes her fingertips slowly back through his hair, savouring the lush thickness as it sifts through her fingers, he hums again, a little louder. More of a purr. His head tilts towards her hand for just a moment, beseeching more, before relaxing again.

Encouraged that he’s appreciating this in whatever state of quasi-sleep he’s in, she shifts her hand, starting from his temple and combing in an arc around his ear. He fidgets a little on the bed, exhaling slow and contented. He seems to be regaining some awareness, but also seems to enjoy it, so Rose repeats the motion one more time, brushing her fingers even more lightly.

But before she can complete the movement, the Doctor stiffens. His jaw clenches and eyebrows draw closer together. His back ceases to subtly rise or fall to indicate he’s still breathing. Terrified she’s crossed some sort of line, touching him without his consent, she freezes, too, her hand immobilized just above his ear.

But within a few moments, the creases in his forehead smooth themselves out. He quietly clears his throat as he resumes breathing normally.

“Is this how you wake everyone you sleep with?”

For being asleep less than a minute ago, he sounds surprisingly alert.

“No,” Rose blurts out quickly, and the Doctor lets out a little huff that’s almost a chuckle. He peeks his eyes open and squints up at her arm, still covering half his face, and she quickly retracts her hand, swallowing hard.

“Only me, then?” he asks.

Rose’s throat closes up, and she presses her cheek down into her pillow for some kind of refuge from whatever his reaction is about to be.

When she doesn’t respond, he glances up at the window.

“Isn’t it a bit early for you to be up?” he asks, a bit rudely.

“Isn’t it a bit late for you to still be asleep?” she retorts.

“Fair point,” he acknowledges with a grimace. “Six hours of sleep… six hours and…” He wrinkles his nose and squeezes one eye closed. “Twelve minutes. Longest I’ve had in a while. Went too long without it, I suppose.”

“How do you feel?” she asks.

“Good.” He smirks. “How’s the hair?” He brings a hand up to card through the mess on top of his head. “Did you fix it for me?”
“I tried,” she snickers, glad that he isn’t troubled by her earlier boldness, “but it was just too mussed up.”

“Still sexy, though?” He clicks his tongue with a little wink. Rose is surprised by the brazen little flirtation, but goes along with it willingly.

“Very.” She nods.

“You don’t look bad with bedhead, yourself.”

“No?”

“Not at all. It’s wild. Sort of looks like you got shocked.”

She pulls one of the pillows out from beneath her and whacks him in the shoulder with it.

“This look is actually in high fashion of Griselda 9,” he continues, unfazed. “People rub plastic over their heads every morning to make their hair stand up as high as possible.” He smiles at her, waiting for the next round of retribution he knows is coming.

Rose picks up the pillow and smacks him with it again, in the head, this time, and he buries his face in his pillow just before it makes contact.

“All right, I’m only joking,” he says, emerging from the pillow. “You look lovely.” He gives her a disarming grin, sincerity in his eyes.

“Ta.” She pretends not to be flustered as she stuffs the pillow back under her head. “So do you.”

“Ta.”

Truthfully, though, she’s glad he made fun of her bedhead. That he’s making light of the situation he woke to this morning. It means he hasn’t been startled off by the idea of waking up in bed with her when he lacks any excuse to rush out of it.

“You don’t want to go back to sleep for a bit?” he asks. “No rush to wake up.”

She can’t blame him for wanting to be certain. She’s never been a morning person, and in the time she’s lived with the Doctor, she’s always been tetchy with him whenever he woke her prematurely. But she shakes her head, resolute. She can’t imagine going back to sleep as keyed up to touch him (both literally and figuratively) as she is now.

“What’s on the agenda today, then, early bird?” He rolls onto his side and props up on his elbow. His brown eyes reflect the warm sunshine as they gaze into hers, and her heart thuds wildly in her chest. There’s nothing she’d like more than to spend the morning with their minds intertwined, more even than having her tea or getting something to eat. But with the peculiar manner in which he’s acting like a normal boyfriend right now – flirtatious, even – she doesn’t want to risk shattering the illusion by pushing too fast.

He’s probably counting on her to suggest something platonic and uncomplicated for them to do. Asking for too much too soon could just throw a spanner in the works and set back the marvellous progress they’ve made the last couple days. And even if he didn’t react poorly to such a hasty request, she anticipates even a polite refusal would trample her fragile little heart.

“Ah…” she manages to eke out, her face flushing with heat. She never did formulate her alternate plan, and her mind is blanking on any activities the island offers that she could propose right now.
“No pressure,” he assures her, detecting her distress.

“I thought, erm…”

“What is it?” She can feel him staring, but simply can’t find the right words to ask him, or think of anything else to say. “Is that…?” he leans in just a little closer, and lets out a little gasp of surprise. “Rose Tyler, are you blushing?”

“No!” she exclaims, quickly hiding her face in her pillow.

“Is it, erm… do you want me to leave the room for a tick, or something?”

“It’s not that!” She exclaims, suddenly a little bit hysterical as she turns back to face him. “Blimey, Doctor, that’s not all I think about.” Still, she blushes even harder. He’s not right this time, but he’s not quite wrong, either. It’s not all she thinks about, but it is something she thinks about a lot. He doesn’t exactly make it easy on her, and sometimes the fact that he knows he drives her mad is a bit infuriating.

“All right,” he gripes back, affronted. “Then, what?”

The fact that she’s this anxious doesn’t even make sense. They’ve done this a few times before, now.

She supposes it’s partially to do with the fact that, counterintuitively, she’s always the one asking to do it. If he initiated it, even once, it would give her a much welcome boost of confidence.

But then again, the Doctor has never has been one to ask for anything he wants, or even needs.

So, she decides to just go for it.

“I just thought we could… you know, have another go at the telepathy.”

“Of course we can,” he says, like it’s the last question he expected. Like the answer should’ve been obvious. “I thought we established that we would continue today.”

“Right,” she says, daring a glance up at him through her lashes. He looks bemused, searching her face for where this miscommunication might have stemmed from.

“What, you mean right now?” he asks.

She waits a moment before she answers, not to seem to desperate (even though she is). “If you want,” she shrugs.

He raises his eyebrows, surprised.

“Little impatient?”

The blush returns with a vengeance.

It’s not like she’s ever experienced anything like this before. If she were with any other bloke and wanted to kiss him, she would. If she wanted to reach out and play with the Doctor’s hair again, he probably wouldn’t stop her. If she had it her way and they were shagging by now, it would be obvious if one of them was randy, and they could address the issue fairly quickly without the need for much talking at all. She’s not accustomed to having to go through the process of asking formal permission to engage in an intimate activity.
Before she can lament her circumstances for long, the Doctor takes pity on her. He tilts her chin up, forcing her to look at him.

“There’s no need to be embarrassed.”

She curses the fact that he can basically read her mind now, and when he takes her hand, she squeezes it a bit too hard for some measure of retribution.

“You can tell me when you want to do this. Well,” he tilts his head to the side. “I may not say yes every time. You and I are still entitled to some measure of privacy. But you can always ask. I’ll never be upset with you for asking. I might be asking you from time to time.”

“That’d be nice,” she admits.

She never expected him to be so open about this. It’s normally pulling teeth to get him to talk about emotions out loud, so she expected it to be the same, if not worse, communicating in an even deeper way. And he was so reluctant to kindle this in the first place, it was logical to assume he would be reluctant to nurture it thereafter. There must be something about the nature of it; that once he’s started, it’s hard for him to stop. Or at least, not nearly as easy to walk away from as a simple conversation. It does seem to give him pleasure and fulfilment that other forms of communication certainly do not.

“It’s certainly possible,” the Doctor responds with a nod. “Tell you what though. Rather than me having to play a guessing game every time,” he raises an eyebrow teasingly, “you can just say:”

His next words aren’t in English.

From the few times he’s spoken in his native tongue in her presence before, she knows this is it. He speaks more slowly than he normally does, and clearer, as though he intends to teach her the words, rather than to quickly mutter something to himself. She just stares at his mouth blankly, wondering how a language could be so much more eloquent and beautiful than any other language she’s ever heard. She thinks she’s at least physically capable of emulating the sounds, but she has a strong suspicion her unsophisticated accent will butcher the phrase if she tries to repeat it.

When she doesn’t respond, he says it again.

Five syllables, in all – emphasis on the second and fourth. All soft consonants and a flowing cadence.

“What’s it mean?” Though her question is very quiet, it still feels like she’s spoiled the lingering beauty of the moment.

“It doesn’t translate very well. In fact, it might sound a bit daft in English.”

“That’s not surprising,” she mumbles, rolling her eyes.

“Roughly translated, it means ‘join me in my mind.’”

Rose grimaces a little. It does sound a bit off-putting. Not nearly as enticing as in its original language.

“But ‘join’ really isn’t a good word,” he rushes out, seeing that she’s not impressed. “The verb,” he repeats the first two syllables, “has no analogue in English. It’s unique, and it’s used in very few contexts. Conjugated the way it is, it’s an intimate invitation. Reserved only for the closest friends and family, or a romantic partner, if that applies. It’d be better translated as a phrase, I suppose,
something like ‘come closer, so you can see me, and hear me, and feel me, and we can become one.’”

Rose swallows down a gasp (and with it, the fantasies roiling in her mind at his words, the other ways she’d like them to ‘become one’).

“But that doesn’t quite roll off the tongue the same way,” he adds. It diminishes the tenderness of the moment, but it doesn’t undo the sentiment he just conveyed about the nature of this connection.

Clearly, she still doesn’t know the extent of how serious this is. She blanches at the thought of uttering a sentence like that to her mum, or one of her friends from back at school. But the Doctor isn’t human, and times like these that becomes more evident than ever.

Two hearts, different body temperature – those things don’t really matter much, in perspective. They don’t have concrete impacts on his daily life, his relationships with others. But this is something vastly important to him, a vital part of who he is. Biologically, socially, culturally. She’s hoping to understand it more with time.

To start, she can learn how to pronounce it. It’ll be far less awkward to use the words he has provided than to beat around the bush with inadequate English terms to try to tell him what she wants.

She says it back to him, even slower and more quietly than he did, and to her surprise, it doesn’t sound so bad coming from her own lips. He corrects her pronunciation in only two places, and she integrates his advice on her second try.

Hearing the phrase spoken correctly, the Doctor’s eyes flutter closed. A little shiver courses through his body, and his hand clenches up where it now rests on her waist, as though she’s found a hidden erogenous zone without even touching him. He lets out a sigh, something that communicates relief, an appreciation of something beautiful. But there’s a certain solemnity in the sound, too, as though the beautiful thing is fleeting. About to be taken away.

When he opens his eyes, they’re eager and focused.

“Now?” he whispers, bringing a hand up to hover next to her temple.

“Yeah,” she breathes, heart in her throat.

His fingertips settle just next to her hairline, and she closes her eyes. It’s easier than it’s ever been to rush forward and meet him at the edge of her mind, wrench open the invisible door and feel him surge through the threshold. Resuming their closeness after some time spent apart, they greet each other warmly and wordlessly as a delicate pleasure synergizes between them, and they both share in the relief that Rose isn’t experiencing any discomfort this time. Her mind slowly expands while he drifts inside like a spring breeze. A warm, pleasant, attractive spring breeze.

“Easy, there.”

Rose startles. It’s the Doctor’s voice, she’s sure of it, but he’s no longer in front of her, but somewhere behind her.

Her eyes fly open, but she’s no longer lying in bed next to him; she’s standing in a garden. The sun shines brightly overhead, the green shrubs and trees and flora of all colours surrounding her slowly come into focus, and she breathes in the aroma of flowers and grass and leaves. Searching for the voice she’d heard, she whirls around to find the Doctor standing there, just as he was before she closed her eyes: brown shorts and white t-shirt. His hands are in his pockets, and one of his bare
feet is crossed over the other, a pose he strikes often. He squints slightly in the sunlight, confirming this place is just as convincingly real for him as it is for her.

“Doctor?” she calls, meeting his gaze.

“It’s me, Rose,” he says, and though she hears it from within the garden, she hears it somewhere else too: whispered close to her face. Though he’s several feet away, and hasn’t moved, she feels his thumb stroke her cheek. Somewhere outside this dreamscape, he’s assuring her that their situation on their bed in the hut hasn’t changed. She didn’t pass out, and they haven’t teleported.

“Where are we?” she asks the Doctor inside. Her voice has an ethereal quality; she can feel herself talking but she knows she hasn’t spoken aloud in the real world.

“Your mind.” His gaze has been focused on her, but he looks around for the first time as he answers, taking in the sights around them. He appears to have never been here before, looking around with the curious, excited gleam in his eyes he gets whenever the TARDIS lands them somewhere unfamiliar to him. He seems impressed with what he finds, and Rose gets a little surge of pride despite her uncertainty.

“Why’s it a garden?” She hopes he understands her underlying, unspoken question: why is it a garden now, but not before? The previous times he’s been in her mind, it’s never taken physical shape or morphed into any sort of observable environment, it’s just been… there. An intangible existence. A black box of emotions and memories.

“You tell me,” the Doctor says, turning back towards her.

Puzzled by the remark, she tears her gaze away from him, studying her surroundings. It’s familiar, somehow: the white marble fountain to their left, the ornate white benches lining the bushes around the perimeter of the square. Even the pink and white conglomerate walkway beneath their feet, twisting its way out from where they stand to branch out in every direction, leading to other parts of this sprawling garden. Taking a closer look at the flowers nearest them, she spots hydrangea, carnations… yellow chrysanthemum.

She knows this garden.

“I’ve been here,” she whispers, and though she’s several feet away from him now, the Doctor hears her.

He closes the distance between them with a few silent steps, still admiring the view. There’s a light breeze on her skin, the perfume of flowers and fresh trimmed greens in her nose, and countless birds chirp their diverse songs from unseen perches in the trees, only occasionally fluttering in and out of view.

“It’s a hub,” the Doctor explains. “From here, you can choose to go anywhere in your own mind. Memories, dreams, fantasies. All these paths,” he indicates the winding cobblestone paths leading to various different sections of the eclectic garden, “will lead us to a different one, depending on what you remember. What you want to remember, or can’t help remembering.”

She glances back over at him, trying not to panic. She didn’t expect this. He’d said he could see deeper things like memories and timelines, and he accidentally proved that last night. But she thought that was a fluke; he had apologized for doing it. She hadn’t prepared herself for them to do it on purpose the next day.

“Of course,” he continues when she doesn’t speak. “It’s not essential to have a hub like this, but I
find it preferable to working without one. I’m fascinated by the way everyone’s mind conjures up
its own preferred setting, uniquely tailored to the individual. But we don’t have to use it, I can
make it all disappear.” He snaps his fingers in the air for dramatic effect.

“I like it,” she says, though it’s still a bit tentative. She’s still unsure how all of this is supposed to
work. All she has to go off of is his word that this is all inside her mind, because it never looks like
this any other time she closes her eyes. “I never even think about this place, though. An’ even if I
did, my memories aren’t this realistic.”

“I’m helping a bit,” the Doctor admits. Rose thinks he’s being modest about the degree to which
he’s ‘helping,’ and raises an eyebrow. “I have certain... abilities. I can help people retrieve
memories they’ve suppressed or forgotten, restore ancient memories that have faded. The human
brain can store massive amounts of information, but it’s rarely easily accessible. I can fuse
disconnected neural pathways, amplify weak signals. It all comes down to the flow and and
intensity of electric currents, really.”

She takes a deep breath, glancing around again at the brilliantly detailed setting. Amazed and just a
tiny bit frightened to learn of yet another of the Doctor’s extraordinary abilities.

“Anyway, I just thought, maybe... you might like to show me a memory. Something new to
practice, to get more accustomed to having me here.” He sounds hesitant, almost scared she might
say no, and she has a fairly good guess why. She’s quite nervous and a bit overwhelmed, and has
no way of hiding that from him right now.

“Yeah,” she nods, not wanting him to think she’s declining his offer outright. “Yeah, I can. It’s
just... how do I... what do I do if there’s something...”

It’s not something she thinks about often. The fact that there are plenty of things buried in her
memories and subconscious she doesn’t want him to see. But the realisation slams into her now
that they’re on the cusp of it coming to fruition: there are certain things she’s not ready to share
with him, or that she’s too ashamed to ever share with anyone. She imagines the same is true for
him, so he must understand her concern. How does she stop him infringing on a memory where he
isn’t welcome?

“It’s simpler than it sounds,” he answers her unspoken question. “You decide which path to take.
You have the power to choose what I can and can’t see. If it’s clear in your mind that you don’t
want me to see something, then I won’t.”

She bites her lip, unconvinced, as she stares down at one path that’s beckoning her the most. It’s a
fairly straight lane leading to a small, Japanese-inspired gazebo. There’s a quaint little white bridge
a few dozen metres along that, if she remembers correctly, overlooks a pond filled with koi fish.
Cherry trees encircle the structure and surround the water, and their pinkish white blossoms float to
the ground in a light rain as they sway in the light wind.

“Is there anything in particular you’d like to show me?” he asks.

“I’m tryin’ to think of something,” she confesses, wishing she’d had more time to think this
through ahead of time.

“Well,” he suggests, “why don’t we start walking and perhaps something will come to you?”

“Okay,” she agrees.
She leads the way down the path, curious to see if the pond is there as she remembers it. She stops
in the middle of the convex bridge, and leans over the railing with a wide grin when she sees the fish there, orange and white and black things that swim too slowly to have been selected by nature. The Doctor sidles up next to her, staring down at the fish, too, and her attention returns to selecting a memory to show him. But before she can begin to browse through the last twenty years, the anxiety floods back that he’ll somehow get a glimpse of something she doesn’t want him to see.

As though on cue, an example of one such memory flashes to the forefront of her mind. One of the worst involving her prick of an ex-boyfriend from high school.

The peaceful water beneath her begins to warp. Murkiness spreads from the centre of the pond, not pollution or dirt but something else entirely. The fish disappear as the water loses its translucence, and slowly becomes an opaque canvas for moving shapes. As the mysterious figures come into focus on the rippling water, she begins to recognize details. The identity of the man. The layout of his bedroom. That stupid bloody skateboard in the corner, a prominent blue sticker plastered on the bottom. The sounds of the scene are garbled and difficult to make out, as though they’re being heard from underwater, but they grow louder and clearer with each passing second. His voice bellows out an insult as he throws a beer bottle across the room and it shatters against the wall.

It happened so gradually that Rose didn’t notice, but she’s no longer standing on the bridge, staring down into a projection of the memory. She has become a part of it. No longer looking on from above, but recalling the events as they occurred, reliving them with a level of detail she hasn’t experienced since the day they happened. Only now, there’s a visitor in the memory that doesn’t belong, one that is suddenly, acutely unwanted at her side. Too shocked and enthralled by the power this place has, she forgot she was supposed to be actively doing something do to prevent this from happening.

Horrified, she closes her eyes and tries to block out the memory, concentrating hard on how badly she doesn’t want to dwell here, hoping fiercely it will work the way the Doctor said it would.

When she reopens her eyes, the voices rapidly warp and fade. The vivid three-dimensional reconstruction of the scene shrinks and collapses violently back into two dimensions. She finds herself standing on the bridge again, the moving images rippling across the water little more than a flat, dim recollection. For a split second, she’s not quite satisfied with this level of resolution. But abruptly, two of the pink trees from opposite sides of the pond rustle and rumble to life. Against every law of both botany and physics, their trunks bend with tremendous wooden creaks to arc over the pond, their boughs stretching and entangling over the water until the entire surface is obscured. Dumbfounded, she searches for any hints of the memory that may remain, listens for any lingering sounds that may emerge. But there’s nothing left, the visions lost behind and volume strangled by the foliage.

Turning around, she finds the rest of the garden, as far as her eyes can see, entirely unchanged.

“So that’s how,” she breathes, impressed.

When she glances over at the Doctor, though, he doesn’t share in her moment of astonishment and delight. He’s angry.

That newly familiar, volatile rage that’s uniquely Time Lord. It’s weak, only traces of it filtering through the garden, since they’re mostly inside her mind. But there are subtle things, too, that she picks up on. The little dimple in his cheek, his jawline sharper than usual, a flash of the Oncoming Storm in his eyes. It’s clear he didn’t like what little he saw, and he’s restraining himself from asking about it. Intent on sticking to his resolution to respect her decisions for what she keeps hidden. Though she hates knowing he’s upset, she’s silently grateful. She still doesn’t have the confidence to dredge up those memories without getting emotional, and even if she did, she would
never want the Doctor to see the naïve mistakes she made only a few years ago.

Suddenly, an idea sparks in her mind of something what she does want to show him. Without comment on what just happened, she starts off down the bridge again, towards the miniature pagoda.

One thing she notices as they stroll along the path is the lack of any disagreeable details whatsoever. No bees or other stinging insects have buzzed near her ear and frightened her, and the sun is shining without making her sweat or burning her skin. There are no obnoxious children or sour adults making noise or otherwise spoiling the experience. No tour guides tarnishing the peacefulness of the environment with lengthy descriptions of everything.

“How comes it’s so perfect here?” she asks. “Y’know, the weather, no bugs, no tourists, nothin’.”

“I’ve helped to remove the other people,” he confesses. “Makes it easier to focus on what’s important. They aren’t gone for good, just not perceivable in this moment.

“As for the other aspects, the human mind excels at compartmentalizing. Often, when a memory is perceived as good overall, during long-term storage it is slowly altered to better match with that perceived goodness. Negative aspects are often twisted into something positive, or erased. Conversely, bad memories might have what little good they contain forgotten altogether. Overwhelmed by the predominant emotion of that era. Hubs tend to be places where positive memories were made, so I imagine that’s the case here.”

She ponders that for a moment, equal measures fascinated and betrayed by her brain. But the Doctor is right: this certainly was a place where positive memories were made.

“My mum took me here, when I was ten or eleven,” she explains. “I was on a break from school, and my friends had all gone on these expensive holidays.” She pauses for a moment, recalling some of the trips she’d missed out on because of poverty. “Mum took me here to show me that even without much money, there was always something beautiful to see, some way to find a bit of joy.” Her heart swells with gratitude and love for her mum even now, and she feels a pang of sorrow that she doesn’t spend as much time with her anymore.

“It’s beautiful,” the Doctor says fondly, and Rose isn’t sure if he means the story, the place, or both.

She approaches the gazebo and peers inside. It’s familiar, too, the dark wood construction and the sloping black roof overhead, the plain benches situated on each edge of the square. She focuses her mind on what she wants to show him, and the magic happens just as quickly as the first time.

Darkness bleeds out from a point in mid-air, a starry night sky slowly consuming the daylight where they stand. The wood grows fuzzy as a scene flickers to life from within the structure, blocking out the view of the garden outside. A cliffside takes shape, along with the silhouette of a leather-clad Doctor beside her, his legs crossed in a pretzel.

Before she knows it, she’s no longer standing at the entrance of a gazebo, but sitting on the edge of a cliff. Her feet dangle in its maw as she stares out into the enormous canyon before her. It isn’t terribly wide across, maybe half a mile, but it seems to stretch into infinity in either direction. Deep in the chasm between the dusky rocks, a river continues to carve out its path, its turbulent water a glowing neon green (the Doctor earlier explained it was the result of bioluminescent bacteria unique to the planet). The sky above, so dark violet it’s almost black, doesn’t have a moon, but millions of bright stars and swirls of stardust paint the night in a soft white glow.
Even though Rose knows it’s about to happen, there’s nothing she can do to avoid the sudden breeze that drifts over her skin. She had forgotten her jumper that night and, clad only in a t-shirt, shivers at the wind. Picking up on this small signal, the Doctor wordlessly shrugs out of his leather coat and drapes it around her shoulders. Grateful, she slips her arms into the too-big holes and sighs happily as warmth radiates from the fabric and into the gooseflesh on her skin. Tucking her chin to her chest and hugging her arms, she inhales deeply. As the books-and-metal-and-cologne smell of the garment wafts into her nose, her heart beats just a little faster. Butterflies flutter in her stomach.

It was the first time Rose began to wonder – for all her jokes and insistence they’re nothing more than friends – if she wasn’t attracted to the Time Lord, after all.

Rose knows it was bold to choose such a moment, especially when she had nearly two decades’ worth of memories without him to choose from. But the Doctor already knows how much she fancies him, anyway, and it can’t hurt to stroke his ego a bit.

As the memory fades out at its natural stopping point, the nighttime scene dissolves from around her the same way the first one had. The gazebo and sunlight come back into view, and the last remnants of the vision fade from the air. The Doctor hasn’t yet said anything, or acknowledged what he’d seen in anyway, so she turns to him, and her hand flies over her mouth with a gasp.

The man standing next to her is her first Doctor, leather and big ears and all.

She frantically scans around for her thinner, brown-eyed Doctor, afraid she has inadvertently caused a small paradox, but she quickly realises this one has replaced the other.

Seeing Rose’s reaction, the Doctor looks down at himself, inspecting the change of both body and wardrobe.

“How’re you here?” she asks, her voice croaking a bit as her throat closes up and moisture wells up in her eyes.

“Because he’s not gone,” he says softly, and his voice has changed back, too. Deeper, with a Northern edge. “He’ll always be in here.” He taps his temple. “And what you’re seeing largely depends on your perception of me. You thinking of me back then is a very transformative force, as long as we’re in here.”

Those glacier blue eyes she thought she’d never see again bore into hers, and a sombre nostalgia tugs at her heartstrings. Closing the short distance between them, she reaches a hand up to press lightly against his chest, broader and more muscular than his next incarnation. His green V-neck jumper is just as soft as she remembers. Lifting her arm higher, she grazes her fingers across his cheek, over a sideburn that’s not yet there. She takes his hand, large and calloused and safe, and brings it to her cheek, closing her eyes as a few tears leak from her eyes and drip onto his fingers.

Before she met the Doctor, she had never felt so safe in anyone’s hands before. The sense of security and comfort washes over her even now, in a place where nothing can possibly harm her. She can’t lie to herself, or her current Doctor: right now, she misses her first. It happens every now and then, though it’s less and less frequent as time goes on. She misses his face and the way he rolled his eyes, the way he said her name and the way he laughed. The way he yelled at her when she defied him. She’d yell back, but she always knew. He only ever lost his short temper because he feared for her safety. Because he cared.

“Sounds like you still want me to change back.”

“No,” she shakes her head, even as a few more tears spill onto their joined hands.
She does miss this Doctor, but she’d never trade him for the one she has now. To prove that to him, she steers her thoughts in a different direction.

Closing her eyes, she concentrates vehemently on her pinstriped Doctor. Drawing on several memories at once, she paints him an image of his tenth incarnation – the way she sees him. He has the same passion for helping others and unparalleled intelligence as his predecessor. The same terrifying glare reserved for anyone who attempts harm to Earth or any members of the human race, especially Rose. But there’s a fair amount that’s unique to him, too. His boyish charm, his collection of designer ties, the way he never shuts up but the chatter never gets annoying. How sexy he looks in those brainy specs, how satisfying it is to tousle his hair, how quickly she melts in his arms every time his lips touch hers. How exhilarating it is to be a human who fell for an alien.

When she opens her eyes, her new, new Doctor is back in his rightful place, his paler, thinner hand still captive against her cheek. He’s wearing his suit and tie and Chucks now, his more commonly worn accoutrements summoned with the potent memories. But his brown eyes are wide with shock.

Before she can say anything, his image fragments down the middle, and the entire garden around them crumbles to nothing. Black emptiness.

She opens her eyes, and she’s back in bed, staring at the real Doctor in his t-shirt. He’s sitting up, noticeably winded, raking a hand back through his hair.

She isn’t sure what to say, what she’s done wrong. He alternates between looking at her and the wall in front of him, so it can’t be anything too bad.

“That was,” he says, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly. “Wow. You… I haven’t felt that in a long time.”

“Was it too much?” she asks, panicked that it was a mistake, after all, to attempt to unpack her own feelings about him for her first memory.

“No, just… I didn’t know you… I erm… Good. Very good. You’ve got the hang of this.” He pulls at his t-shirt, as though he’s overheated, fanning his chest with outside air. “So, erm, shall we… breakfast?”

Suddenly, he swivels around, swinging his legs off the side of the bed and leaping to his feet. He snatches his light blue Oxford shirt from the nightstand and pulls it on.

“I’m quite peckish.” He straightens out his collar and deftly fastens a few buttons from the bottom.

Bewildered by how quickly he’d ended such a momentous encounter, Rose sits up, but is speechless, her mouth half-open waiting for words that won’t come.

“Should probably take a mo’ to straighten out my hair, though, hm?” He jerks his thumb in the direction of the adjacent loo.

Without another word, he ducks through the curtain, leaving Rose staring after him.
Chapter 21

Hi guys! My posting schedule is complete chaos but hey, my life is complete chaos so. Most importantly, I figured you guys could use a bit of light on this dark day. I know it brought some light to mine and I hope it can do the same for some of you. Thanks to Amber and Heidi for the feedback and betas.

The Doctor is absolutely not freaking out.

Approaching his reflection in the single small mirror, the first thing he sees is the unparalleled chaos of his bedhead. He supposes he’d better actually do what he claimed he was going to do when he skipped in here. Flipping on the faucet, he gathers a pool of water in his palm and splashes it onto his head, not caring that most of it drips onto his face. He splays his fingers and massages the water into his hair, kneading and twisting to bring some pliability back to the dry, wayward strands. Once most of it looks slightly damp, he pulls out his travel-sized tube of product and squeezes a few drops onto his palm.

He is certainly not running away from her again.

With rapid strokes back and forth, he rubs it over the top of his head, leaving no strand untouched. Only once it is distributed evenly does he employ more precision, using both hands, capturing sections between his fingers to mould them into the right shape, up and towards the mirror. There’s the one section that’s always particularly cow-licked in the morning and requires more attention. And as usual, he has to spend several minutes mere centimetres from the mirror, using his fingertips to craft the very front just the way he likes it. Rebelling against gravity, but not defying it altogether. A slight angle outward that dares someone to come and touch it. Well, so long as ‘someone’ is Rose.

He is not stalling a conversation about what just happened by hiding in the bathroom, either. Nope. It’s much easier to style his hair fresh out of a shower, but he can always make do with the circumstances he’s given. This hair was ready to be styled straight out of regeneration. It’s no huge mystery why, and he’s always known that. He died pouring his heart out to an attractive young woman, and his subconscious manifested that by turning him into an attractive young man – touchable hair included. What other explanation could there be that his tenth incarnation appears younger than any of his others (excluding, of course, his first)? It’s not at all uncommon for regeneration to manifest a Time Lord’s most pressing need or desire at the time of death. It is perhaps uncommon for that need or desire to be another person, but he isn’t sure that detail matters. Statistically, the chances that the two events are correlated in some way is far greater than that they occurred together by a stroke of cosmic luck. The universe rarely stacks the odds in his favour.

He grumbles at his reflection as his hand falls to his side. This hair, like many other aspects of his current figure, was literally made for Rose’s enjoyment, and he’s standing here playing with it instead of letting her do that.

He’s suddenly reminded of the 90’s sitcom, Friends. In one episode, Phoebe claims to want a fabled bicycle from her childhood with all of her nostalgic heart. But when Ross buys it for her,
though she parades it around Central Park and maintains its shiny appearance, she doesn’t actually ride it.

Except that was actually endearing, and had some validity, since Phoebe didn’t know how to ride a bicycle. The Doctor can’t claim he doesn’t know how to – (well, *ride* isn’t the right word, but blimey, it’s astonishing how readily his mind went there) – *indulge* Rose. He’s just being stubborn about it. He’s got all the hardware (and software) for passion and intimacy now, but he’s just strutting around letting her admire it rather than actually using it.

And simply because she showed him, quite vividly, how much she cares for him, too, he’s backing off even more. Stashing that bicycle in the closet rather than let anyone see it. He’s inadvertently punishing her for honesty.

He isn’t sure how Rose expected him to react, but he knows it can’t have been to run off. When someone shows you how they feel about you, and it’s *that* intense, the only polite thing to do is to return the sentiments shortly thereafter. He didn’t at all prepare himself to do that today; he was more or less expecting to see the first time she baked a cake, not a compilation of all the reasons she’s in love with him. She didn’t actually use the word, but what Rose doesn’t understand is that these exchanges of emotion are far more impactful than words to telepathic species. If he stayed, he would have had to construct a similar experience for her, or else come up with a verbal response to what she’d shown him that would indicate she’s not alone in her sentiments. But what does she expect? How can he explicitly requite that level of affection, when not four days ago he was prepared to swallow said feelings altogether? To sever the very connection that made her confession possible?

A swish of the curtain interrupts his brooding.

“Oi, you about done? I want to wash up.” Rose sounds irritated.

“Yeah,” he pushes away from the little sink and whirls around. She looks irritated, too.

Now’s his chance, then.

He meanders over to where she’s standing in the doorway, effectively blocking her path to the sink.

“Listen, I just want to say…” He rubs the back of his neck, staring at the wall next to the shower rather than meeting her gaze. “Thank you. For, erm… showing me what you did.”

He dares a glance at her, and her expression has softened. Less disappointment, more disbelief. A bit of confused curiosity in her eyes. Swallowing, she nods and breaks their brief moment of eye contact.

“It was a lovely moment,” he adds, the words a bit rushed.

“Yeah,” she acknowledges. “Don’t mention it.” She skirts around him, and his eyes follow her as she sidles up to the sink. She swipes her toothbrush and paste from the little counter space there is and gets straight to business ‘washing up’, as she’d put it.

Though she could see him in the mirror if she wanted to, she actively avoids looking up at his reflection. Pulling back the curtain, he leaves her be without another word.

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Much to their dismay, they’ve missed breakfast by the time they arrive at Kenai’s house. Every family member is present – a universally acknowledged day of rest for the village, they soon
discover. Fortuitously, there is only about an hour or so until lunch will be served, and they spend the interim discussing the recovery of the ruki. The Doctor is delighted to learn the population is bouncing back well enough that Kenai and Kalei are planning the next fishing trip.

The energy between him and Rose is unusually strained throughout the conversation, though. At first, the Doctor chalks it up to Rose being tetchy because she’s hungry, and patiently endures the tension until she can get in a proper meal. But Rose’s reticence has not improved by the time their plates are clean (some kind of sweet vegetable curry-like dish mopped up with a flat bread that resembled naan). As Karina starts clearing the table, the Doctor is perturbed enough that he’s ready to whisk her back to the hut and formally apologize. And perhaps figure out something else to do to make it up to her.

The conversation he had with himself late the previous evening comes to mind – about just giving in, physically – and much to his surprise, he’s hardly opposed to that at the moment. Seeing her properly disappointed with him for what feels like the thousandth time since they landed here, he doesn’t know if there’s anything he wouldn’t do to win back her approval. But what is Rose expecting for their first time? A candlelit dinner and rose petals on the bed? A romantic film with wine and superfluous foreplay? Or will an early afternoon shag born out of guilt suffice just as well?

Before he can answer his own question, Kairi pipes up with his name from across the table.

He looks up, surprised she had spoken, as she usually only does when spoken to (not out of any cultural restrictions, but merely because she’s unbearably shy), and gives her his attention.

“Hm?”

“I was wondering, erm…” She looks down at the table, the rest of the sentence hanging in mid-air. When she’s silent for several long moments, he looks around at the other occupants of the table, silently asking if this is normal behaviour.

Kalei, seated next to her, elbows her lightly in the arm.

“It’s just… I have this project for school that I can’t get to work, and you’re so brilliant. I was wondering if you might have time to help me out.”

“Certainly,” the Doctor agrees immediately to try to soothe her insecurity. “You’ll want to invite Rose along, too though,” he nods to Rose and gives her his most charming smile when she looks up. “Rose Tyler, I’m lost without her.” As he predicted, she scrunches her mouth up to keep from smiling at the memories these words evoke, trying to stay outwardly cross with him.

“Yes, of course!” Kairi agrees. “When is a good time for you both?”

“Well, we haven’t exactly made plans yet…” He steers back to his halted train of thought. His desire to clear the air with Rose (and maybe implement his reconciliation plan) is a higher priority in his mind than a science project.

“Excellent!” Kenai exclaims. “I knew he’d be able to help, Kairi.” He pats the table happily before gulping down some more of his juice.

Unable to go back on his word now, the Doctor resigns to postpone talking to Rose, and whatever may follow that conversation, until later on.
The Doctor isn’t sure what to expect upon walking into Kairi’s bedroom – it’s not where he expected this homework hour to take place. There aren’t many societies in the universe where a young girl can invite strange adults into her bedroom and her parents not protest to the arrangement. The door is left open, though, and Kalei is in an adjacent room working on a carving, his door open as well.

Kairi is ever the professional – she clears the Doctor and Rose a place to sit on her bed while she goes to drag in chairs from around the dining table, as there’s only one currently at her desk. It looks similar to his own – but it’s cluttered with primitive tools rather than electronics, leaf quills rather than pens, and parchment rather than computers.

Once she’s retrieved their chairs and they’re all situated, she wraps her long, straight hair (must come from her dad’s side) into a bundle atop her head and pins it in place with a dried white flower. Sitting down next to them, she unfurls a long piece of parchment from the centre of the workspace.

The Doctor pulls on his glasses and peers at the design.

“Looks like a blueprint. Well, except for the paper not actually being blue. Though, on Earth, architects transitioned away from using actual blue paper for blueprints as early as the 1940’s…” He glances over at Rose, only to see her giving him a distinct ‘get on with it’ face, and quickly redirects his attention. “But what is it? A slide?” It certainly looks like one – a steep slope of something smooth, maybe intended to be metal – tucked between rocks in a mountain that must represent one of the ones on the island.

“What’s a slide?” Kairi asks.

“It’s a… erm,” the Doctor stops himself, scratching behind his ear. “Well, what is this, then?” he turns the question back on her.

“It’s intended to be for quick travel from the top of the village near the summit down to the bottom, in case of emergencies. Or for transfer of goods or supplies, perhaps. I’ve built several models with Kalei’s help, and blacksmith’s apprentice I know from school, but they’ve all been failures.”

“Where are these models?” the Doctor asks, curiosity piqued.

“Gone. Deconstructed for parts. Nothing goes to waste on this island,” she chuckles a little. “Least not if my dad has anything to say about it. He said it’d be better if I start from scratch, anyway.”

“Is it supposed to be constructed on the mountains up there?” He nods his head in the general direction of the rocky slopes.

“Yes, the models weren’t life-sized though. For the project, the assignment is to make a small model. About one metre.” She pulls out a stick from beside the desk, marked with measurements along one edge. The Doctor quickly and quietly assesses that it doesn’t seem to be an entirely accurate representation of a metre, but it’s close enough. “The winner in the class for the most useful project will get the help of the village to implement it in its real proposed size.”

“I see,” says the Doctor. “What caused them to fail?”

“The first one was metal. I used a thatch of leaves to carry down a rock. Every time I touched it to start a new trial, I got badly shocked. I figured that would be a problem for actual users, so I threw it out.”
“Quite right,” chimes Rose.

“The next one was rock,” Kairi continues, “and I had a similar problem. That, and I couldn’t get the rocks smooth enough. After a few trials, sparks flew and I almost burnt down my room. Dad wouldn’t let me continue with that one, after that.” She sighs, but it’s with a sense of peace rather than despondency. A true budding scientist, she has already come to terms with the fact that failure is a part of the process.

“Then I decided to go for wood. But friction was still a problem. One day, I got Kalei to help me polish it to make the surface nice and smooth. And I got some leftover cazaut oil from the kitchen to make it slippery on the surface. And that worked. But I knew there was no way to acquire enough oil to implement it on a larger scale. And even if it were possible, no one would approve of the project using such an important source of food. So I knew I had to find another way. But this is the latest blueprint, I haven’t started a new one, yet.”

“But that’s brilliant,” Rose says, in awe. “An oil slide. Sounds even faster than a water slide, and more innovative.”

“I agree,” chimes the Doctor. “Brilliant. But you’re right, it’s impractical. Why can’t we use water, instead of oil?” he suggests.

“It would take an excessive amount of water,” Kairi says, scrunching up her forehead like the Doctor is out of his mind.

“You’ve got an excessive amount of water,” Rose suggests. “Surrounded by the ocean, yeah?”

“Right you are, Rose. Ocean water, Kairi, what’s wrong with that?”

“Well,” she points to the bottom of the parchment. “The water is here,” she indicates. “And the… slide…” she uses the Doctor’s term with some awkwardness around the syllables, “starts way up here, at the top of the village.”

“There must be water sources inland, though,” the Doctor says. “How do you irrigate the crops?”

“There are freshwater springs in the forest, and we’ve developed an aqueduct system there. But that water is restricted to supply homes and provide irrigation. It would never be permissible to use it for something frivolous like this, especially in those high quantities.”

“Hmm,” the Doctor muses, stymied. “I’d hardly call it frivolous,” he grumbles quietly.

“You’d have to have some way of getting the water up there, then,” says Rose, on a more optimistic note.

“That may be the only way,” the Doctor agrees. “That is, if you’re settled on this idea, and don’t want to try something a little less ambitious.”

“Well…” Kairi ponders that, both hands under her chin as she inspects the print.

“I’ll tell you what though, Kairi,” says Rose. “I think this could be used for more than just emergencies. I think lots of people would use it for fun. Might be something that could bring people to the island. You could even charge for it.”

“What? No,” she waves her hand in the air, like the idea is preposterous, and the Doctor holds back laughter with his fist over his mouth before he can speak.
“As ridiculous as it may sound to you, I think Rose is right,” the Doctor adds.

“Guess I should stick to it, then,” says Kairi, a gleam of pride in her eyes. A well deserved spot of arrogance, the Doctor thinks.

Kairi sketches down several ideas for a water transport system from the shore to the summit, and the Doctor has to bite his tongue several times to keep from using the word ‘pump’ as she talks them through aloud. He doesn’t tell her what to draw, or how to tweak her angles or calculations. Doesn’t tell her outright when a design is rubbish. He only forces her to think about potential design flaws; leads her to detect the lethal ones quickly and start over. Guides her in the right direction when she gets stuck. Does the more difficult arithmetic calculations in his head when she asks so she doesn’t have to do them by hand. (“Call me your personal computer,” he says, and she laughs like it’s the most nonsensical word she’s ever heard. And, since it doesn’t exist in their version of Kaelondaian yet, he supposes the English must, indeed, sound ridiculous to her. At least as ridiculous as ‘slide.’)

In the middle of her fifth design, the Doctor suddenly feels something peculiar. A wisp of melancholy that’s not his own. A tug of quiet frustration. Hunched over the desk as he is, he has to look over his shoulder to check on Rose.

But when he does, her chair is empty.

Too enthralled by teaching and calculations, he doesn’t even know when she left. And now she’s somewhere out there alone, stewing in this turbulent sense of disappointment (probably directed at him) that’s severe enough to be broadcast to him.

To be fair, she does wander off a hell of a lot, and her clever escapes always seem to go undetected by his Rose radar. She’s good at being discreet and quiet, and tends to do what she wants regardless of his say in the matter.

“Where’s Rose gone?” Kairi asks, noticing her absence at the same time.

“Keep working, Kairi, I’ll be right back.” He pats her on the shoulder and leaps out of his chair to search for Rose.

To his relief, he finds her in the first place he looks – the kitchen. She’s standing at a countertop, cutting something that looks like carrots. Several feet along the same counter, Kenai is breaking down a pile of ruki (still from the batch the Doctor brought from the past). It feels like they just ate lunch, but tuning into his time sense, he realises it’s been four hours since they ate. Suppose that means it’s already time to start preparing for dinner.

The Doctor clears his throat to announce his presence.

“Can I help?” he asks, approaching them hesitantly from behind.

“You can assist Rose in cutting the vegetables, if you’d like,” says Kenai through the sounds of fish filets slapping the cutting board.

The Doctor sidles up next to Rose, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, but she doesn’t say anything. Her only acknowledgement of his presence is a cursory glance in his direction.

“How’re you doing?” he asks, and he knows it’s a loaded question but can’t help it.

Predictably, she gives him a little glare.
“Sorry for getting caught up. I was just trying to help, and sometimes I can be a bit… single-minded.”

“Don’t I know it,” she says, derisively. She doesn’t seem to want to talk, and he can still feel an annoyed ire radiating from her mind, festering inside his.

He knew the lightness of their conversation in Kairi’s presence earlier had been an illusion, and that they’d have to properly confront what happened this morning sooner or later. But how can they have a confrontation about it right this moment? The matters involved are fiercely private, but they lack privacy.

There is, of course, one easy solution.

He glances over at Kenai. He’s mere feet away from them, on the opposite side of the sink, but he does seem engrossed in his task.

But suddenly, as though lifting the idea from the Doctor’s mind, Kenai suddenly starts to sing. It’s not very loud, and it fades in gradually, like it’s just something he does instinctively while he cooks. The TARDIS doesn’t translate the language, knowing it would butcher the beauty of the music. Hearing the language authentically, it reminds him of Hawaiian. Karina joins in after a few lines from the next room, an effortless harmony to Kenai’s part. The song is beautiful, and the Doctor would very much like to keep listening. But this is his opportunity.

“Rose,” he whispers.

She just barely glances over at him, acknowledging she heard her name, but returns her eyes to her work. Several long seconds pass while he gathers his courage.

He speaks those sacred words, the invitation he taught her just this morning. Prays to gods that don’t exist that she’ll accept, this first time he has initiated.

Her head whips towards him this time, eyes wide and lips parted, gaping at him.

He holds out a hand, making his intention clear. But he hovers several inches away, waiting for her to accept his offer.

Setting her knife on the counter, she just barely nods.

Abandoning its patience, his hand surges toward its destination, tingling with excitement.

He coordinates them to be partially connected, this time, dipping only shallowly inside her mind while inviting her the same depth inside his. Enough to sense transient thoughts and emotions but not much more. It doesn’t take as long to forge such a connection, and it’s not as all-consuming as a deeper one. Since they’re at high risk of being interrupted, he doesn’t want either of them to become too overwhelmed by whatever may be said or shared in the confines of this link. They both have to function like normal people as soon as the interaction is over.

She’s still not great at maintaining the two-way street, and it’s a bit of a push-pull, but she’s definitely improved since yesterday.

*Holding up all right?* he asks as soon as they’re sufficiently intertwined.

*Still cross with you*, she confesses, knowing she can’t lie to him.

*I gathered.*
I gathered that you gathered, she retorts, and the words are like ice through the link.

*Bit defensive there,* he accuses.

*Hmph.*

*I shouldn’t have run off like that,* he admits.

*No.*

*To be fair,* he paraphrases what he’d said to himself earlier, *I wasn’t quite expecting for you to choose a memory with me in it. Or to get a novel on all the reasons you fancy me.*

Yeah, well. *You got me all emotional, changin’ back like that. That wasn’t fair.*

*Suppose not. But I didn’t actually do it, Rose. It really was the power of your mind that made you see me like that. I can’t have a physical existence in anyone else’s mind. My appearance there all depends on your memory and perception.*

*Hm.* She ruminates on that for a moment, cogs turning in her mind. Wondering why her brain betrayed her like that, made her so vulnerable. Wondering what she might look like to him inside his mind.

An interesting question, that. But one he skips over quickly.

*Thank you for showing me. It was very … special to me. But it was also quite overwhelming. And unexpected. I just needed time to process it, I suppose.*

You ’re somethin’ else, you know. *Spend a couple of hours literally inside my mind, and let me see your every thought, an’ two seconds later go mad when I say I like you.*

*Well, when you put it that way.*

After a few moments of tense silence, she suddenly puts forth a demand.

*Think it ’s only fair I get to see one of yours.*

*That… does seem fair,* he admits.

*And I’ve got to be in it, too,* she adds. *Tit for tat.*

*That makes things a little tougher. Yours was a very nice tit.*

Rose tries to scold him for the remark, fists of anger bludgeon him through the link. But a little bit of joy shines on him, too. If she weren’t trying so hard to stay angry, she’d be laughing.

*Knob.*

He ignores the insult.

*Tonight?* He asks.

*Deal,* Rose agrees.

*Brilliant. I ’m going to disconnect. I think this song is about to end, and Kenai might get a bit weirded out if I’m touching your head like this.*
Upon their reluctant return to individuality, the song is indeed ending, and they both compliment Kenai on his singing voice and choice of song. As they finish chopping the night’s vegetables, they take turns asking about what inspires the music on the island. Who writes the songs, who the best performers are. They even ask to hear another song, and Kenai happily complies. The chopping finished, Rose and the Doctor applaud his encore performance.

“I told Kairi I’d be right back,” the Doctor says softly, only to Rose, as he wipes some sticky juice and shavings from his hands onto his shirt. “Want to come back and help us?”

“Didn’t seem like you needed my help,” she says.

“I can always use your help,” he assures her, reaching for her hand. He can’t bear the thought of her thinking that to be true in any respect.

“You go on ahead.” She tilts her head in the direction of Kairi’s room. “I think Kenai still needs help gettin’ the food ready.”

“Sure?” he asks quietly.

“Yep. See you for dinner.”

“Deal.” He gives her a smile and brushes his thumb over hers before leaving her and Kenai alone.

When he reunites with her, Kairi has basically re-invented Archimedes’ screw. He would know – he was there when that was invented, too. But Kairi is hardly fourteen. The Doctor is tremendously impressed.

By the time dinner is called by Kenai and Rose, Kairi has (with his assistance) calculated the required length and diameter of both the model and the theoretical life-sized version. She has also determined how much power she’ll need to pump the water up the distance. It’s a substantial figure – several levers powered by several individuals will be necessary to produce it. To his astonishment, she comes up with a plan for its operators to use their legs to crank the device, rather than their arms. Blimey, the girl just invented stationary bicycles, too.

As they eat, Kairi insists she doesn’t even really need the Doctor’s help anymore, and assures him he is welcome to leave once dinner is over. Bubbling with confidence and enthusiasm, she promises to recruit Kalei and other friends to help build the model starting tomorrow. The Doctor can’t help but be proud of her progress today, both intellectually and socially.

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Rose insists on having some time for a shower as they depart their hosts’ home. The Doctor is eager to get back to time with just the two of them, but reluctantly agrees to reunite in forty-five minutes. Rose likely doesn’t want him hovering right outside the loo while she takes care of business, so he heads back to the TARDIS to freshen up.

He doesn’t need to shower every day, at least from the perspective of hygiene, but he likes to make a habit of it, anyway. At least in this regeneration. Since early on, he has somehow convinced himself it’s not to make sure he smells as nice as possible for Rose. That it’s just a vain little quirk of this incarnation, nothing more.

But that is utter rubbish. Everything that follows his shower is evidence of that. The evermeticulous crafting of his hair. The application of aftershave though he didn’t touch a razor tonight. Getting his clothes speed-dry-cleaned by the TARDIS. The spritz of cologne on his shirt. The very manly lotion he spreads over his hands so they’re soft against Rose’s skin. (Just, you
know, in case.)

Oh, and then, there’s the fact that he waits for her on the bed in his specs again, only pretending to work on the artificial gills some more. As he sits cross-legged on the bed, awaiting Rose’s entrance (should be any moment now, the water has been off for twenty minutes), there’s no denying the reason he brought along a project in the first place. He knows she thinks the glasses are sexy on him.

*Flaunting it without using it…* he reminds himself.

How bad would it be if he did… use it? His contemplation from late the night before runs through his mind again.

But before he can answer his own question, Rose appears through the curtain to the loo, her face lighting up when she sees him waiting. Her hair is down, a bit of a voluminous mess from wearing it up all day but lovely as ever. She’s wearing a form-fitting pair of pink pyjamas, and a sleeveless white top that leaves little to the imagination. She seems to have forgone wearing a bra.

Suddenly, he finds it preferable to simply see what happens.

Rose throws her old clothes onto her suitcase and plods forward to sit on the bed, and he collects his multipurpose project and stashes it on the desk for later.

“You ready?” she asks, without pretence.

“Straight to business, then?” he half-jokes, swiping off his specs and leaving them on the bedside table.

“You had plenty of time to prepare this time.”

“Suppose I did.” He smiles, glad to see she’s gaining some confidence. It fuels his own. Flopping onto his side facing her, he just stares at her, waiting for her to accept his implicit invitation.

She likely doesn’t intend for it to be seductive, but the way she crawls up the mattress and slowly reclines next to him, he feels rather seduced.

Resisting the temptation to ogle her and allow his mind (and hands) to wander, he reaches for her temple instead. As soon as his fingers make contact, he can feel her heart racing beneath her still-damp skin. He closes his eyes, breathing in coconut and flowers and oestrogen, and just a little adrenaline, too – she’s still nervous tonight.

Dismantling his many defences, he presses his fingertips a little harder and reaches out for the patient, curious tresses of her mind. Once she can sense him there, inviting her, she rushes inside with abandon. Though she’s much more accustomed to the process, he gives her a few moments to fully settle in, to acclimate to the atmosphere inside his mind.

The sensations are just as spectacular as the first time she did this. A powerful sense of humanity humbles his Time Lord consciousness. Mortality intertwines with every fibre of his near-immortal being. A cosy warmth surrounds his two hearts as he is blanketed with compassion. Concentrating on his faculties despite the sudden inebriation, he transforms their dimensionless surroundings into a landscape they can both make some more sense of.

When he opens his eyes, they’re in one of his typical hubs: the TARDIS library.

Rose’s eyes open at the same time, and she appears just as she was when he left her: the pink
He quickly senses Rose’s surprise that they’re in a location she recognises.

But there are fewer places he feels more comfortable than his ship. A place he can hide from the havoc the universe threatens to wreak on his life. Where he can even hide away from time itself. And in this particular room, the countless books offer an added layer of escape from reality. Whether it’s in the musty, yellowed pages of ancient texts or the new book smell of freshly printed novels he hasn’t yet read, this library has always provided him refuge within its depths.

It’s one of his default settings for times like these, because it’s so comfortable. He can hear the distant breathing of the time rotor, can feel the stillness beneath his feet, the irrelevance of time inside the Vortex.

Extracting these sentimental musings from his mind, Rose doesn’t comment on his subconscious’ choice of setting.

They’ve materialized near the centre of the library, and though Rose glances around at the familiar setting, her eyes never stray from his for long.

“Does it work the same way?” she asks, scanning a few of the closest aisles. “Every path leads somewhere different?”

“Yes,” he answers simply.

She drifts away from him slightly to have a better look around, and it’s obvious which particular sections of the familiar library attract her attention. A corner that’s bathed in unnatural shadow. A few nearby shelves concealed by strange floating clouds of darkness. Features that distinguish this fabrication from the real TARDIS library.

“Well,” he sighs. “Not exactly the same. I have a fair bit more practice with shielding memories I don’t want to be seen. Any dark areas are a manifestation of those skills,” he explains.

Rose’s face scrunches up a little, and a little zing of jealousy strikes him. It wasn’t nearly as effortless for her to shield a memory from him.

“After a few centuries, you start to get the hang of things,” he says in his defence.

“What would happen if I tried to see something in the dark?” she asks.

It’s transparent that she isn’t out to invade his privacy; she’s just curious about the mechanics of his hub, the same way she was about her own. Eager to discover their similarities and differences and catalogue them accordingly.

“Why don’t we go and see?” he nods his head towards the nearest darkened shelf. “I still have voluntary defences I can use, the same way you do,” he explains. The wood beneath their feet creaks authentically as they stroll across the library floor. “In the end, it’s still up to me to decide what you can see.”

They approach the shelf in question, and he indicates that Rose come closer. She looks back and forth between him and the shelf a couple times, searching for confirmation that this is okay. He provides it wordlessly, focusing on granting her permission to try, but not for anything to be revealed. It’s a dangerous line to tread, but he has more than enough skill and training to distinguish the two.
As soon as Rose has decided to reach a hand out towards the darkened shelf, the gargantuan wooden edifice rumbles in protest. When her hand inches closer, it starts to move, grinding along the floor away from her hand. She takes a step, and swivels on an invisible axis, the face lined with book spines fleeing from her prying hands. It continues to turn, the noise amplifying as it scratches along the floor, though it doesn’t leave a trace on the ground. Its task is finished mere seconds later as it slams into its new position, wedged between this aisle and the adjacent one. The rear face of the shelf is solid, a single sheet of wood extending up by a dozen feet, leaving its contents utterly inaccessible.

But this aberration in the library’s organization doesn’t last for long. Another nearby shelf creaks to life, rumbling along the floor to fill in the gap left behind by its previous occupant. The aisle is restored to a normal appearance, but this time there are no obscured shelves: the soft reading light from overhead uniformly illuminates each shelf.

With a couple fingers, he motions for Rose to follow him sideways a few steps to inspect the adjacent aisle. As he expected, the perpendicular shelf is no longer obstructing the middle of the aisle; it has disappeared altogether. The aisle isn’t missing a bookshelf of its own, either. During the commotion of the other moving shelf, the off-limits selection stealthily exchanged itself with another shelf someplace in the vast library.

“Woah,” Rose breathes out, letting her astonishment and wonder filter through to him.

“Not so different, hm?”

“No.” She smiles, obviously glad that, despite their inherent incompatibility in the telepathic respect, they share a few things in common.

“Come on.” He reaches for her hand.

They traverse a path through a few of the aisles, towards a wing that’s bathed in a brighter, golden light. Where the dust, collecting on the shelves and visible in the rays of light shining from above, takes on an almost pinkish hue. He leads her to a stack near the middle of the third aisle, quite set on what he wants to show her. He knew this was coming all day, so he has had this particular memory prepared for hours now. Something that includes her. Something meaningful. Something that will take away some of the embarrassment she’s feeling about what she showed him earlier. He has the perfect scene in mind.

From a low shelf on their right, a text pulls itself out from the stack. It floats slowly through the air into the middle of the aisle, blocking their path. It lingers just long enough to reveal its cover, a low-quality black-and-white depiction of the Colosseum, before its cover opens slowly in front of them, angling back as it does. The first thin page in the volume catches in an invisible breeze, hanging in mid-air before it whips against the front cover. The wind picks up, turning page after page with growing speed.

Seeing this phenomenon, Rose clutches the sleeve of his shirt in her fist, jaw dropped open.

The air above the text swirls with glowing gold particles, and a new scene burgeons from the tumult. The bookshelves are replaced with Renaissance paintings; the flat maroon ceiling exchanged for vaulted domes and archways. The soft ambient lighting of the library is overtaken by bright sunlight filtering from large, ornate windows.

A half-finished marble statue of Rose stands in the centre of the new landscape. Her facial features are easily recognizable – lips, nose, ears, eyebrows. Though they’re empty and colourless, her stone eyes still seem to gaze upon her visitors with tenderness. The statue only has one arm, the
other still obscured in stone (later meant to cradle a cornucopia). While half of her tunic clings to her body, the fabric rippling in an invisible breeze, the other half is largely still a stump of marble. Her feet, don’t yet exist, either, trapped inside the rock waiting to be chiselled free.

The Doctor himself is slumped on the floor against a nearby wall, crunching noisily on an apple. His unassuming brown robe highlights his contemporary peasantry, distracting from the glaring anachronism of his hairstyle.

He finishes his snack quickly, and tosses the core onto the floor to be disposed of later. He swipes up the smooth stone and sharp chisel from the platform beneath the statue as he approaches. But, tossing the rock up and down in his palm a few times, he thinks better of it, and sets them both back where they were. Reaching a hand up tenderly, he lets a few fingers graze over the statue’s hair. His thumb brushes over her cheek, and his imagination substitutes soft warmth for the marble’s cold hardness. He allows himself to graze over her bottom lip, just once, imagining what it’d be like to touch the real version. Soft and warm, pliant beneath his touch, glistening with moisture that tempts him to taste.

Rose can feel it all, now. How much he missed the real Rose. How much he longed to touch her and, he dares to think, maybe even to kiss her.

The Doctor lets his hand drop back down to his side, and reluctantly picks up the rock and chisel to resume his work.

With the first clack of the rock against the chisel, the memory begins to fade. More quickly than Rose’s garden had, the library swallows up the Renaissance landscape and the Doctor finds himself standing in the aisle once again. The book in mid-air claps itself shut with a thud, and slowly retreats back to its shelf, kicking out a tiny mist of dust from the shelf as it settles into stillness.

Rose stares at him with wonder in her eyes, even moreso than when she first saw that statue of herself in the museum. Though she can’t hide her budding emotions well, the tender surprise and excitement already brewing between them, she tries to make light of this revelation.

“That kiss makes a bit more sense now,” she teases.

He plays along for a moment, chuckling with her, but then reaches for her hand again.

As he leads her further down the same aisle, another book awakens from the shelf, a sprawling villa on its cover.

This time, classical white pillars and togas bleed out into the aisle to obscure the library.

The Doctor integrates them into the memory at the precise moment a phial of reanimation potion restarts his frozen hearts, and breathes life into his stiff, weighty limbs. Staggering forward with a rush of vertigo and disorientation, he stumbles straight into his rescuer’s arms. Overcome with joy and unspeakable pleasure at being alive, and flooded with the memories of touching the stone Rose’s lips, he leans in for a kiss. It was the first time he kissed Rose properly in this body. The first time he kissed her without the assurance her memory of the incident would be swiped clean.

It’s too short, little more than a strike of lightning. A flash of magnificent proof that he’s alive. An instant of wonder and sheer ecstasy that he can finally feel these soft, pink lips against his. It’s over before he can remember to count the precious seconds it lasted.

“Wotcha,” the memory-Rose squeaks out when he pulls away, a lovely blush on her cheeks.
As quickly as it came, the memory crumples and shrinks into nothingness in the same manner as the first, and the book returns itself back to its proper place.

“I quite enjoyed that kiss, too,” says Rose, her voice unusually wobbly.

Before he can see it coming, the Doctor is suddenly steamrolled by an outpouring of unbridled lust. It’s familiarly feminine, and too powerful to have originated from himself. His blood turns to searing honey in his veins, his double heartbeat pulsing pleasantly in his groin, as visceral desire tugs deep in his chest. It consumes his mental faculties so quickly that it breaks his focus, and the fragile mirage surrounding them crumbles and disappears.

With nothing left to distract them, the volatile new desire simply ricochets between them, growing more intense with each pass.

Equal parts enchanted and frightened by the sudden incendiary passion, the Doctor abruptly severs the link.

When he rejoins Rose in reality, she is closer than he remembers. Knees and hips against his. Her arms circled around his neck, the fabric of his shirt bundled in her fists. The gentle weight of her breasts on his chest. Her gaze can’t seem to find a place to settle, flickering from his lips down to the buttons of his shirt, occasionally meeting his eyes. But regardless of where she’s looking, it’s like she’s trying to decide which dessert to eat first. Her breaths are shallow and shaky. There’s that same delicious blush of pink on her cheeks she had back in Rome.

As if he needs another layer of proof, he inhales a slow, deep breath through his nose. Beneath the more obvious scents of the sea and Rose’s fragrant lotion, he detects a subtle, unique aroma in the close air: unmistakable, intoxicating proof that Rose is aroused.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Look at me, sticking to my biweekly schedule! I inadvertently switched to Fridays, but I'm okay with that. As always thanks to Amber and Heidi for the superb betas. But I changed a lot after they were done, so still blame me for errors.

Anyway... ahem. Yes. Uhm... enjoy. ;P

For a substantial period of scientific history, electricity and magnetism were thought to be separate forces. It wasn’t until well into the first Gallifreyan empire (and, if his memory serves, 1820 on Earth) that it was discovered they are, in fact, inextricably tied to one another. Electromagnetism, it was later named. But it isn’t until right now, in the Kaelondaian year 2981, about 21:00 local time, that this unity has been so unequivocally clear in the Doctor’s mind. As the electrical storm raging Rose’s mind draws him to her like flecks of iron to a magnet.

The entire nervous system is, after all, an intricate network of wires to carry electrical impulses. It’s no coincidence that neurons themselves resemble electrical phenomena; their dendrites and axon terminals branching out to their neighbours the same way lightning bolts branch against the night sky before striking the earth. He can feel it, the static in the air between them, confirming every one of Rose’s synapses is a live wire, waiting to transfer signals to and from his own.

Her soft, pink lips are parted just slightly, a cautious invitation. Her pupils are blown wide, eager for what may happen next but anxious he might pull back again.

Tonight, the Doctor thinks, he will not be doing that.

Before he can give himself a reason to run, he closes the short distance between them and seals his mouth over hers. It has none of the urgency he would like it to have, but all the electricity. A gently humming current that brings light and energy to once-dormant parts of his mind. After reliving the memories they just have, and with how long it’s been since they last kissed – a whole twenty-four hours, nearly – it’s already heaven. Really. There’s no place in all the celestial bodies where he feels more welcomed and cherished than in her kiss. Her fist tightens on his shirt and her breath hitches, but he isn’t sure if it’s from surprise or restraint, or some combination of both.

There’s suddenly a pleasant tingle on his lips, his mind feeling emboldened to activate their connection through their mouths, though it’s not quite strong enough yet for such a thing. His fingers twitch with the urge to reach for her temple and open it again, to forget about pacing himself and give in completely. But Rose hasn’t moved, or reciprocated in any substantial way, so he pulls away, truncating this first kiss before it can escalate.

Is she simply uncertain of his intentions – if this is a kiss goodnight or the prelude to something more?

Is he certain?

They may not have forever, as she keeps promising, but they will have plenty of time to make love his way. And it would be such a relief to finally let this happen. Holding himself at arm’s length is
like holding back one powerful magnet from another – it requires constant determination to keep them from touching, and it’s exhausting. All he has to do is let go for a moment and the struggle would be over. It would no longer be something he had to worry about, or another thing on the checklist of ways he’s disappointed Rose. And even without a proper, deep connection, their remote one is active enough that they’ll be able to share some fraction of pleasure with each other. If nothing else, the satisfaction Rose will get from it will be quite enjoyable in itself. But he is also fairly confident Rose will do everything in her power to ensure he is satisfied, too. He stifles a shiver at the thought, not wanting to give himself away.

Whatever happens for the remainder of their stay on this island or anywhere else, in this moment he doesn’t want to run from the temptation anymore. He wants to do this. More than anything, he wants to put an end to his streak of selfish decisions and make tonight about her.

Meeting her hungry gaze again, he tries to wordlessly communicate that it’s her night, and she only needs to show him what to do. He lets his nose brush against hers, tilts his head, waiting for her to accept his offer. She does quickly, pulling from behind his neck until their lips meet again. Melting into her, he surrenders the reins, letting her decide what kind of kiss she wants this to be. It’s gentle and slow, at first, like she’s testing how long he’ll allow the overtly sensual contact. Tempering her obvious exhilaration that he’s considering this at all, for fear he may change his mind. But he doesn’t make any indications he’s about to stop her, returning every brush of her lips with one of his own, matching her tender curiosity.

With his unblemished track record for tempting and leaving, he thinks perhaps she needs a more tangible signal from him. Carefully, he curls one finger around the hem of her shirt, rolling it up her stomach until his thumb brushes over the newly exposed skin. The light circles he traces over her stomach and hipbone elicit a rash of gooseflesh under his hand.

This unspoken whisper of consent and willingness spurs her into action. With a soft sigh into his mouth, she deepens the kiss a little more, nibbling lightly on his bottom lip, tasting it with her tongue. She devotes her entire being to this moment. Pulls herself closer and closer to him, never satisfied, as though she’d like to climb inside his very soul.

Intent to match every move with one of his own (so it can never be said they didn’t both initiate this), his hand slips under the front of her flimsy top, feeling her racing heart beneath her heated skin. Encouraged by her passion, he traces his hand higher until his fingers graze over her ribs. He pauses for a moment, giving her a chance to stop him, but she hardly seems to notice, rapt as she is by his lips. He climbs higher inch by careful inch, waiting to feel the fabric of a bra, but it never comes. (He knew it.) His pinkie grazes the underside of her breast, and he moulds his hand around the swell of smooth skin, grazes her nipple with the pad of his thumb.

With a sharp gasp, Rose breaks the kiss, and a crackling bolt of arousal flashes through their every point of contact, sizzles through his veins. His own desire sparked by her excitement, he groans a little against her cheek as his length twitches in his shorts. Eager to produce another sound like that from her lips, he rolls her nipple beneath his thumb.

She arches into his touch, and her jaw drops open but the sound is caught in her throat. Frustrated with the fabric constraining his hand, he reaches down to roll it up high enough that the full expanse of her chest is revealed to him. He holds the garment bunched up at her collarbone, and slides down the bed just slightly so he can angle his head down to her breast, replacing his thumb with his mouth. Teeth latch onto her skin with gentle suction as his tongue swirls the sensitive tip.

There it is. Rose whispers a string of unintelligible syllables, and pride swells up in his chest. He pulls back with a barely contained grin on his lips.
“This okay?” he asks, already knowing the answer.

“Yes.” she nods, breathless. He returns to his task with renewed enthusiasm, delighted at how easy it is to please her this way. Burying her fingers in his hair, she holds him fast, pleading. “Long as you don’t stop.”

Another intense wave of arousal washes over him.

But, increasingly irritated with the rumpled up shirt that keeps getting in his way, he pulls back again, with a displeased whimper from Rose.

“Can we take this off?” he murmurs, pulling up on the shirt.

She nods as she lifts off the bed momentarily to lift it over her head single-handedly and toss it to the floor.

No intentions of teasing her, he dips his head to give due attention to her other breast. circling his tongue in ancient symbols before closing his lips around the hardening bud and sucking it gently into his mouth.

With only a few moments of this, another shockwave of lust rattles through him. Beautifully tinted with affection though it is, Rose’s mind is more powerful than he gave her credit for. The Doctor’s mind is swimming in the pool of their combined arousal. All the many compartments of his highly developed brain converge on a singular thought, a singular mission: to satisfy her. Whatever it takes. It’d be great to satisfy himself, too, of course, but all that matters is her pleasure. Regardless of how he achieves bringing her to a climax, he vows to himself she should never have to do it herself again.

Anxious to move closer to that goal, he hooks a few fingers around the waistband of her pyjamas, and she recoils slightly. Is it once more out of shock? Releasing her breast and the fabric gently, he looks up at her, cautious.

“All right?” His voice is hardly audible as he traces a finger over her hipbone.

She nods her head, any audible response stuck in her throat.

Ensuring he takes both the bottoms and knickers with it, he slides his hand down the outside of her thigh. She lifts her bum off the bed and pushes down the opposite side with her hand, and once he gets them both bunched around her ankles she kicks them off with her feet.

He has to pause a moment at the sight beneath him. An endless expanse of fair skin waiting to be kissed, flushed with bright pink on her cheeks and chest. Taut rosy nipples on deliciously round breasts. The soft curvature of her hips and stomach. Short, dark hairs tucked between smooth, toned legs, enticing him to discover what they conceal.

Watching him ogle her exposed form, Rose crosses her arm over her chest and brings her knees up closer to her body, striving for some concealment from his gaze. Troubled that she feels the need, he leans down close to kiss her, tender and sweet, as a means of giving her a little of the privacy she seems to want. Both their eyes closed, she relaxes a little. Subtly, carefully, he closes his hand around her arm and pulls it away from her body, and she circles it around his back along with the other.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispers as he gently releases he lips. She lets out a breathy chuckle, like she doesn’t believe him. He lifts up on his elbow a little more and glances down, still drinking in the sight that he tried to imagine (and failed, he can see now) for so long. Even his superior Time
Lord imagination isn’t good enough to have fantasised something so perfect, and it’s having even more trouble trying to imagine what will come next. Touching every one of the soft curves. Tracing their shape with his fingers and lips. Some of them cushioning his weight as he moves inside her.

Again, she squirms beneath him, and it raises a red flag in his mind.

“Do you not want me to see you?” he asks, suddenly worried he’s rushed her into crossing a line she wasn’t ready to cross.

“It’s just…” She fidgets a little more. “It would help if you didn’t still have all your clothes on.”

“Fair point.” He pulls back on his knees and gets to work unbuttoning his shirt, dutifully staring up at the wall rather than down at her body, tempting though it is. At least until he is in a comparable state of nakedness. He internally mourns the fact that Rose still has this level of insecurity about her body image. She has gained quite a bit of confidence since she started traveling with him, but he didn’t know deep down she still struggled with self-acceptance. He hasn’t done a good enough job reminding her how stunning she is.

“Are we really gonna do this?” she asks, the words a bit broken on her lips as they tremble slightly.

His hands still on his shirt immediately.

“Do you not want to?” he asks quietly, hearts in his throat.

“I do, I do,” she assures him, placing a hand on his forearm. “It’s just… I didn’t expect… I’m…” she swallows hard.

She’s nervous. It’s new, and faint, but it’s definitely there. Trembling within their link.

“We don’t have to do anything,” he echoes her reassurance to him from earlier in the evening as he abandons the task of taking off his shirt to lie down next to her. Rose doesn’t respond, but chews on her lip, lost in thought. He stares down at the bit of white sheet between them. “I mean, it certainly felt like you wanted to, but…” He sounds exactly like the scared newborn he was when he asked Rose if she wanted to leave right after he regenerated.

Rather than answer with words, she surges forward, taking his face in her hands and crushing her lips to his. A passionate kiss that leaves him lightheaded. Her hands drift down to his shirt to finish unlatching the buttons, and he wrestles himself free of the sleeves until it gets lost in the sheets somewhere.

“You sure?” he rushes out when she releases him.

She nods. “I just haven’t prepared for this, really. S’pose I’m a bit nervous.” She chuckles humourlessly, the blush on her cheeks darkening. “An’ I sorta can’t believe you haven’t changed your mind and ran off, yet. It doesn’t feel real.”

Ah. He supposes that makes sense; he changes his mind and bolts in matters of their relationship fairly often.

“It’s real, Rose,” he whispers, lowering his mouth to her neck, nibbling the skin lightly and soothing it with his tongue. He lingers in a few different spots in his search for one she really likes, and knows he’s found one just beneath her hairline when she sighs his name.

It lights a fire of urgency inside him, hearing his name like that, and his hand finds its way to her
breast again, teasing with the tip of his thumb. It achieves precisely the outcome he hoped: his name on her lips again as her hips thrust up into the air, searching. No will in him to deny her anything, he panders to her desire, trailing his hand down her abdomen until his fingers are buried in the short hairs between her thighs. A single digit dips in between her folds and she cries out, another gorgeous sound he tries to preserve in his memory. Her fingernails scratch between his shoulder blades; he groans at how slick she is already. His hearts pound at the mere suggestion of being sheathed in this slippery heat.

Burying his face in her neck, he explores her folds with slow strokes for a few moments, using Rose’s vocal signals to guide him to the right spot. Shifting a hand up behind his head, she yanks him up by the hair for a ravenous kiss as he grazes her clit a few times, light touches every few seconds. Tingling remnants of her pleasure zing through to him, amplifying the throbbing sensation in his aching length, and he presses down just a little harder, seeking his own release now in addition to hers.

Suddenly, Rose’s hand reaches down to his shorts and she struggles to try to edge them down over his bum. Entirely unsuccessful, she breaks them out of the kiss, panting.

“I want to come with you,” she explains, tugging on the shorts again.

“Think that may happen either way,” he grits out, summoning all his self-control to stop his ministrations. Human arousal is so incredibly potent. This is even worse than in the TARDIS kitchen, that night when Rose was…

Still determined to heed any and all of her wishes, he pulls away and makes use of both his hands to wriggle out of his shorts.

Before he can roll on top of her, Rose reaches out and wraps her hand around his length, tugging lightly on the skin. Eyelids drooping shut, he clenches a fistful of sheets in his hand with the explosion of pleasure it brings to finally be touched there. She tugs once more, twice, and his head spins with the intensity of it: her lust and his mingling in his mind, her hand wrapped around him soft and warm and completely maddening.

He gasps as Rose brushes her thumb over the tip. “I’m… ahh…” Unable to finish a coherent sentence, he rests his hand on Rose’s bum and squeezes it lightly, hoping to convey some kind of vague warning. He doesn’t want to come without her, either, but he’s been rendered somewhat speechless by her touch.

She heeds his warning, and pulls her hand away, and it takes the Doctor a moment to return to his senses. To try to knock his excitement down a few levels so he can last for her.

He opens his eyes to find her legs open, waiting for him, and he clambers quickly but carefully on top of her, his length hovering tantalizingly at the apex of her thighs. She pulls up her knees close to her body and he sinks lower, touching as much of her skin as he can. The dip of her bellybutton on his abdomen, the pebbled peaks of her breasts grazing his chest. Close enough to her face that he could kiss her, but he watches her instead – the anticipation that sparkles in her darkened eyes, the ‘o’ of surprise her mouth makes when his length presses against her slit.

He grinds against her a couple times, sharing in the soft noises she makes, before she spreads her knees a little wider and he slips between her folds. The warm wetness spreads over his length and she rocks her hips against him until the he rubs against her clit. She repeats the motion while he hovers motionless above her, and he thinks he might die right here, watching her use him to satisfy herself. The gleam of confidence in her eyes, the pleasure contorting her features. More and more, the Doctor is realising just how badly Rose has wanted this.
He lifts off of her just slightly so he can guide his hand between them, and repositions the tip of his length at her entrance. Before he can even think of bracing himself, she pulls his bum forward and he slides inside easily, slowly stretching her to accommodate him until he is sheathed inside her completely. Warm and snug and deliciously wet.

Though most Time Lords vehemently insisted otherwise, physical intimacy can absolutely enrich a relationship. Maybe not as much as a mental connection, but stars. This is definitely enriching theirs already. Coupled this way, Rose holds his body with the same steadfast warmth as she does his mind. Her legs wrap around his waist, her arms around his shoulders, welcoming him as a part of herself. The contented sounds they make harmonize together. Their minds are only weakly connected now, conducting even the strongest signals only weakly, but physically they’re one. Two poles of a magnet snapping together, or opposing ions finally colliding to form a neutral pair – it feels like the strongest forces in the universe have brought them together this way.

He is hesitant to move, to remind either of them that they are separate entities. His mind craves to reignite their connection right now, complete the union, but he doesn’t want to overwhelm her. They’ve only tried it a handful of times yet, and this is their first intimate night together. Her brain might short circuit if he tries to push her too much with that onslaught of sensation, and she could pass out on him altogether. And he really, really doesn’t want that right now. It would spoil pretty much everything he has planned.

He kisses her instead, openly accepting the fresh waves of excitement and lust crashing over him. But she starts to wriggle her hips, searching for movement, so he retreats slowly and pushes back inside experimentally a few times, learning the right motion to keep as much of their bodies touching as possible. Her fingers twist in the short hair just above his neck; her legs squeeze him tighter. He angles his hips so he can rub against her clit with every push forward, and they find a rhythm together, a slow push and pull of hips as sweat begins to lubricate their skin. The smell of salt and sex permeates the air. Her gasped breaths and murmurs of praise are hot and messy against his shoulder.

The tension coiling inside him is already almost unbearable, but he also cannot bear the thought of this being over so soon. Before he can get caught up chasing a climax, he slows down, craning his neck to place kisses on her lips and forehead with each slow thrust to focus on lasting for her. But he’s already so far gone, patience becomes increasingly difficult. His cheek brushes against hers on every thrust as he bows his head into the pillow and tries not to shout. She makes matters worse by latching her lips onto the newly accessible skin on his neck, sending a pleasant shiver down his spine all the way to the tip of his cock.

“About to…” he warns, his voice breaking.

“Me too,” she sighs into crook of his neck with the most erotic, beautiful cry of his name yet.

And that’s it. The slow build of ecstatic pressure rushes to its outlet; he groans out her name as the tension pulses out of him to the time of her gorgeous, fluttering contractions around him. As he spills his pleasure, and she accepts this evidence of the encounter without complaint, he can’t help the surge of pride that consumes him.

But then the relaxing crash of feel-good bonding hormones floods through them, their effects synergistic through their weakly buzzing link. Relaxed and humbled, he kisses her again, soothing and grateful, as they catch their breath. Eventually his softening length slips out of her on its own, and he rolls over and deftly feels around the sheets for his Oxford shirt to clean her up.

“Wow,” Rose breathes as they collapse side by side, limbs still intertwined.
“Lovely,” he concurs, nodding. Still high from the orgasm, and the tingly pleasure of damp, overheated skin touching everywhere it can. “Really, really lovely,” he mumbles, nuzzling her neck.

They’re quiet for a while, too satisfied for proper conversation. They savour the intimate moment with soft touches and intermittent kisses while their systems recover.

“Do you…” Rose is the one to interrupt the silence, and his head snaps up to look at her. “Could we… is it possible to… what we did earlier, is it possible to do that during…?”

She trails off suggestively, hoping he understands.

Normally, he might decline to answer. There’s already been so much new for them today, and he doesn’t want them to get ahead of themselves. And he certainly doesn’t want her to feel guilty for her impatience upon finding that there is, indeed, more to this. Or to feel that she’s missed out on something by being a physical-desire-driven human. But it’s very hard to resist a cautiously curious request from someone who’s just given you so much pleasure.

“Yeah,” he acknowledges, tracing circles on her arm with the tip of his finger.

“Oh? Then why didn’t…” she trails off again, gesturing down to their naked forms.

“I didn’t want to overwhelm you on our first try,” he admits.

“Overwhelm me?” she raises an eyebrow sceptically.

“Oh, yeah,” he drawls out suggestively. “If you think I was good tonight, I’d really make your toes curl then.”

“You seem awfully confident.” She giggles, but there’s a hesitance to it. Equal parts confused and pleased.

“It’s the way I learned. The way I prefer. Everything is stronger up here, for me.” He taps his temple.

“If you wanted… why didn’t you tell me?”

Yep, there it is: that guilty, missed-out feeling.

“No no no, don’t do that,” he rushes out. “It’s like I said: I didn’t want to move too fast. You’ve only just started practicing telepathy two days ago.”

“Yeah, but I could’ve waited if you’d just explained.”

Oh, blimey.

“Now you tell me…” he sighs, scrubbing a hand down his face. Even when he thought he was making the right decision, being cognizant of her desires and communicating properly, he still didn’t get it quite right. Will he ever?

“I promise you, this was brilliant,” he adds.

But Rose doesn’t quite look convinced, and he can feel wisps of remorse from her mind.

It’s new to feel these lighter, more ephemeral emotions, and he dares to think their connection may be stronger now than it was mere minutes ago, before the clothes came off. It’s not implausible: it
was quite a spectacular relationship-building exercise. He wonders if the strengthening effect will be temporary.

Catching himself following a tangent, he refocuses his attention on Rose. Brainstorms a plan to remedy her guilt.

Thinking on his feet, he places a couple fingers on her temples.

“May I?”

“‘Course.” She nods, waiting.

As a quick way to assuage her fears (and give her a little something extra he reckons she’s more than earned), he drifts into her mind. Giving her only a few short moments to adjust to his presence, he replays in sharpest detail his memory of one particular moment: Rose clinging onto him for his last few thrusts before they finished together. He lets her share in every sense: the softness of her lips on his neck, the friction of damp skin, the slick heat wrapped around him, the way his voice cracks and goes hoarse as he topples over the edge. Every overstimulated nerve firing at once as the pleasure overtakes him and he spurs against her contracting walls.

Rose clutches onto his arms, gasping heavily, trembling next to him. As he predicted, her brain was sufficiently tricked that she physically climaxed again. He disconnects and pulls his hand away with an enormous grin on his face.

“Oh my God,” she rasps out, and thumps a hand over her heart while she catches her breath. “How did you do that?” she asks.

“Told you,” he tilts his head. He knows he’s being a bit arrogant, but he can’t help it. She makes him insane.

“Blimey.” She closes her eyes, limp and spent. “We’ve got to try that.”

“All in good time,” he promises ambiguously. “For now, I think you need rest.”

“Mmm,” she agrees, snuggling up close, resting her head on his shoulder.

The Doctor tilts his head down for one more chaste kiss goodnight, and pulls the blanket over them both. His fingers comb gently through her hair and swirl indecipherable phrases down her back, a silent lullaby to carry her down from the heights of pleasure. Before he has finished writing all the ways he adores her, she’s sound asleep. Arms burrowed against his chest, breathing slow and even against his collarbone. Her soft figure is sultry warm and quite lusciously nude against his.

His arm snugly around her, he closes his eyes, content to get some rest, himself. This sex with a human thing is wonderfully exhausting. Fatigue has slowly set in to his muscles, leaving his limbs feeling strangely heavy. But at the same time, he also feels lighter than air, like he might float away if he doesn’t hang onto Rose tightly. And with the concoction of happy signalling molecules still bubbling through his system, there isn’t a negative thought to be found in his mind. All he can seem to think about is how perfect it feels to hold Rose in his arms, no barriers left between them. And how unthinkably brilliant it will be when they can combine their nascent telepathic and lovemaking skills into one glorious evening.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

I did it guys! Hope you enjoy :)

Thank you very much to Heidi for the last minute beta!!!

When the first hints of consciousness tug at Rose’s mind, it feels… good. Unusually good. Better, maybe, than she ever has upon returning to consciousness. Every centimetre of her skin radiates with a sultry heat, and it’s surprisingly pleasurable as it trickles through her bloodstream. Tiny shivers course down her spine to tips of her toes. A dreamlike fatigue anchors her weightless limbs to the plush linens, leaves her senses hazy. It’s almost too good. Maybe she is still dreaming. But regardless of whether this is reality or not, she doesn’t want it to end. Content in the peaceful heaven, she breathes out a long and low hum of pleasure, willing herself to drift deeper into the dream.

It’s then that she realises she isn’t alone.

In response to her call, someone whispers her name, close to her ear.

Stirred by the familiar voice, her awareness starts to return. Bits and pieces of reality begin to filter through her mind.

A soft, wet caress on the side of her neck. Something warm and solid draped over her ribs. Long, sentient digits cradling her breast, tender as they brush over her nipple. She lolls her head back against a waiting shoulder as the truth catches up with her, silently pleading for more of what he’s offering.

The ambiguous, lethargic pleasure from before escalates as nerve endings all over her body are enticed from their slumber. She bites her lip as arousal trickles down through her body. Tension coils deliciously in her belly until her racing heart throbs between her legs, her clit swelling with every beat. Unable to stay confined in her twilight state any longer, she calls out his name, a delirious, desperate sound.

The Doctor whispers her name again, too, between swipes of his tongue over her pulse point. Her limbs writhe into responsiveness, back arching, nails scratching the bed. The once-luxurious fabric of the sheets is scratchy compared to the softness of his touches.

“You’re awake.” His voice is unusually hushed and desperate.

All she can respond with is a mumbled affirmative.

“Been waiting so long,” he breathes, growing more eager with this confirmation. His lips shift to her jaw, and though she’s drowsy and drunk with pleasure, she turns her head, searching, and his lips quickly capture hers. It’s wet, and a bit sloppy at first, but he quickly tempers himself so she has time to catch up to his state of desperation. A deep, tender kiss that kindles the embers of arousal slowly.

The hand on her breast shifts down to her stomach, pulling her back gently until her bum collides
with his – oh. She gasps against his mouth. He has been waiting a while. Swollen and overheated and bloody hard. How long has he been awake? Or did he not sleep at all, merely spent the night counting the seconds until he could have her again? She can almost see it in her mind, skin pink and taut, protruding with veins. And though she’s facing the wrong way, tempted by the imagined sight, she peeks open her eyelids.

She’s surprised to discover that the hut is still bathed in darkness. There may just be a hint of the first rays of sunrise filtering through the window, but then, maybe it’s just bright starlight. She can hardly see anything in the room besides the bright white of the linens. He wasn’t even able to wait the full night to make love again. The thought sends fresh shivers down her body, and she grinds her bum back against him in a slow circle.

He breaks their kiss with a low, restrained groan against her cheek.

Tucking her knees up closer to her chest, she parts her legs, one knee resting on the bed, the other pointing to the ceiling. Reaching a hand back, she feels around for his bum and squeezes the cheek she finds, pulling him closer as she pushes back against his solid length again.

His hand grips onto her thigh, securing her hips with ease as his other hand guides his member to her entrance.

But before he can find it, an unpleasant doubt suddenly nags at the rational part of her mind. A question she’d been too swept up to ask last night.

“We don’t, ah… need anything right?” she rasps out. He’s mentioned several times how ‘incompatible’ they are, but she wants to be certain they’re explicitly incompatible in this regard before they make this a habit.

The Doctor shakes his head.

“We’re not…” he breathes as he finally nestles between her folds. Wasting no time with teasing, he pushes inside carefully as he ekes out the rest of the feeble sentence. “…compatible.”

He exhales heavily against her neck, stretching and filling her slowly. Buried inside her at last, his hips snug against the curve of her bum, he makes the most beautiful sound, a cross between a sigh and a sob that he muffles against her jaw. His fingertips dig into her thigh as they both adjust to the feeling, and she echoes his sound, softer and higher. He pulls out slightly, only to push forward again in a shallow thrust, pulling back on her thigh to move her hips back to meet his. They both cry out together, this time, and he repeats the motion, slipping out just a little more, his thrust lasting a little longer.

Rose has always been fond of this position. It lends itself to the laziness of mornings, to gentleness and taking their time. With so much skin touching, his body truly wrapped around hers, it feels like they’re even closer than the night before. There’s a familiarity to it, too, that helps her to feel relaxed – she already knows now how he likes to move. What his voice sounds like, low and husky with pleasure, when he tells her how good she feels. How he likes to touch her everywhere he can, his hand shifting on her thigh with every soft collide of their hips, lips wandering from her shoulder to her cheek. It’s slower, this morning, his thrusts deep and unhurried. Quieter, too: hushed cries of each other’s names, the rustling of the blankets as they move together, the soft smack of wet kisses and gasped breaths against her skin.

As her own pleasure builds, it’s enhanced by occasional sparks of bliss through their weakly humming link. The focused, deeply cerebral arousal she now knows is the Doctor’s. His hand slowly drifts down her thigh, closer to where they’re joined. It takes away some of the power of his
thrusts, they’re a little shallower without the extra leverage. But when two of his fingertips tend to her exposed clit, suddenly it’s quite worth it. Rose arches back into him, and a moan escapes her throat in praise of this blissful surprise. It breaks the peaceful bubble they’ve been closed in thus far. Slowing down but not stopping anything, the Doctor cranes his neck to capture Rose’s lips with his, happily swallowing any further outbursts of pleasure.

She’s getting close. So close she wants to beg him to speed up. She knows he must be near the edge too, and starts to rock backwards to meet him as he pushes forward. With a gasp into her mouth, he presses down with his forearm across her abdomen to admonish the behaviour, holding her still as best as he can in the awkward position. She heeds his warning, yielding to the torturous pace and gentleness of his thrusts, the slow dance of his fingertips, the way he deliberately savours each kiss.

Before long, they are both rewarded by the Doctor’s transcendent patience.

The swells of her climax start to build from within, heightened every time he grinds his hips into her bum. It spreads through her body as it intensifies, taking her soaring higher and higher: white stars burst behind her eyes, her extremities go numb purely because her mind is no longer able to process everything. She’s thankful the Doctor’s mouth is still intermittently covering hers: the muffled moans and broken mews that escape whenever she pauses to breathe would surely be screams if her lips weren’t occupied at all. He doesn’t stop, and she climbs higher still, until she thinks she can’t take anymore, she might lose consciousness at any moment. But she never does, and when the mounting pleasure finally reaches a peak, she breaks away, gasping his name one last time before she explodes. Every synapse in her body fires at once, deep muscles fluttering around the Doctor as she shudders in his arms, endless, blissful shivers spreading throughout her body.

He comes only moments later with a final, forceful thrust, quieting his cries of ecstasy against her neck as he spills himself deep inside her.

He sounds so gorgeous.

They stay intertwined for a long moment, two lifeless heaps with tangled limbs. The Doctor listlessly brushes his lips over her jawline. Lets his hand wander over her stomach and the curve of her waist.

“Good morning,” he breathes, nuzzling her cheek with his nose.

“Mmm,” she mumbles in acknowledgment.

He chuckles lightly as he pulls out of her.

Drowsiness is setting in quickly. There’s still not much light coming in the window, she notices as she tries to hold her eyes open. Sex hormones and sleep deprivation are a bad combination if he actually wants her to stay awake right now.

He folds the covers down to their waists and rolls away from her, and she wrenches an eye open as she reaches around, feeling remorseful for not returning his greeting as enthusiastically as she should have. But he’s not leaving; only reaching off the side of the bed for something. When he turns over again, he’s holding his shirt in his hand.

“Er… sorry,” he mutters, offering it to her feebly.

She takes it from him, and halfheartedly cleans herself up before throwing the shirt back onto the floor somewhere. It’s not a big thing. She’d rather this than have to deal with a condom every time,
and it’s rather nice to not have even the slightest anxiety about an accidental conception.

“C’mere,” she mumbles as she turns to him properly, putting an arm around his waist and tugging.

He comes willingly, scooting closer and wrapping an arm around her waist, too. He brushes his nose against hers, and touches his lips to hers. She weakly returns the gesture, but is still having a hard time imagining starting the day this early. The first light of sunrise is just beginning to filter through the window, the dim glow just before the sun breaches the horizon.

“’S all right if I go back to sleep for a tick?” she asks, slurring the words a bit.

“Of course,” he says, combing his hand back through her hair. “Sorry I woke you.”

He continues to stroke his fingers through her hair, gently massaging her scalp as he goes, and within a few minutes, she’s right on the cusp of unconsciousness. But before she can cross the threshold, an unexpected sensation tugs on her mind. A faint but unmistakable fear. The sort of deep-seated, guilt-covered, unnecessary anxiety that could only belong to the Doctor.

She resists the urge to sigh.

What could he be afraid of now? Or guilty or anxious about? This was the best way to wake up she thinks she’s ever had. She should’ve scolded him for apologising before so he didn’t have a chance to consider he’d done something wrong. There was nothing wrong about that.

“Wha’s wrong, Doctor?” she asks, her voice surprisingly clear for her state of grogginess.

His hand freezes on her head, and she pries her eyes open and stares over at him. He inhales a slow, measured breath as his eyebrows slowly pull together. Rather than answering, he rolls onto his back, expelling the breath towards the ceiling in a dramatic huff before pinching the bridge of his nose.

“What?” she asks, affronted.

“It’s just… you don’t have to do this every time.” He puts forth visible effort to keep his tone neutral.

“What?” she asks. “Care how you’re feeling?”

“Not that,” he says, like it should be obvious. “Show off about knowing how I’m feeling.”

“Like you haven’t been doin’ the same to me?” she counters, bewildered by the accusation.

“I ignore…” he catches himself in the lie, and changes course, “… some things.”

“Mhm.” She crosses her arms, though much of the effect of the gesture is lost in her position.

“You could at least give me the illusion of privacy, now and then,” he insists. He sounds more irritated than she would have expected. But Rose should’ve seen this coming. He used to be so bloody good at hiding how he was feeling, and she won’t let him anymore. And it’s driving him mad.

“Kay, well, ‘s not like I know how to do that,” she responds, some irritation bleeding into her tone, too. It’s contagious. She hates that they’re doing this right now, when the morning started off so well. But now that it’s out in the open, it’s better to get the issue resolved than to sweep it under the rug as he’s prone to do.
“Well, I do,” he mumbles.

“I know,” she responds through gritted teeth. This isn’t even the first time he’s brought this up; his bitterness that she made him promise not to employ his superior abilities. “If you want privacy so bad, why’d you even agree to this?” she asks, swallowing down a lump in her throat.

He sighs, rubbing his eyes.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How’d you mean it, then?”

“It’s just… difficult,” he hedges. “It’s been a while since I’ve had to share my head like this with anyone.”

His answer isn’t very convincing. Rose can’t help but feel like he doesn’t really, and truly want this. That perhaps all along he has gone along with it more to appease her than anything, when he’d like to clam back up in his shell and never have to share anything again. He does seem to enjoy it, in the moment, but that doesn’t necessarily mean he’d still rather not get entangled in it. Rose sighs, and her head droops onto the pillow as her vision blurs with unshed tears. She forgoes blinking to try to stop them from falling.

“Rose.” He reaches a hand out to stroke her cheek, and a tear falls anyway. She leans into his touch as a few more follow it, the floodgates opened with this small gesture. “I shouldn’t have reacted that way. It’s not your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong.” He strokes his thumb on her cheek tenderly.

“You jus’ act like… you don’t really want to do this.” The truth leaks out of her the same way the rogue tears did. But she doesn’t have much to lose; he’ll be able to extract her sadness if she doesn’t tell him outright, anyway.

“I do,” he reassures her, his eyes boring into hers in the dim orange light from outside. “I’m just… having some trouble adjusting.” He takes a deep breath. “I’ve spent decades cultivating these barriers. For a long time now, they’ve been my only means of protecting myself. It’s unnerving not to be able to use them. I just feel a bit… exposed. When someone else knows your emotions, they can use them against you.”

His uncharacteristic honesty is sobering.

“What do you think I’m gonna do?” Rose asks. She’s too relieved by his confession to be completely serious, but too saddened by the sentiment to be completely joking.

“I don’t think you’ll do anything. It’s just something I’ve been hard-wired with, I suppose.”

“Has it always affected you this way, then? I mean, you said you’ve done this before, with others…” she trails off, worried she’s misunderstood something.

“All Gallifreyans cultivate their mental barriers from the time they’re young,” he explains. “So, I’ve never been in a situation quite like this one before.”

She frowns a bit.

“Which isn’t a bad thing,” he adds quickly. “It’ll just take some adjusting.” He sighs as he stares up at the ceiling, lost in his thoughts for several moments. “I’m sorry, again,” he adds softly.
“Apology accepted.”

“Thank you.”

“So…” she nibbles the inside of her cheek, debating whether it’s wise to press him on this. But for him to have any reaction that’s less than stellar right after they’ve had sex, she’s too morbidly curious not to. “Are you gonna tell me what was wrong, though?”

His mouth twitches down into a grimace.

“You don’t have to,” she adds.

He regards her for a long moment, arguments visibly churning in his mind, but looks away again. Back to the trusty old ceiling.

“This isn’t like me.” He shakes his head.

It’s vague, but she can work with it.

“What isn’t like you?”

“Waking someone from perfectly restful sleep for a shag,” he admits. “I’m normally quite patient. And not at all reliant on physical intimacy.”

“That is a bit out of the ordinary for you, then,” Rose agrees, not wanting to diminish any concern he might have, even if it snuffs out the confidence he alighted with the very same aberrant actions. “’M not complainin’ though.”

He smirks at that.

“It was fun, hm?” he agrees. “It is odd, though. I only slept for about an hour, but there were plenty of other things I could’ve done to keep busy while you slept. I think maybe you were dreaming about me or something.”

“Gonna blame all your randy episodes on me?”

“Considering it.” He tilts his head to the side playfully. But then he grows more pensive. “It’s possible that it is an effect of our connection, some of your human urges constantly rubbing off on me,” he ponders aloud. “Like I said, I’ve never experienced this with a human before…”

“Y’know, stereotyping is rude. Just ‘cause I’m human doesn’t automatically mean I’m always more randy than you.”

“Actually…” the Doctor begins, but snaps his mouth shut at the warning look on her face. “Right. It is rare for me, though. It’s been such a long time since I felt like this. And I worry that…” He catches himself again, bites his tongue before he can say something. Rose can only guess he was about to say something meaningful. It’s usually the case when he censors himself.

“Dunno about Gallifrey, but on Earth it’s not a crime to get a little randy. Chances are if you are, I am too. An’ if I’m not, I’ll let you know. So, don’t think there’s any reason to worry.”

“Good to know.” The Doctor smiles, but it’s half-hearted, like there’s still something bothering him. Like this isn’t what he was worried about, after all. That all this was merely at the surface, and whatever it is is still plaguing him, deep down. But whatever it is, he clearly doesn’t want to reveal it, and she decides to respect what little privacy he still has while he has it.
“Tell you what, though,” she changes the subject. “How about you teach me how to block you out?”

“Right now?” he asks.

“No, tomorrow.” Her sarcasm is evident.

“Thought you wanted to go back to sleep.”

“’M not tired anymore.”

“Your attitude suggests otherwise.”

“Oi!”

“Rose, we both know you’re tetchy in the mornings.” She grumbles. “But as long as you agree not to yell or throw things, I’d be happy to teach you.”

Of course he’d never let her live that down. She only threw something at him one time, and it was a stuffed animal. And it was three in the morning.

“Okay.” She shakes off some of her irritation.

“Though, I should warn you, it’s not something that can be learned in a single exercise. It’ll take weeks, months even, to develop the skills required.”

“Right,” she nods. “I understand.”

He props up on his elbow, facing her.

“There are several facets of mental defence. Blocking out an entire consciousness is quite different from blocking out satellite thoughts or emotions. It’s more direct. And for that reason, it’s an easier way for beginners to learn how to start building these walls. It’s best to start broad, and focus on fine-tuning your skills once you’ve developed a foundation.”

“So we’ll start with just… you?”

“Yep,” he pops the ‘p’. “Just little old me. It’s a unique challenge on its own, learning to close your mind off to someone trying to invade it.”

“Invade?” she asks, tenuous.

“Well, not that I’m an invader, per se. But we’ll be pretending I am, for learning’s sake.”

“Right.”

“I’ll still need your consent, though. When you fail, I don’t want to barge in uninvited.”

Rose’s heart sinks at his blasé use of ‘when’ instead of ‘if.’

“Yeah, of course.” She nods, trying not to be offended. “Yes.”

“Now, if I can remember them, I can tell you the techniques I used when I first learned…” He closes his eyes and focuses his attention inward. “So long ago…” When he opens his eyes again, he reaches out a hand, placing a couple fingers on her temple. “Try picturing your mind as an enclosed building of some kind. Something with a door or something else you can close and lock. And when
I try to come in, don’t open it.”

“Okay.” She pictures her room back in the TARDIS automatically, standing in the centre of it next to her bed, staring at the door that leads out into the winding hall.

She feels the familiar pressure of him in front of her, like gravity shifting towards her head rather than the ground. It’s so different from their usual interactions, when she’s so ready to embrace his presence that he breaches the threshold of her mind as soon as he tries. All her instincts are whispering that she should let him in, because he’s the Doctor and he’s wonderful and it will feel so right when she does. But she stares at the door in her mind’s eye, closed and locked, and focuses on keeping it that way despite it feeling unnatural.

But after only a few moments, she detects a leak in her amateur defences. From the tiny crack between the bottom of the door and the carpet, a thick cloud of steam billows into her imaginary room. As she was expecting battering rams and Trojan horses, she’s too surprised to react straight away. There’s that feeling when you step on a bag of crisps, expecting it to explode, but a little stream of air seeps out through a tiny new hole instead. As anticlimactic as disappointing.

Already, some of the pressure she felt before is relieved, and she feels just a little less alone. Realising she is losing this battle and needs to act, she rushes forward and scrambles to try to patch the gap with her hands, but it’s of no use.

Before long, the invading presence encompasses her entire room, and, by extension, her mind. Fortunately for Rose, her intruder happens to also be a welcome guest. Despite her early failure, she’s still temporarily uplifted at feeling him inside her again. Power and wisdom and compassion all wrapped up in youthful energy.

The Doctor drops his hand too quickly, leaving her alone in her mind once again.

“It’s all right,” he reassures her. “Only your first try. And I do have nearly a thousand years’ experience.”

She scoffs a little at his arrogant reminder.

“Care to try again?” he asks.

She nods, and they carry on.

This time, all he has to do is pick the bloody lock on the door.

“How are you even doin’ that?” she blurts out angrily at the second defeat.

“Doing what?” he asks innocently as he disconnects them for the second time.

“Getting in like that. Picking the lock. Thought I was the only one who could manipulate things inside my mind.”

“I didn’t pick any locks.” He holds up his hands. “No tools. The sonic is actually, erm…” he turns around to scan the floor briefly. “Over there in my trunks.” He nods to the vicinity of the area. “It’s all your mind again. Same way it changes my appearance when I am inside. If you’re picturing a setting in your mind, it will maintain that illusion by translating my actions to become a part of that setting. My efforts will manifest in a way that makes sense in that context.”

Rose sighs, rubbing her forehead.
“Enough for the day?” she Doctor suggests.

“No,” Rose insists, gathering strength. “Come on.” She waves him on with a hand.

This time, he infiltrates more subtly – via the air vent system that Rose rarely even acknowledges.

“Now that it’s happened more than once,” the Doctor explains as he pulls back again. “Your mind thinks this is just the way of things. That it will always have weak points of easy entry. But it won’t. Any weakness can be strengthened. You just need that extra push to break through the plateau. Try to give yourself a reason to succeed. Something that would motivate you to maintain privacy. Maybe think of a time you were cross with me, or pretend I’m someone else entirely. Whatever helps you feel stronger. The more real this feels, the more successful you’ll be.”

Rose mulls over his advice for a moment. It’s true: she’s been thinking of this mostly as a learning exercise, a bonding experience of sorts for her and the Doctor, similar to each of the other telepathic training sessions they’ve had. One suggestion in particular sticks out to her – to give herself motivation to block him. She thinks back to all the times her inability to put up defences has caused them both an inconvenience. The night she was awoken in a fit of lust and unable to stop. The way he so smugly pointed out how she was feeling in the kitchen of Kenai’s house earlier today, when she was trying to be aloof. Oh, she hated it. And just minutes ago, when the Doctor was so perturbed by her picking up a signal he didn’t want detected. Even though they both agree that this telepathic connection has its perks, if they can’t have any privacy, ever, it’ll never work. Members of even the strongest, most steadfast relationships have to have time to themselves, and Rose has to cultivate these skills in order for that to be possible.

Closing her eyes again, she changes the landscape of her imagination. Instead of her room in the TARDIS, with its many built-in points of weakness, she builds herself a fortress that merely resembles her room, a purely pink box of concrete with no points of entry. Her furniture has come along to make it at least feel a bit homely, but there are neither doors nor air vents. No obvious ways inside.

But as she waits for him, prepared for an onslaught, it doesn’t come. Instead, there’s a much less climactic sensation: a strange poking feeling. Something that reverberates through her head like someone tapping on the glass of an aquarium. No sound accompanies the feeling, but it still makes her flinch each time. Suddenly her mind feels like an egg without a shell, the mere membrane that keeps its contents protected on the verge of being punctured from the constant jabs from the outside. It’s disconcerting, being hyperaware that someone is trying to poke a hole in your head to get at your brain, even if it is a purely mental threat, without the possibility of physical pain or injury.

And as time goes on, it becomes more uncomfortable.

The constant attempts at intrusion start to have more tangible effects. Her fortress begins to warp to match the sensations. Patches of the walls and ceiling sink inward, only to snap and jiggle back to their original shape, as though they’re made of floss and gelatine rather than rebar and concrete. Only a few moments pass before the floor softens and a new intrusion from beneath makes it swell and dip violently, knocking her off her feet. The wave passes through the floor as it rights itself, like a blanket being shook out. The furniture jumps and rattles and their contents are strewn noisily onto the floor.

The commotion becomes so overwhelming that resistance becomes too much for Rose. Exhausted, she lets her efforts slip for just a moment, trying to take a breather, and that’s all it takes. The next attempt to break through suddenly succeeds. She can just see the hole blown in the wall in front of her, the rest of the structure crumpling like a deflated balloon, before the whole illusion vanishes.
The Doctor’s presence quickly fills her mind again, and the first thing she can feel from him is remorse.

*Y*’don’t have to feel guilty, she says, completely failing to hide her disappointment with herself.

*You shouldn’t feel disappointed,* he counters. *I’m genuinely proud of you, Rose. I had to properly work to get in, this time. You’ve made remarkable progress in quite a short amount of time. It’s impressive for a human.*

She figuratively swats at his head for the ‘human’ remark.

*And you’ll get even better with practice,* he continues unfazed.

She wordlessly thanks him for the encouragement.

*So, what about… the day to day stuff, then,* she asks. *When you’re not really in my head, but only partially there? Y’know, the emotions stuff?*

*It works roughly the same way. It all starts with building these barriers and strengthening them, though it’s a bit more nuanced. But we can work on that later. You’re exhausted.*

Rose is about to protest, but the Doctor interjects.

*I can feel it in here,* he insists. *If you want to finish a marathon, you’ve got to rest in between the training runs, don’t you? Your mind needs some rest. And it could do with some food, too. Breakfast?*  

*All right.*

The Doctor retreats from her mind, and she opens her eyes to find him throwing off the covers altogether, leaping out of bed. But instead of rushing off like she expects he will, he comes around to her side of the bed, extending a hand for her.

“Come on.” For a moment she’s frozen in shock. He’s completely naked still, his hair a right mess from sex and sleep, but he doesn’t seem to care in the slightest. He stands tall, doesn’t bother covering his crotch, and smiles down at her, unashamed.

“Don’t leave me hanging,” he quips, motioning for her to get up.

She takes his hand as she sits up, and he helps her onto the floor to stand in front of him. He reels her in close, wraps both arms around her lower back, and leans down for a kiss before he releases her.

With matching smiles and awkward glances, they both plod around the bed to help each other reclaim their discarded clothes. Both at least halfway decent, they both make use of the adjacent loo to get ready, taking turns using the single small mirror as they ponder aloud what another day on the island may have in store for them.
Wow, finally back from that horrendous block. I can't apologize enough for the delay. I've missed this story so much, and I know many of you have as well. I hope the chapter is worth the wait. It is a long one, at least.

Many thanks to Heidi for the last minute beta work. But also, I ran through it once more when she was done, so mistakes are my fault! I didn't edit it through as many times as I usually do, in favor of getting it posted before the end of the day, so please forgive any lapses in the quality of the prose. I'll get back in the swing of things.

Having woken up as early as they did, the Doctor and Rose make it to breakfast with Kalei with plenty of time to spare. The daily report on the ruki population is quite promising – there were hardly any fish washing ashore the night before. There’s a fishing expedition planned for this morning led by Kenai, and he invites them to come along. But when they discover Kalei won’t be in their company (he was never good at fishing, he says), the Doctor and Rose kindly decline Kenai’s offer. Recalling their difficulty reeling in their last catch, they insist they wouldn’t be much use to the professionals in attendance. Instead, they opt to shadow Kalei at the wood shop, to see first-hand what he’s working on. But just knowing their proprietary treatment is working puts an even bigger skip in Rose’s step (if that’s possible).

They start out the morning meeting some of the other expert woodworkers, some of which are friends of Kalei’s, and others that are much older. Rose silently categorises them as apprentices and mages, respectively, though she doesn’t know how much truth there is to the labels. Once they’ve been introduced to everyone, they follow Kalei to his workstation, and he drags over a couple of extra chairs for them to get comfortable. He explains a few of the ongoing projects he’s working on: some are daily commissions, and others are months-long tasks in collaboration with experts in other fields.

They aren’t any help, of course, though that doesn’t seem to bother Kalei. Rose is entirely unfamiliar with woodworking, and though the Doctor has a natural predilection for engineering, without any threat of danger or requests for help, the projects are too mundane for him to volunteer assistance. But at least for a while, they both enjoy hearing about what he’s doing, as the Doctor is always keen to learn any tidbits about a foreign culture. But eventually, Kalei’s explanations die down, and the lull in conversation is making both Rose and the Doctor a bit bored.

“So, make any headway with Dakota?” Rose asks to break the silence. There hadn’t been a chance to ask him the day before, as she wanted to avoid embarrassing him by asking in front of his entire family. She keeps her tone as casual as possible, trying not to let on that she had encouraged Dakota to talk to him the other night.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you yesterday!” he exclaims, pausing his work on the stack of planks he’s currently cutting and shaping. “I haven’t told him yet. But we talked that night.”

“Oh?” Rose feigns ignorance. “What did he say?”

“Not much, really. He said he wanted to hang out. We’re supposed to meet at Nani’s once we’re
“Oh, that’s exciting!” Rose doesn’t hide her excitement.

“You think so?” he tilts his head to the side and screws up his face, sceptical.

“Well, yeah! I mean, how did he ask you? Did he sound nervous?”

Kalei pouts his lip, thinking back.

“I guess he was acting sort of weird… but, we hang out all the time. It didn’t seem like an out of the ordinary request.”

“He didn’t invite anyone else, though, did he?”

“Well, no…”

“Did he say anything else that night?” Rose feels like she’s giving him the third degree now, but she can’t help it. The implausible success of her and the Doctor’s relationship has her floating on an inflated sense of romantic optimism.

“He did tell me again how much he likes the wolf charm. And that I was the best craftsman he’s ever met.”

Rose quirks an eyebrow, waiting for the revelation to hit him. Blimey, all blokes across the universe are equally thick.

“You think he likes me, too?” he asks, pointing to his chest with his thumb.

“Think he might,” Rose says nonchalantly, trying but failing to hold back a grin.

Kalei’s jaw drops open, his eyes going wide.

“Oh, wait!” he exclaims. “You were talking to him that night, too. I completely forgot! Did he tell you? You didn’t tell him I liked him, did you!?” Kalei quickly turns hysterical.

“I didn’t tell him anythin’,” Rose assures him, holding out her hands in a peaceful gesture. “And he didn’t… specifically tell me anything either. I just got a feeling, talkin’ to him.”

“Wow…” A wide grin spreads across Kalei’s face, making him look even younger than he usually does.

Rose happens to glance over at the Doctor, and finds him leaning back in his chair precariously, his feet up on the nearest desk, staring up at the ceiling as he plays a game of catch with himself. Despite his obvious boredom, he still looks rather pleased with himself, and it’s not hard to figure out why. Heat floods through her with a rush of memories of her wake-up call this morning. But even though the Doctor could be playing the ‘stud’ card right now and offering Kalei advice of his own, he still seems entirely uninterested in the romantic affairs of others. Not wanting to purposely ostracize the Doctor from the conversation any longer, she wraps up this particular discussion.

“Please, just let me know how it goes tonight, yeah?” Rose asks.

“Will do,” he agrees, turning back to his work.

“So, erm, how’s Kairi’s project going?” she changes topics.
At that, the Doctor perks up, stuffing the sonic back in his shorts and dropping his feet (and the two front legs of his chair) back on the ground.

Rose gathers that she worked on the project late into the evening, and it’s going well, but there’s a long road ahead.

They spend another fifteen minutes or so with Kalei, and he solicits the Doctor’s advice on a geometry problem with a special order that has stumped him. But after his brief (for the Doctor) questions have been answered, the Doctor gets restless. Though to be fair, with no one to help and nothing to occupy his hands or intellect, she’d be worried if he didn’t get antsy.

So with one more benediction from Rose for his date tonight, they say goodbye, and promise to meet up with him tomorrow.

“So, what now?” Rose asks as they step outside to a cloudless sky. She covers her forehead with her arm to protect her eyes from the bright sunlight.

The Doctor pulls out his sunglasses and darkens them quickly with the sonic.

“I know just the place,” he announces with gusto, like he’s had it planned out for a while now. “C’mon!” He tows her down the stone steps with him towards the shore, and something tells her she’s going to like the surprise.

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The Doctor leads her along the coast, past the edge of the village, and past the tide pools they admired a few days ago. At some point as they venture on, the lively ruckus of the bustling little town is completely lost to her ears. The further they get from the tiny civilisation, the fewer footprints mar the pristine sand. Engaged as she is in the Doctor’s ramblings about the astrophysics of waves (though she can’t understand it, he’s as endearing and sexy as ever when he talks science to her), she doesn’t notice how far they’ve gone. When she turns back around to check, she can’t even see the village anymore – it’s disappeared around the natural bend of the island.

When she looks around, the amount of sand around them has diminished considerably. Only about ten feet of damp sand now separate the tide from the towering purple rocks. They’ve gotten steeper, too – not a gentle slope on which to build a village, but treacherous cliffs that wouldn’t be kind to the most skilled of climbers. Looking on ahead, she notices the beach disappears entirely not too far ahead, supplanted by the unwelcoming rocks.

But the Doctor looks unconcerned that their path is ending.

“Doctor,” she interrupts him.

When he looks over at her, she simply gestures to the disappearing sand, the expanse of water and great, big cluster of boulders blocking their way forward.

“Right, then!” he announces with glee. “Almost there.”

Without warning, he starts unbuttoning his shirt.

“What’re you doin’?” she asks, gawking at his newly exposed chest. If he wants her to mind his personal space until they’re properly alone again tonight, stripping isn’t a good choice.

“Just a bit of a swim to get there. You don’t mind, do you?” He wriggles his arms out of the shirt one at a time, and crumples it between his hands.
“No,” she stammers out, trying to keep her cool. Averting her eyes from his exposed form, she tries to suppress the memories that his now bare torso brings to the surface. What it felt like to drag her tongue along the length of his pale neck, to sink her teeth into his shoulder as he moved within her.

She’s at least glad she decided to wear a swimsuit beneath her clothes again. It’s never quite off the table, here, going for an unexpected swim.

They leave their clothes on a natural shelf of the rocks, far enough away from the tide they think they’ll be safe from the ocean spray, then wade through the low crashing waves until they can comfortably swim parallel to the cliffs.

Eyes peeled for whatever spectacle the Doctor is taking her to, Rose soon spots a curious recess in the cliffside, swallowing up the waves as they crash into the rocks. In the bright light of the sun gleaming off the water, it’s too dark to see inside; it’s just a misshapen black hole. But it looks big enough to swim through without being harmed, even with the roll of the tide. And sure enough, the Doctor is leading them straight for it.

“A cave? Really?”

“It’s not just a cave,” he retorts, indignant. “There’s a whole cave system in there. It contains the metal ores I told you about.”

“All right,” she tries to trust that this excursion won’t be as dank and cold and filthy as she’s imagining. The Doctor hasn’t steered them wrong yet, after all.

They hold their arms up against the rocks as they swim through the entrance, to prevent hitting their heads should a sizeable wave come through.

Once she’s properly inside, shielded from the midday sun, it takes her eyes a moment to adjust to the relative darkness. But when they do, she can immediately see why the Doctor wanted to take her here.

The small entrance opens up into a large pool, maybe fifty feet in diameter, surrounded on all sides by the purple rocks that make up the mountain. Overhead, the ceiling is domed higher than she’d expect, at least ten feet. On the far end of the pool is a shelf of rock that looks perfect for sitting, gentle little swells lapping against its slanted surface. Beyond this, a stony path disappears into the shadows, where she supposes the ‘cave system’ begins.

But none of these things are what make this place spectacular.

The entire surface of the water glows turquoise, projecting an eerie radiance onto the surrounding rocks. With each moment that her eyes grow accustomed to the reduced lighting of the inside, it becomes more spectacular. It reminds her of neon signs, translucent blue jellyfish… the bioluminescent bacteria in that canyon where the Doctor gave her his jacket. The hidden grotto takes on a strangely dreamlike quality, like they’ve crossed into a parallel dimension of fairies and trolls and wizards. (Though realistically, she expects it is actually some unknown physical phenomenon that she hopes the Doctor will explain.) Regardless, she finds herself staring down at her body, ensuring it hasn’t grown scales or fins or something in the luminous water.

Looking back at the Doctor behind her, closer to the entrance, she sees a mere silhouette of his head.

“’S bloody brilliant,” she marvels. She’s surprised at how sharply her voice echoes off the close rock walls, and lowers her voice to just above a whisper before she speaks again. “How’s the water
glowin’ like this?”

She starts to swim towards the shelf up ahead while he provides an explanation, something about the light traveling through the water, certain wavelengths being filtered out as it travels through the gap in the rocks beneath the surface.

Some parts of the explanation make sense; others are gibberish. But the water around the island has always looked uniquely teal compared to oceans on Earth. The light in here at least seems reflective of that.

Rose hauls herself up onto the rock shelf, enjoying the way the small waves trickle beneath her thighs and recede again. The view is better from up here, but she’s still puzzled by the water. What he said about the light coming from underneath makes sense, because there’s only the one tiny hole in the rocks illuminating a small patch of the surface; most of the light emanates from the water itself. But even with an explanation, sometimes, it’s easier to stop scrutinizing it and just consider herself lucky to witness something so magical. She’d lump it in the same category as rainbows and meteor showers.

“Thought you’d like it,” the Doctor says as he hops up onto the shelf next to her. He’s more visible now, away from the glaring white spot of the entrance. The light from the turbulent water ripples on his expanse of fair skin, a perfect canvas. Looking down at her own arms and legs, she sees the same is true for her, though perhaps to less of a degree, so she doesn’t comment on it.

“It’s wonderful,” she grins at him, the one she reserves for congratulating him after his obvious attempts to impress her.

He grins back, swishing his legs back and forth in the water with delight.

She’s always thought of caves as damp, cold places, but this one is comfortably warm. The water is like tepid bathwater, as usual, but the inside of the cave has seemed to trap some of the sun’s heat, somehow. Like the inside of a car on a cool sunny day – it’s warmer in here where the air is stagnant than outside in the breeze. It might be stifling in normal circumstances, but since she’s wet from head to toe at the moment, it’s quite a comfortable temperature.

“So what kinds of metals have they got in there?” she tilts her head back towards the path that leads into a black abyss.

It might be a frightening orifice, if she wasn’t already certain the island had no large animals to speak of. But then again, she’s with the Doctor. The Loch Ness monster could come skulking out of there, and she’d probably just point and laugh as long as she was with him.

The Doctor goes on about the elemental composition of the ores, and how each of them is harvested and used.

Though he’s talking about iron and copper and silver, he’s keeping his voice down to quell the acoustic effect, and it just ends up coming out seductive. She tries to listen to what he’s saying and just stare out at the water, but all she can seem to think is how alone they are, and how close to naked she and the Doctor are. She glances over at him, water still dripping from his hair and beads coating down his arms and chest. Thinks about how she’d like straddle him right here to lick the droplets from his skin. Taste the salt on his lips. The can of worms opened, her thoughts flit back to earlier this morning, waking up with his arms around her, bodies touching everywhere. His teeth on her neck, fingers on her clit, her bum pillowing the impact as he thrust inside her again and again. The sounds of ecstasy he breathed into her ear as he held onto her so tightly.
Fuck.
She’s done for.

The Doctor continues his monologue for several more agonising seconds before it hits him, and he gasps lightly as he turns to her, lips parted, his eyes as hungry as they are startled.

She bites her lip, and breaks eye contact as soon as he makes it, but sees him shake his head in her periphery.

“You’re insatiable,” he teases quietly.

At his playful tone, she glances back at him, and he offers a smile to let her know he doesn’t find the observation problematic.

And to her surprise, he’s the one who leans closer to kiss her. His lips are cool and salty, and they move against hers easily with the extra moisture between them. Beads of water trail down her face, from his hair or hers, she doesn’t know. As his hands reach up to cradle her cheeks, the little sparks of lust humming through her are suddenly amplified. A shudder rolls through her body down to her toes as whispers of the Doctor permeate her mind, the charged filaments of his arousal intertwining with hers. Being reminded how quickly and powerfully she can affect him this way only makes matters worse. For years, she struggled to try to discover what could possibly turn the Doctor on, and consistently failed. Now that she knows exactly what she needs to do to get him hot and bothered, and can do it successfully, it’s rather intoxicating.

She’s about to wrap her arms around his neck and simply see where this heated kiss leads them, but remembers they’re technically still in a public place, remote though it is. Reluctantly, she breaks the kiss, panting.

“Want to go?” she breathes, hoping he’s on the same page.

He glances to their only exit.

“Far walk to the hut.”

She narrows her eyes.

“What are you sayin’?”

He arches one eyebrow with a smirk. Quite a devilish one, at that. She didn’t know he had it in him.

“Oh.”

He reunites their mouths, determined to make her forget where they are. His hands quickly find her waist, rubbing droplets of water into her skin with his thumbs. His lips brush leisurely against hers, patiently, like he intends for this to last all night and sees no point in rushing it. He’s focused, too, attentive to her every shift, every tiny noise of contentment in the back of her throat, so he can respond in kind. As persuasive as the Doctor can be with words, he’s even more persuasive without them. With only a few minutes of snogging, he’s nearly convinced her that pleasure is the only thing that matters for the foreseeable future. That he’s here for whatever she wants, indefinitely. She sighs against his mouth and he returns the encouragement, softer, deeper. Pulls her ever closer.

And it almost works. Her mind wanders as she realises her indecent fantasies from the canoe a few days earlier are being fulfilled, and she’s about to pass up her opportunity to savour it while it lasts.
She runs her hands up the length of his torso, smearing the water on his chest beneath her palms, and brings her hands up into his still dripping hair, twisting the slick strands between her fingers. It’s just as good as she could have imagined, if not better.

But one of his hands moves, then, leaving her waist in favour of teasing the inside of her thigh, fingertips brushing slow, irregular circles that draw closer and closer to her centre. She shivers in anticipation, clinging onto the back of his neck. His thumb makes contact with the wet fabric of her swimsuit bottoms, and he traces along her slit with caution until he stops and presses in a light circle, just over her clit.

She gasps as she breaks their kiss, shackling his wrist in one hand to pull him away.

“Are you daft?” She scans quickly around the cave, though she knows there’s not a single soul inside.

“What?” he breathes innocently, pouting a little that she stopped him. His eyes are dark, clouded with lust. “You don’t want me to?"

His mouth shifts carefully down to her neck, and he places a few kisses there, wet and lingering. She leans her head back, and her eyes close with a little moan, wordlessly telling him to continue. Her grip on his wrist weakens, and he gently breaks free of her hold, this time slipping his hand inside her swimsuit. A wet digit slips between her folds, slick and warm with something besides seawater. Her rebuke is lost on her tongue when he grazes her clit properly for the first time, and a shudder ripples through her at the sudden rush of intense sensation.

His lips leave her throat, and his forehead comes to rest against hers. “Hmm,” he breathes out slowly, deeply, though he’s the one being touched. “Feels like you do,” he murmurs. She tilts forward to capture his mouth again, figuring she can let him touch her a few more moments. Just a few more deliberate strokes over her clit is all it would take, really… and maybe if she’s finished fast enough…

He’s a tease, though, moving in the perfect circumference exactly where she needs it, but never giving enough pressure for her to climax. Only for her to beg for more.

Her mouth slips from his and she calls his name, already resorting to begging. It’s louder than she meant. Just loud enough to echo off the walls of the cavern, a tangible reminder of where they are.

“We can’t…” she breathes out. “Someone could…” she doesn’t have to finish her sentence before he stops, his hand retreating. She could cry from the loss of his touch. He opens his eyes, frustration evident on his face.

“There’s no one here,” he reassures her in his quietest, most soothing voice. He looks around briefly if only to humour her. “Today’s not a mining day.”

Clit still throbbing with need, she considers his words. Bites her lip. Wanting more than anything to give in.

“We’re alone.” He peppers kisses down her neck again. Over her collarbone. “And if someone were coming, I’d hear them before they could see us.” He pulls back her bikini, and before she can stop him, swirls his tongue hot around her breast. Taking her nipple gently between his teeth, he flicks his tongue just there, and she gasps.

“You sure?” she asks, but she’s already made up her mind.

“Yes,” he assures her, only pausing his ministrations briefly.
He continues in this manner for several moments, and her head spins as she succumbs to it. The throbs of pleasure with every swipe of his tongue radiate down to her centre. Planting her hands on the rock, she leans back on her arms, letting her head fall back, allowing herself a little moan. Fantasies flit through her mind, imagining his tongue lower on her body. Guiding her to a climax with his exceptional focus and precision.

The Doctor suddenly groans, and releases her breast with a shudder.

“What is it?” she asks, disappointed that he stopped.

“Mmf…” he tries to stifle another groan as he sits up straight, meeting her eyes. He suddenly looks nothing short of desperate. “What were you just thinking about?”

She flushes from head to toe.

Did he just…?

“How?” she asks, merely to buy herself time, because she’s already fairly confident of the answer.

“I, erm… felt a particularly… strong pulse of… excitement just then.”

Yep, as she suspected. Damn, he said this thing between them would keep getting stronger, but she wasn’t prepared for it to betray her this fast. She can’t possibly tell him the truth. It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours that they’ve been intimately involved, and it seems like the sort of thing that only happens after a few months of the basics. At least, that’s what it’s always been like with other blokes. And even then, it was always too rough and slobbery for her to ever finish that way. She isn’t sure why she’s fantasising about something that’s never been particularly successful.

She just has a feeling it would be different with the Doctor. That he’ll know how to make it feel good, or learn quickly if he doesn’t.

The Doctor grunts out her name, his face contorting with restraint as he grips onto her waist. For a moment she feels quite powerful, having the ability to make him squirm like this. “Please, tell me. I’d like to know what you want.”

“I was…” She swallows hard, potential explanations dying in her throat. She’s holding him to principles of honesty, though, and she should hold herself to similar standards. “I really like your mouth,” she blurts out.

Okay, it’s a start.

“Yes?” His resulting smile is one she’s seen variations of a hundred times before – the hallmark of masculine pride.

“Yes,” she can’t help but smirk back a little at his elation. “I was thinkin’… what it’d be like if you…” She bites her lip, then slowly nods down to her legs.

His eyebrows shoot up as he realizes what she means. Then his smile grows even wider.

“Well,” he draws out the word seductively. His eyes are well and sparkling with pride now. “I’d like that very much.”

“Yeah?” she asks, throat dry.

“Oh, yes.”
He brings his mouth to hers again, with a sense of urgency that’s unusual for him. The kiss is over quickly, though, and before she can voice any reluctance, he’s kissing his way down her chest. He twists around as he sinks into the water slowly, his mouth on a determined path down her stomach, his intentions clear. When he reaches the hem of her swimsuit bottoms, he pulls back, hooking his thumbs under the skimpy thing, looking up for assistance. With a few awkward manoeuvres, she manages to help him get it down past her bum, and he pulls it the rest of the way down, freeing her of the garment one ankle at a time. With another devious look, he pulls it out of the water and hands it to her, still dripping. She takes it with a roll of her eyes, and drops it on the rock next to her. The Doctor skims both hands down the inside of her thighs, coaxing them to open for him, and he sinks lower into the water as he nestles between her thighs.

Staying afloat with one of his forearms resting on the rock just beside her leg, he hooks his other arm under her knee, creating even more room for himself. There’s certainly no hiding from him now, nor time to be shy. He turns his head, pressing warm, wet kisses to the inside of her thigh, occasionally nipping with his teeth, swiping his tongue for a taste. Slowly getting closer to where she’s aching for him. It’s almost painful how slowly he moves, her heart galloping in her chest while pleading sounds fall from her lips for him to just touch her. She’s about to sacrifice her last shred of dignity and properly beg him to get on with it, but then he’s there.

It’s just the tip of his tongue, at first, pushing into her slit until it’s cushioned between her folds, near her entrance. She gasps at the delicate pleasure it brings, and holds her breath, waiting. Slowly, he pushes forward, the flat of his tongue slowly spreads her folds apart. Warm and so wet, slick and perfectly rough at the same time, he licks a slow, deliberate line, tasting. She can already tell this is going to be very different from previous attempts.

A cry of his name tells him he’s found her most sensitive spot, and he lingers there with a deep hum of victory. The tension she’s holding to try to conceal herself melts away, and slings her leg over his shoulder to free his other arm as he continues his exploration, tentative and curious. Just enough pressure to make her lift her hips in search of more, not so much that he risks desensitisation.

How is he good at literally everything he does?

She reckons this can’t be his first time doing this properly, with the developed skill he clearly possesses, and the stab of jealousy makes her dig her heel into his back. She reaches a hand down to his hair, fingers combing through it before she clenches her fist, tugging him closer with gentle persistence. Claiming him for her own.

She has never cared to watch this – always thought it was messy, awkward, and an unwelcome reminder of how intensely vulnerable she was. But right now she can’t tear her eyes away. His own are closed, too focused on other senses to be distracted by sight. He has that same look that he has when he’s concentrating on something intricate; though she can’t see his eyes, she’d recognise it anywhere. It’s the same look he had when he was fixing the watch in the arms closet. When he’s got his glasses on, trying to decipher minuscule text. Handling something fragile as he tries to identify what it is. He’s analysing. Studying. And he’s enjoying every second of it.

He doesn’t mindlessly employ a method he has predetermined to be best, but attunes himself to her signals. He persists when she’s vocal, changes tactics when she goes quiet. Lets his technique be guided by her movements, whether encouraging or cautioning. She loses herself in the intimate attention of his mouth, and shortly runs out of energy to keep herself upright. Slowly, she sinks back until her bare back hits the wet rock. She can’t watch him anymore, and something hard juts into the back of her head, but she doesn’t care. She can hardly feel any of it, anyway. Can hardly
feel anything but the persistent caresses of his tongue between soft, wet lips. Her cries begin to echo in the watery chamber, but, every jarring, embarrassing moment that her own voice pierces the air is quickly soothed away by the Doctor’s mouth.

The only thing he won’t allow her to control is his pace. He gently rebukes her when she pursues more, slowing down when she whispers ‘please’, pulling back altogether to leave marks on the inside of her thigh when she becomes desperate enough to rock her hips up against his face.

But it isn’t long, a minute later, at most, before his lesson in delayed gratification pays off. The climax builds from deep in her bones. Pleasure pulses to life with every stroke between her legs, slowly spreading its roots, blossoming through her body, warm, tingling, shivering. Her toes curl even as her limbs turn to jelly. It all finally reaches a spectacular peak and she writhes against the hard ground, her hand fisting in the Doctor’s hair. It’s too much to hold in, and she shouts her praise, the fact that they’re in a cave with extraordinary acoustics once again completely forgotten. Startled by the volume of her own voice echoing around them over and over, she slaps a hand over her mouth, gasping for breath as she tries to keep quiet. Lifting her hips to his willing tongue, she holds him fast with her leg around his shoulder as he carries her through it, extending the pleasure as long as he can with slower, softer motions.

As the last waves of her orgasm fade, the Doctor groans deep and long against her, his tongue faltering in its rhythm, making her shudder with overstimulation. His head lolls against her thigh as he pulls back, panting against her skin.

She thinks he hear him mumble a curse, but it’s so quiet she can’t be certain.

The Doctor very rarely curses, and for a moment, Rose panics. Perhaps he didn’t enjoy it after all, and it was but a chore he wishes he hadn’t done.

It takes her a moment to come down from the hormone high to process the other clues he’d provided, and soon arrives at a more savoury theory.

She sits up, and winces as the change in position alerts her to several tender spots on her bum and back. Oof. She’s sure to have bruises tomorrow.

“Did you just come, too?” she asks, staring down at him with a hint of a smile.

He sighs against her leg and finally looks up at her, sheepish.

“Straight into the water.”

She laughs, and, affronted, he leaps back up onto his spot next to her, stopping her laughter with his mouth.

“I must be good,” she teases when their lips finally part.

“You are.” He whispers something in his unfamiliar tongue, something that sounds vaguely like a curse, but is almost too beautiful to be anything profane. “I was about to lose my mind. Tasting you. Feeling you. I had to…” He pauses, flustered.

Rose is rendered nearly speechless by this confession, but tries to reassure him.

“Right. S’okay.” She tries not to burst into flames imagining it. She hadn’t known he was playing with himself, but desperately wishes she had. Blimey.

“You should’ve told me, though,” she adds. “I would’ve made you come up here so we could,
y’know… help each other at the same time.”

“That’s just it, Rose. I couldn’t stop. It was…” He hesitates again, like he may be about to confess something else. “You were driving me mad.” She thinks that isn’t the whole story, but leaves it be. She’s been on the receiving end of something like this, and vividly remembers how overwhelming the urge was to touch herself during it. She can hardly blame him. Nor expect him to delve into details of how he got himself off, the same way she wouldn’t want him to expect it of her.

“But now you’ve gone and soiled the water on this beautiful island,” she makes a joke out of it, mostly so she doesn’t climb on top of him and have her way with him again right now.

“At least it isn’t the drinking water.” He shrugs, and kisses her again.

With so much bare, wet skin touching, and Rose’s bottoms still lost somewhere behind her, they almost get carried away again. Hands wander, little moans fill the small cave. Somehow, she ends up on her back again, the Doctor hovering above her. Rose is just beginning to feel his erection rekindling against her thigh when a noise startles them apart.

A quiet, but ferocious growl echoes through the chamber from somewhere deeper within the cave.

The Doctor clamsbers off her, leaps to his feet, and swiftly positions himself between her and the maw of the cave, reaching into his pocket for the screwdriver before settling back on his haunches. He reaches around for her bottoms, scoops them up with his index finger, and hands them to Rose. Eyes glued to the darkness before him, he flicks a few settings on the screwdriver until he can shine the light towards it, illuminating the first few meters of the abyss. What they can see is simply more of the same, a roughly cylindrical tunnel of purple rocks.

Once she has her swimsuit on properly again, she gets to her feet and wraps her arms around one of the Doctor’s.

“What was it, a dog or something?” she whispers as quietly as she can, stifling the dread rising in her gut. It’s a stupid question, and she knows it. But she needs the Doctor to think out loud. To tell her what he’s thinking.

“There are no dogs here,” he responds coldly, quieter than she had managed. “No mammals larger than a rabbit. Certainly nothing capable of growling.”

They stare down the darkness for a few long moments, waiting for the unseen creature to repeat itself, but nothing happens.

“Whatever it is, it could put the Kaelondaians in danger,” the Doctor counters, with clearly no intention whatsoever of heeding this advice. “You can wait here, though, if you like. I’ll shout if you need to run.” He turns to her with a twitch of his mouth that’s almost a smirk, knowing how unlikely it is for her to take that option.

“Yeah, right.”

They pad slowly down the cave, and Rose is thankful that their lack of footwear lends them an unusually quiet passage. If not for the light rustling of the Doctor’s shorts and Rose’s loud human lungs, they might be completely silent, at least to her ears. The Doctor is on alert like a police hound, every sense hyper-aware for cues of danger. He’d be the first to hear or see something anyway (or even smell it, she thinks). She doesn’t say anything as they continue down the way, not wanting to distract him.
Aside from the occasional shimmering pockets of metals in the rock, the route is monotonous.
Rose wants to ask how much longer he intends to follow down the endless path, but figures he’ll
tell her when it’s a lost cause.

It’s still strangely warm inside the tunnel, like all the sun’s heat is trapped in here as it shines every
day on the island above, nowhere to escape. It’s curiously circular, too, as though purposely carved
by people, rather than formed naturally by the water, and she realises it probably was. This is
basically a mine, after all, and the Kaelondaans continue to surprise her with their skills for
innovation. They hit two forks in the road, but the Doctor barely pauses at either of them, only
taking a short moment to emit a sound from the sonic, and make a decision whether it’s the path he
wants to follow.

As they continue on, the sound does not recur. If there were a real threat, she thinks they’d have
encountered it by now, and Rose’s anxiety dwindles as time goes on. The Doctor’s seems to, as
well.

“We’re about to hit a dead end,” the Doctor says, still quietly, but nothing like the fearful whisper
of before. “Nothing here.” He sounds disappointed, like he was hoping this investigation would
finally yield some answers to the mysteries they’ve encountered here.

“We can check the other paths?” Rose offers, and she’s surprised at herself. She thought she
wanted to get the hell out of this haunted cave. But she supposes no small part of her was looking
forward to some adrenaline-filled adventure, too.

“They were dead ends, too. Not more than ten, twenty meters deep.”

“All right then. Should we head ba –”

Before she can finish her sentence, the end of the tunnel comes into view in the pale blue light of
the sonic. Rose sucks in a harsh breath and covers her hand with her mouth.

Scratched violently into the cave wall in crude handwriting are two familiar words:

BAD WOLF

Rose’s heart stops in her chest. Her stomach turns sickeningly.

It can’t be.

Neither of them moves or speaks for several long moments, both of them in shock, entranced by
the menacing writing. Fear and confusion reverberate between them, compounding the sensations.

When she finally turns to the Doctor, his eyebrows are sunk low over his eyes, his jaw clenched.
Rose doesn’t ever want the Doctor to be afraid, but she finds herself selfishly glad that she can
discern his true feelings now. If she didn’t know better, she might think the only emotion he was
feeling now was anger, the way he’s giving the cave scribblings a full-on Oncoming Storm glare.
It’s reassuring to learn that deep down, they operate more similarly than she thought; even if it
manifests in vastly different ways on the surface. Comforting that maybe humans and Time Lords
aren’t as different as the Doctor wants people to believe.

“That’s impossible,” he finally breathes, stepping closer to the wall.

He reaches a hand out to stroke his finger across the letter ‘W’. Finding it real enough, his arm
recoils, and he steps back again, only to adjust the sonic and wave it around the letters, analysing
the rock. He flicks through several settings in rapid succession, compiling as much data as he can.
But all of these assessments seem to yield nothing of import. He growls in frustration when he runs out of settings to try, and runs a hand through his still-damp hair, making it stand on end.

“What’s this mean?” Rose asks gently, unsure if he’s through brainstorming or not.

“I don’t know,” he rushes out, directing his anger at the stone face rather than at her. “There’s no trace of anything here, no residual energy, radiation, abnormal elemental residue, nothing alien at all.”

“What then, one of the blokes here playin’ a trick on us?” She doubts that’s it, but doesn’t have any other ideas.

“Have you told any of them about this?” he asks rhetorically, knowing the answer.

“No,” she admits.

“Besides, this wasn’t written in Kaelondaian and translated by the TARDIS. It’s carved in English.”

“Who else here knows English?”

“No one,” he says on a sigh. “They’ve never had extra-terrestrial visitors, save for us.”

A chill runs down Rose’s spine.

She takes a moment to compose herself.

“So, what then, end of the world? Daleks? Destruction of the universe?”

He’s silent for a few beats, shaking his head, and some of his fear starts to show through. His eyes betray him.

“I don’t know.” He sounds defeated.

They stand there a bit longer, both unsure of what else they can ask, or what they can do to reassure one another. In the past, this has only meant imminent catastrophe.

But eventually Rose can’t take the silence anymore, and being in the vicinity of the ominous writing is making her feel physically ill.

“Well, starin’ at it’s not gonna do much,” she suggests quietly, rubbing his arm. “Why don’t we head back?” When he doesn’t respond, she suggests a plan of her own. “Do a bit of explorin’, see if there are any other clues ‘round the island?”

He reaches his hand out to thread his fingers with hers, but it takes him a few moments to answer. Still staring at the words, his mind visibly racing.

“Yeah.”

He nods and lets Rose lead them back out of the cave.
Chapter Notes

Surprise! I decided to post before I went to bed. I couldn't sleep, anyway. I really enjoyed writing this chapter. One of my favorites I think. I really love playing with new telepathy concepts. I hope you guys enjoy it too. It's a longer one, as well! I may be starting to lose control of my word count again :P

Thanks a million Amber and Heidi for the beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Doctor remains mostly silent on their trek back to civilization. Hands in his pockets, chewing on his cheek, his eyes hidden behind his shades as he stares down at the sand. He kicks clouds of it up every now and then, an outlet for his frustration. Though Rose has basically coerced him to cease all attempts to hide his emotions, right now she’s tempted to ask him to make an exception. His internal panicking is only amplifying her own.

On Rose’s insistence, they set out to investigate potential origins of the ominous writing. First on the agenda is to confront a few randomly selected villagers to inquire about anything mysterious they might have seen or heard. Most of them have nothing to report; a few corroborate Dakota’s claims of howling at night; only a handful recall Dakota and Kalei’s incident in the woods.

Unsatisfied with the eyewitness testimonies they’ve amassed, and agreeing that formally interviewing the entire town would be folly, they decide to use other means to gather intel.

They roam around the island for a while, and the Doctor conducts scans everywhere they look: tide pools, the port, the hut, local shops and schools. When these, too, turn up nothing, they solicit directions from Dakota to the location of the forest where they saw the glowing eyes.

By the time the Doctor has scanned enough trees to recreate his own digital version of the forest, Rose is downright exhausted. The sun’s rays are making her dizzy from dehydration. It’s not the first time it has slipped the Doctor’s mind that Rose needs nourishment more often than he does; sometimes she has to remind him.

As subtly as she can, she suggests they could both use a break. That she could use a snack and some water, at the very least.

“All right,” the Doctor agrees, to Rose’s surprise. He stuffs his sonic back in his pocket. “I want to head back to the TARDIS anyway. Run some scans of this planet that I can’t manage on my own. You can grab a bite and a kip there, if you like.”

Rose is concerned that the Doctor doesn’t seem willing to partake in a meal or rest, but agrees to the arrangement.

The Doctor gets straight to work at the console when they arrive at the TARDIS, transforming his sunglasses back to his sexy specs and pulling the computer monitor straight up to his face. Rose leaves him to get started, and her growing thirst guides her instinctively to the kitchen.
With tall glass of water in her stomach, an extra for the Doctor in her hand, and a stack of peanut butter sandwiches on a plate for them both, she heads back to the console. Setting up camp on the jump seat, she holds out one of the sandwiches for him. His only acknowledgment of her return is to take the food she’s offered. Over the next several minutes, he hardly looks away from the monitor, and only occasionally tears off a bite of the sandwich. He certainly doesn’t make any attempts at conversation, let alone an effort to ease either of their fears. One of several unfortunate side effects of Time Lord anxiety: it always makes him clam up.

Every test and scan comes back either negative, or with information the Doctor doesn’t want to see. He mumbles to himself, hits the side of the monitor, tears a hand through his hair. Even kicks the console, at one point. His sandwich is forgotten before it’s half-finished, and he still hasn’t had a sip of his water. Rose thinks it best not to interrupt him while he’s concentrating, and research at a single computer is hardly a two-person job. He isn’t brainstorming, doesn’t need a sounding board. He’s just plugging in inquiries and reading the data the TARDIS’ supercomputer spits back. They’ve been in situations like this before, and it’s usually better to wait for him to fill her in when he reaches a stopping point than to try to force him to multi-task.

When he finally collapses on the seat with her, he shakes his head.

“Nothing.” He’s noticeably pouting. “The TARDIS can’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

Deep down, Rose has harboured suspicion that the TARDIS wouldn’t help them with this particular investigation.

“She didn’t last time either, did she?” she asks rhetorically.

A few new creases carve into the Doctor’s forehead.

“Suppose not.”

They had to figure out the whole ‘Bad Wolf’ thing on their own last time; the TARDIS was no help. (Though Rose can’t help but chuckle to herself at the irony of that statement.)

But does this mean the entire universe is at stake again? Could Rose re-fuse with the heart of the TARDIS any second now? Is the Doctor facing an imminent regeneration? Or was the threatening message merely an accidental relic of her time as an immortal, a leftover from all that she scattered across time and space? They haven’t seen any Daleks, after all. There’s no evidence yet this is a portent of cosmic doom.

“Maybe this isn’t somethin’ bad,” she suggests, hoping it doesn’t sound stupid.

The Doctor is quiet for a while, looking at her with confused curiosity, as though he can’t comprehend how she can still be optimistic after all they’ve been through.

“Maybe not.” Though it sounds like a concession, he doesn’t look like he’s giving the theory any real credence. Eyes always give him away.

“Still reckon we stay a bit longer,” he adds after a time. “Make sure Daleks don’t start swarming out of the caves.” The comment clearly isn’t made to be taken seriously, but it’s not quite a joke either. Neither of them laughs.

“Even if they do, we know how to handle ‘em, yeah?” She bumps his shoulder.

“We do have some experience in that area, I suppose, yes.”
He cracks a smile, and the sight of it makes her heart just a little lighter.

Leaping up from the chair to stretch her legs, Rose peeks out the front door to find it’s nearly sundown on the island. Even with a snack in her stomach, she’s looking forward to a proper meal, and she wants to shower before dinner. As long as they’re here, it’d be nice to have the luxury of a hot one for the first time in several days.

“Think I’ll pop back to my room an’ take a shower,” she informs him quietly, pointing to the hall. She hates to leave him alone after something like this, but if they’ll be doing anything intimate tonight, she needs to get the last day’s worth of sex and sea salt off her.

She almost asks him to join her, but she doesn’t think they’re quite ready for that. Sure, her subconscious fights back, he can go down on you in a cave but heaven forbid you take a shower together.

Well. It has a point.

She shivers at the mere memory of that encounter.

“Okay,” he nods her along, not looking at her. Mumbles something about needing a shower, too.

This whole thing has really messed him up. Rose is terrified of what this Bad Wolf stuff could mean, too, but this sort of thing always hits the Doctor harder. He has a tendency to want to spend every waking second in panic until he arrives at a solution. She often has to help him pace himself, to take a step back with her and breathe. Especially for cryptic harbingers like this that they have no concrete, immediate plan to address. His creative genius thrives under pressure; most of the times when he saves cities and planets are when he’s scrambling to do so with a critical time limit. But when there is a vague threat like this one that can’t be quickly solved, with so many unknown variables and factors out of his control, he goes a bit mad.

She hopes she can help calm his nerves tonight. They could both really use the night off from worrying. At the very least, she has a few ideas she thinks will effectively distract them both for a few hours.

“Be out in a tick,” she assures him before heading out of sight.

Anxious to get back to the Doctor, she gets the shower over with as quickly as she can, though washing her hair always takes extra time. But in her haste, she forgot to bring some fresh clothes to change into.

When she tiptoes back out into her room (wet and starkers save for the towel on her head) to get some fresh clothes, the Doctor is sitting on her bed.

With a little gasp, she ducks back into the loo for an extra towel to cover herself before she comes into his line of sight again.

His eyes are glued to her as soon as she reappears, and she thinks she catches a flash of disappointment that she’s bothered to cover herself up. He’s in clean blue trunks (in just a slightly darker shade) and a fresh white shirt. She wonders how much longer he’ll be willing to forego his usual suit. She may not have a thing for calves, but she does like the open buttons at his collar, and the way he rolls his sleeves up during the day.

“Hey,” she offers to break the silence, clutching her towel just above her chest.

“Hi,” he says, just as quietly. His eyes glance down to her bare legs a few times, either convinced
or pretending she doesn’t notice.

“Forgot my… clothes,” she points to the chest of drawers behind him. To get anything, she has to go around the bed he’s sitting on.

“I can see that,” he says, the words coming out oddly strangled.

His hair is freshly styled and still looks wet, and she can smell his crisp cologne from across the room. Not for the first time, she’s amazed at how quickly he’s able to wash up.

On her path to the clothes, she can’t help but take a detour to him. She runs a hand through his hair, then down over his cheek the side of his neck. His skin is still damp and pleasantly warm from a shower.

Unexpectedly, he pulls her in for a kiss. It’s not the leisurely kiss he defaults to; it’s messy, urgent… even a little demanding. It tells her he wants to get lost in it. For a while, she can’t help but do just that, kissing him back with abandon, climbing onto his lap, not caring when the towel falls between them and she’s straddling him mostly naked. Her taut nipples graze against his shirt, exciting her further, and before long she’s rutting against him, feeling him harden beneath her. They both want to forget what they saw today, and this is the perfect way to do that.

But she doesn’t want to disappoint Kenai’s family by exploiting their continued hospitality. The least they can do, if they’d rather be alone and cook up something of their own later, is stop by and tell them they’ll pass on tonight’s meal.

Picturing the confusion and worry of Kenai’s family when they check the hut after no sign of them, she reluctantly pries her mouth away from his.

“We don’t want to miss dinner,” she pants out. “They’ll be worried.”

He looks bewildered, and a bit dejected, but doesn’t argue.

“Right. Get your clothes, then,” he nods to the drawers, avoiding her eyes.

She extricates herself from his lap, and he stands immediately, smoothing out fresh wrinkles in his clothes and patting down the sides of his hair. He strides a few paces away and loiters awkwardly in the middle of her room, staring away from where she’s changing.

Rose knows they can pick up right where they left off later tonight. But she can’t help but feel guilty as they make their way to Kalei’s, because the Doctor is uncharacteristically silent again throughout the journey.

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With the Doctor intellectually preoccupied, and Kalei absent (off on his date), conversation is uncomfortably stunted at dinner. After briefly asking the family if they’ve seen anything out of the ordinary (and hearing nothing promising), the Doctor’s mood sours even more. Other than commenting on the freshness and deliciousness of the freshly caught fish, the Doctor is disturbingly quiet. And it isn’t long before another gratuitous helping of his anxiety wallops her through their link.

Rose does her best to uphold polite dinnertime etiquette during the worst of the silences, but eventually concedes to rush through the meal so they can be alone again as soon as possible.

The Doctor opened up to her this afternoon, in a way. Without using words, he tried to made it
clear he wants a distraction, and it was idiotic of her to withhold that from him, even temporarily.

When they’re finally clear of their hosts and making their way across the sand back towards the hut, the Doctor finally speaks up.

“Rose, I’ve been thinking.” He stops walking and stuffs his hands in his pockets, avoiding eye contact, staring out at the dark crashing waves. The huts along the boardwalk are mere silhouettes in the fading purples of sunset. “I’d like to have another look ’round tonight.”

That, she did not expect.

“Doctor,” she exhales heavily, a scold on the tip of her tongue.

“Whatever’s going on here, it could be catastrophic,” he continues, unfazed. “There must be something I’m missing.”

Rose can’t bear seeing the Doctor so anxious anymore.

“Doctor, we’ve been searching ’round all bloody day. I really don’t want either of us to stress about this anymore tonight,” she confesses. “I just want to relax and get our minds off it.”

He doesn’t respond, but he finally turns his head to meet her gaze. She takes a step closer and takes his hand in hers, and he rubs his thumb over her skin, staring down at this connection between them sombly.

“Whatever’s gonna happen will happen,” she continues. “An’ we’ll be right here if they need us. We’re just a shout away. So can we just… be together, for now?”

Instead of answering, he cradles her cheek in his hand and leans in close, resting his forehead against hers. When he finally kisses her, it’s so softly it’s as if he fears her lips will shatter. He repeats the delicate gesture a few times, trying to find serenity in each touch of their lips. When he pulls away, he seems to have substantially softened to the idea of taking it easy tonight.

“What’d you have in mind?”

Rose takes a deep breath to muster her courage. There’s one sure-fire way to assure him, after her ill-timed rejection earlier, that she wants to be with him. Quietly, and slowly to make sure she gets it right, she entreats him for a telepathic encounter in his native tongue.

In spite of everything, he smiles genuinely at the prospect. It’s more beautiful than ever in the twilight.

“Of course, Rose.”

He tugs lightly on her hand, leading them onward. It may be arrogant of her, but she can’t help but think he already seems a little more at ease.

They walk in companionable silence along the pier, lightly swinging their joined hands between them. Now that they’ve properly shagged for the first time (and the second and third), holding hands like this is starting to feel less like their usual platonic interaction, and more like she and her alien boyfriend have just made it official and want to parade it around for everyone else to see. She’d never make such a brazen declaration of the authenticity of their relationship, at least not within earshot of the Doctor, but such a thing also doesn’t seem necessary. She’s learned that some things are better said without words at all.
“Do you want to work on your barriers again?” the Doctor asks as he clicks the door shut behind them. In the near-blackness of the room, Rose is briefly tempted to say sod it and just have another shag. It was still dark when they made love this morning, and the darkened room seems inherently sensual now. But the Doctor quickly remedies the darkness by lighting the lamp by the bed, and she regains some of her senses.

With a sigh, she actually ponders his question.

“I sort of got the idea, I think;” she confesses. She doesn’t want to work on that tonight; it’s too much labour without enough reward. “Can we practice that later? I want to learn how to do it with the emotions. What good is learning how to use these defences if I can never apply them?”

“Well, Rose, it’s like I said. You need a foundation.” He catches the disappointed look on her face, and his train of thought takes a detour. “But we can start, if you’d like. But we’ll still have to start out the old fashioned way.” He holds his hand in the air and wiggles his fingers to indicate he means with contact.

“I’m okay with that.” She strolls over to the bed and crumples onto it, patting the space next to her. He happily accepts her invitation, but crosses his arms across his chest, clearly not ready to dive in yet.

“All right.” He blows air out his mouth, puffing out his cheeks and all, thinking. “Oh, how to go about this…” he muses quietly to himself. “Forgive my incompetence as an instructor. I’ve never had to teach someone how to be a telepath before.”

“Forgiven,” Rose assures him. “I think you’ve done an okay job so far though. I’m learnin’ aren’t I? Thank you for teaching me at all.”

“Least I could do after basically hijacking your brain.” He drops his arms onto the bed, gripping the edge.

“Stop it,” she commands, knowing how dangerous that train of thought is. “I chose this.”

He glances in her direction, but then goes quiet for a long while, staring at the floor. Still thinking.

“Right,” he eventually agrees, if only to mollify her. “I told you blocking out emotions is harder,” he begins, turning his gaze towards her. “More nuanced.”

“Mhm,” she acknowledges, nodding for him to continue.

“Well, there’s a reason for that.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s easy, or at least easier, when I’m right in front of you, and it’s clear that I’m trying to get in.” Rose opens her mouth to protest, and he qualifies his statement. “Not easy to do, just easy to recognise. It’s transparent. There’s no uncertainty.”

“Okay,” she agrees hesitantly. “Yeah, s’pose you’re right.”

“It’s much harder to block out individual emotions that arise from afar. The main reason for that is, they are quickly and efficiently assimilated with your own. You’ve experienced that now. Even though it’s easier to tell now, after getting acquainted with my telepathic signature, that something didn’t originate from your mind, it still affects you. You don’t just sense that it’s there in an abstract sense – you feel whatever I’m feeling. Sometimes just as strongly as though it did originate
from yourself. Am I right?”

“Yeah,” she agrees. No point in arguing that.

“Mind you, it affects me too. It affects anyone with a connection like this. I’m using ‘you’ in a general sense.”

“No, yeah, I got it.”

“Well, because of the nature of telepathic links like this, blocking out things like emotions is not as simple as it sounds. First, you have to recognise that an emotion is mine. Which I know you’re getting better at. Becoming familiar with how each emotion feels, like we practiced the other night.”

“Yeah, it is gettin’ easier.”

“But that’s the easiest part. The real difficulty is, once you’ve recognized an emotion isn’t yours, you have to dissociate from it. Separate it from the ones that are and ignore it completely. When you’re first starting out, it can be as difficult as suppressing your own emotions. And of course, depending on the severity of the emotion in question, sometimes it’s harder than others. More often, it may just be little things here and there that aren’t too bothersome to ignore. But once you’ve done that, the final step is just to push it out of your mind, and prevent it from entering again.”

“But, once I get my defences stronger, can’t I just prevent things from comin’ in in the first place? Can’t you do that?”

“Well. Hmm. That’s a good point. I…” He scrunches his face up in consternation. It is mad, really, how often she’s able to stump the Doctor with her questions these days. “Yes and no. Remember, the reason this connection was formed without either of us knowing is because it’s supposed to feel natural. It’s harmless, and my subconscious knows it, and from what I’ve gathered so far it seems like your subconscious does, too. Now that I can recognise you, yes, I can do that. It’s actually fairly easy for me. But, I have to make a conscious decision to put up barriers specifically for you. For example, if I know in advance that you want some privacy. Otherwise, anything from you will come through. You go straight through my filters and detection systems for nefarious forces. And I imagine I’ll go straight through yours.”

She frowns a little.

“I’d forgot about that.”

“The good news is, once you’ve strengthened your defences a bit more, you’ll be able to keep me out pre-emptively, if you will. And, of course, you’ll be able to do the inverse as well: keep your own emotions to yourself, locked inside so they can’t transmit to me. But regardless of which direction it’s running, this is something I think we’re both hardwired to accept. However you’ve gained these abilities – and I’m still not entirely sure but I’m thinking the TARDIS had something to do with it – they seem to work very, very similarly to my own. And for me, it must always be done deliberately, it’s never automatic. Least not between us. So I have to assume it will be the same way for you.”

“Doesn’t sound easy.”

“It’s like deciding to control the way you’re breathing. It’s possible, yes, but it requires a constant, conscious effort. As soon as you stop thinking about breathing a certain way, it will default back to
being an automatic process. You’ll go back to breathing normally. And it’s hard to focus on something that requires so much effort and seems so unnecessary. It’s easier to just give in and let your body do things the way it was designed to. That’s how it feels for me, anyway. Even as good as I am, it’s mentally strenuous to keep extra barriers up like that. I can only do it for so long. Maybe a day or so before it gets exhausting. It takes a lot of patience and practice to be able to do it at all.”

“Blimey.” Rose sighs, a bit despondent. If this is something the Doctor struggles with, a Time Lord with a thousand years’ experience, how can she possibly hope to get the hang of it? “Is there even any hope for me?”

“It’ll just take time. With enough practice, you’ll be able to do both without much problem. We’re just going to tackle one thing at a time, hmm? I know you want to learn, and that’s the most important thing.”

“Okay,” she agrees, encouraged by his faith in her ability. “So, what do I do first?”

“Well, what would you like to work on?”

“Well, I think blockin’ you out is a higher priority than getting privacy, myself. You’re the only one who ever seems to get irritated by it.”

Guilt etches itself into his features immediately.

“I apologized for that.”

“I know, sorry. I didn’t mean it like that but… ‘s true, so. Just teach me all you can.”

“All right,” he concedes. “Well. We can work on step two. Learning how to detach from my emotions once you’ve recognized them. See how it goes, hm?”

He nods toward the pillows, and Rose scoots back to get more comfortable without further delay. It still helps to be completely physically relaxed to avoid discomfort. He lies down close to her, and once she stops fidgeting, doesn’t hesitate to reach for her temple.

Rose doesn’t quite expect for the Doctor to take them to her hub again. When she opens her eyes to find herself standing in the garden, just as it was when they left it, she fails to hide her surprise.

“Oh,” she gasps. “Why’re we here?” She turns to the Doctor next to her, looking exactly as she left him in the real world.

He shrugs, hands in his pockets. “It’s just like I said. I like having the visuals.” He gestures to their surroundings with a nod. “It feels a bit more natural. Would you rather not?”

“No, it’s… I like it, too.”

He smiles, and turns away, wandering towards a different path than they used last time. Though she’s supposedly still calling the shots here (and she’s much more inclined to believe that, after what she was able to do before), she follows his lead. There’s nothing she wants to show him tonight, after all. It doesn’t matter which portion of this figment of her imagination they’re in.

The Doctor chuckles.

“It’s not a figment of your imagination, Rose. It’s a real place that you went to, isn’t it?”
“I suppose.” She feels momentarily irritated that he spied on her undercurrent of thought, but quickly banishes the sentiment. He can’t help but hear everything.

The path they’re following soon leads them beneath a tunnel of archways. Copious leaves and red roses climb their way towards the sky along semicircles of black wrought-iron. The arches are far enough apart to allow plenty of sunlight from above, but they are only just tall enough to accommodate the Doctor; rogue stems and drooping petals hang mere inches from his head. The sweet perfume of the flowers and the sharp tanginess of freshly trimmed greens fills her nose, and Rose can’t help but slow down to admire the best and brightest colours of spring. She’s flooded with that unique sense of hope and promise that only the beauty of nature can bring.

They reach the end of the enchanting walkway too soon, and a tiered white fountain awaits them on the other side. Overflowing water trickles a quiet greeting into a new section of the garden. The fountain is rather orthodox – a series of plain white stone basins pouring their contents in a perfect circumference into a larger basin below. Nearest to the ground, the lip of the largest basin flattens and extends outward, doubling as a circular bench for enjoying the view. Peering into the water, Rose finds that the basin is littered with coins of all sizes and metals, just as it would be in real life.

“Fancy a wish?” asks the Doctor, a teasing grin on his lips.

The garden that stretches out before them is a grid of pathways, much like the roads of a city. Instead of buildings, though, the blocks are filled with rich green grasses and bushes of flowers of various sorts – white tulips, red poinsettias, pink roses. It’s like Valentine’s Day itself created this section, and Rose finds it more and more curious that this is the path the Doctor just ‘happened’ to choose for them to travel down. She eyes him suspiciously as he leads the way to their right, around the fountain. The edges of this garden are lined with trees, thick, towering things covered in tiny white flowers she can’t quite identify. Whatever lies outside this sanctuary back in the real world, she’d never know, because the trees obscure whatever road or building lies beyond.

Quaint little white benches are placed strategically along the path, in little nooks in the bushes. If they weren’t inside her mind, Rose would be convinced the Doctor was contriving their first proper date. They do have the garden completely to themselves, after all. Briefly, she thinks about what it’d be like to lead him to one of the benches for a snog. Or to lay out a blanket in the grass nearby and tumble onto the ground with him to make love. What happened in that cave earlier today has her mind wandering about what else they can get up to in the open air.

She doesn’t stifle the fantasies quickly enough.

“One thing at a time, hm?” The Doctor raises an eyebrow.

He stops them walking, and she bows her head in embarrassment, feeling her face flush. It seems he’s stopped them near the centre of the garden.

“Take a few deep breaths for me, all right? Try to relax as much as you can.”

“Why, what’s –”

“Just…” He makes a show of breathing in and exhaling out slowly, his hand following the path of the air.

After she’s taken a few deep breaths, Rose notices a twinge of something. Something that doesn’t feel right. An ominous tug in her gut, a lurch of her stomach.

Glancing around her, she sees the garden begins to warp.
Vivid green blades of grass fade to brown and shrivel before her eyes. Flowers wilt and droop, losing their petals to a swift sickness before they shrivel and die, too: nothing left but empty brown husks of their previous beauty. A strong gust of noisy wind blows through the garden, kicking up the dry corpses of leaves and petals, making them scratch her exposed skin as they pass. The inviting white benches darken to uninviting grey; thorns sprout up in the wood and spider webs stretch across the corners.

High above, a swarm of darkness slowly obscures the sun. But instead of the moon and stars and an indigo canvas, the sky turns utterly black and empty. Against the laws of physics, the garden is engulfed in eerie hues of dark red, emitting from nowhere in particular. The trees around the edges shed their leaves, and the numerous naked branches twist into gnarly, monstrous appendages. Scowling faces appear in thick trunks of scarred grey bark. The pleasant white noise of chirping birds is gone; replaced with growls of beasts and screeches of bats. Searching around for some solace from the dreadful sights, she looks to the fountain, but the previously pristine marble is chipped and tarnished with stains, and black sludge oozes where there once was clear, rushing water.

It’s what she might have pictured the vestibule to hell would look like.

Rose hugs her chest and her teeth begin to shatter as this dreadful place fills her with terror.

She turns to the Doctor, and he, at least, is unchanged amidst the fearful scene. Same clothes, same face. Only, instead of the rock of reason he usually is, he looks scared, too.

“What’s goin’ on?” she stutters out, taking a few steps closer to him.

“It’s me,” he says ominously. “I’m projecting fear into your mind. You can recognize it’s me, can’t you?”

“I…” Rose tries to suppress her fight-or-flight instincts to try to focus on the sense of horror chilling her skin in the breeze and seeping into her soul. It does have a distinctly ‘other’ quality, ethereal and ancient. When she first felt its tug, she remembered it feeling unnatural. Like it didn’t quite fit. And that, she has come to find, is how she’s been able to tell these days, when something she’s feeling is coming from the Doctor. It’s a funny thing that she’s able to tell the difference at all. It’s such an indescribable nuance to detect.

“Yeah,” she finally answers. It’s difficult to speak to him in complete sentences as long as her brain is muddled with fear like this.

“Try to control it,” the Doctor orders, confidence in her ability evident in his tone. “You know it’s not yours. Try to reject it. Picture the garden as it was before.”

Glad to have some instruction to work with, Rose tries to focus on fighting back against the feeling. But every positive thought is quickly dampened and obliterated by the abyss of terror radiating through the garden. She’s hopeless to brighten the scene; the panic chills her to the bone and becomes indistinguishable from her own emotions. And at that point, she’s defenceless to fight it off.

“I can’t,” she cries, a few tears spilling over as she rushes into his arms seeking protection. He feels real, just as solid and warm and secure as he does out in the real world, and she fists her hands in his shirt and buries her face in his chest, already feeling better to have escaped some of the terror.

“It’s all right,” he murmurs, pressing his lips to the top of her head. Eventually he wraps his arms around her, continuing to shush her dry sobs, and it is the perfect balm for her weary mind. A
warmth spreads through her, like being wrapped in a blanket fresh out of the dryer. There’s security, too; suddenly she’s been encased in a suit of armour, something that nothing could ever injure or penetrate. The sense of comfort and safety sends the fear fleeing so quickly it’s almost disorienting.

The abrupt change is yet another sign that neither set of emotions were hers.

When Rose peeks her eyes open, she’s greeted with warm sunlight and plentiful colours once more. She sighs against the Doctor’s shirt, feeling a little pathetic that she quit so quickly, and a little reluctant to end this rather tender hug.

“We’ll work on it,” the Doctor says softly, carding his fingers through her hair. She’s at least glad he doesn’t seem inclined to end the intimate moment, either. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have started with something so difficult to combat.”

“’S all right,” she mumbles. The flowers have bloomed again, the trees are in the height of spring, the fountain is back to spouting fresh water.

“What were you thinkin’ about?” she asks, unable to stop the impulse to try to soothe whatever it was.

How often does he feel fear of that magnitude? She hopes never, but knows it’s daft to hope such a thing.

The Doctor sighs, and Rose pulls back just a little so she can see his face. He’s looking out at the garden rather than her face and is doing a poor job of hiding his reluctance to share. But when she doesn’t retract the question, he surrenders.

“How afraid I am of losing you.”

The words cut through Rose’s heart like a knife.

She reaches up, resting a hand on his cheek, stroking her thumb there. Lacking any meaningful words to reassure him, she just whispers his name, and he closes his eyes as he hears it. She tries to mimic what he’s just done for her, sending warm, reassuring thoughts to him with as much strength and passion as she can.

It seems to work, too, because within seconds, his despondency fades away, and a hint of a smile plays on his lips. Impressed again at her ability, no doubt.

“Tell you what, though.” He opens his eyes, now filled with adoration, and taps on her chin with one finger. “I’ve got an idea.”

“What?” She doesn’t exactly want him to change the subject yet, but nor does she want them to dwell on such a morbid possibility.

He takes a deep breath, concentrating on something.

Without warning, the garden starts to change again. Grey clouds cumulate in the sky in fast forward, shield the sun’s rays and darken the sky. Within seconds, it starts to rain. Not just a drizzle, but a proper, pouring rain that quickly soaks her to the skin. The entire garden turns shades of greenish-grey, no colour in the flower blossoms, the once bright green leaves now a pitiful faded turquoise. The flower stems all bend passively, and their blossoms droop as though the plants themselves are mourning. Raindrops collect and fall from the petals like tears.
Watching all this take place, Rose is overwhelmed with sadness.

“Instead of trying to just flat out ignore it,” the Doctor’s voice rings out through the downpour, “try to overcome it. If one of your own emotions overpowers it, it might make it weak enough to expel.”

Rose thinks it’s worth a try. But the sadness is quickly usurping most of her faculties. It’s like the night on the Sanctuary Base, when she was so overcome with grief she couldn’t hold back her tears. Before she can become too depressed to think, she attempts to take the Doctor’s advice. She tries to imagine the ruby roses on the archways, the sound of the little waterfalls in the fountain, the songs of the birds. She imagines her favourite theme park ride, spending time with her mum, baking biscuits in the TARDIS. She clings onto the joy she finds in these images and memories, and uses everything in her power to remind herself the sadness doesn’t belong here. At least not in this moment.

A few rays of golden sunlight peek through the cloud cover.

Inspired by the early marker of success, she continues to think of joyous things. Her favourite TV shows, her favourite musical artists. The way the Doctor smiles when he’s proud of her. The way he rambles when he’s excited.

The rain lets up to a fine mist as colour begins to return to the garden, spreading out from where she stands, seeping into the grass and flowers. Her joy that it’s working then begins to expedite the process. The rain stops altogether, the clouds turning from ominous grey to fluffy white. The sulking flowers snap upright and bloom to their fullest potential once again. Puddles of water on the walkways and benches evaporate, and her and the Doctor’s clothes dry back to normal. The last of the white clouds shrinks and disappears from the sky, leaving it clearer and crisper than ever.

The Doctor looks around at the renewed landscape, a very impressed smirk on his lips, pride gleaming from his eyes.

“Brilliant,” he shakes his head, smiling properly now.

“I did it!” She jumps up and down a few times before dashing into his arms for a celebratory hug. As is their tradition, he lifts her off the ground and spins her a full 360 degrees before setting her gently back down.

But deviating from this tradition, as soon as her feet are on the ground, he’s kissing her.

It’s still in the garden, in her mind, and she’s pretty sure it’s not happening in the real world. But it feels pretty damn real. His fingers thread between hers just the same, his other hand splayed on her back is just as strong, his lips are just as soft and persistent against hers. His tongue just as playfully curious when he deepens the kiss. And he makes the same little contented noises in the back of his throat.

But suddenly, it’s not just her own senses alighting in her mind.

It starts with just whispers, threads on the periphery of her awareness. She can just barely sense what her mouth feels like against his. Taste what he tastes when he kisses her. Know how it feels to hold her hand and pull her softer body against his leaner frame. His sensations grow stronger with each brush of their lips, and it takes her a few moments to adjust, foreign and otherworldly as it is to have two perceptions to filter and process at once. She can’t effectively process them both in parallel, instead having to choose whose perspective to focus on each consecutive moment. Multitasking is more difficult here, even, than in the real world.
With this first taste of the dual sensations she would experience if they were to add the telepathic element to their intimate relationship, Rose is suddenly quite eager to seal the deal.

When the Doctor pulls away, he looks like he knows exactly what she’s thinking.

Oh, right. He does.

“What can we do in here?” she asks, swallowing.

“Anything,” he answers quietly.

She understands what he means without the need for explanation.

“Most telepathic species like to have both elements present, though,” he adds, still quietly. “Time Lords, perhaps, being an exception. Too cerebral for their own good.”

“Their?” She highlights his use of third person.

“I was always a bit of a rebel.”

“Both elements, though, you mean…”

“Physical and mental. Especially for species that aren’t inherently telepathic, it would be quite foreign to forego the physical element completely and confine to the mental. I prefer to include both, personally.”

“Yeah?” her voice shakes a little. “Do you… think we could do that? Tonight? Or… right now?” she glances at his mouth again, arousal stirring in her belly.

“Rose, after what that happened today… there’s nothing I’d rather do.”

Her heart skips about five beats.

“But…” he continues, quickly sinking her hopes. “It’s a lot to handle. I wanted to be sure you were ready first.”

“Well, look at what I did tonight,” she counters, gesturing around them.

“Quite right.” He grips onto her waist with both hands, pulling her impossibly closer, staring into her eyes hungrily. The first signs that her arousal is starting to affect him. “But you’re still a brand new telepath. I’m not sure if you can handle that yet.”

“You think you’re such a stud,” she shakes her head, sceptical.

“Well…” He grazes her jawline with his nose, sending shivers down her spine. “Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it.”

“Not knockin’ it. I just think you’re a bit overconfident.”

“I don’t think so.” He chuckles lightly against her cheek, like the idea is preposterous.

“You’ve got a –” she gasps as he drags his tongue down her pulse point – “tall order to fill now, mister. You’ve set my expectations really high.” Her voice squeaks as he trails messy kisses toward her ear.

“Just don’t want you to pass out on me,” he murmurs against her skin, sending shivers down her
body.

“You know.” She pulls him up by the collar of his shirt and glares at him. “Arrogance isn’t becoming on you.” He raises an eyebrow, like she’s never been more wrong and he’s never been happier about it. It fuels her competitive nature. “Tell you what, if I do pass out, you have permission to wake me.” She narrows her eyes at him, a challenge.

He takes a moment, only pretending to consider declining her offer. His eyes are glazed over in that familiar way that tells her he’s properly turned on now, inebriated on the human hormones he’s drinking inside her mind. He knows what he wants, and he won’t turn back now.

“Seems fair enough.”

“All right then.” She loops her arms around his neck and murmurs close to his ear. “Show me your moves, Time Lord.”

Chapter End Notes

Just as a reminder, if you enjoy this fic or other of my works, you now have the option to leave me a tip! :)
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

This chapter literally /destroyed/ me it was so much freakin work to get it just the way I wanted it. I normally only do 2-3 rounds of editing, but this puppy got 5. Aaaahhhhh. I'm just... nervous as hell. I think I amped up everyone's expectations too high, and I'm so worried I won't live up to them. I tried really hard to, I hope you guys at least appreciate that.

I've really taken a fresh approach to telepathy in this fic, and that extends into the smut. This is definitely different to all the other times I've written telepathic sex before. It was really lovely to dive into it from his pov, too. A night like this is a perfect opportunity to really explore it. Anyway I really hope you guys love it, because I certainly do (or I did before I stared at it and picked it apart for 40 hours, sorta hate it now lol). Okayyyy done rambling now.

Thanks Amber and Heidi for the betas!

As the Doctor deconstructs Rose’s garden, he uses more caution than usual. They’ve both agreed they don’t want to be confined to their minds, and the simulated environment would be superfluous for what they’re about to do – they likely won’t be paying much attention to their surroundings. But it’s a tenuous process. He doesn’t want to completely sever their connection just yet, and it can be difficult to turn off some telepathic elements without withdrawing entirely. As the last vestiges of the mirage disappear, he retreats to the shallower parts of her mind while inviting her deeper into his. It’s advantageous for him to have more control and leeway while he’s teaching her, but optimal intimacy requires equal access.

With a concerted effort, the scale slowly starts to tip so it’s more symmetrical between them, but he slips a couple of times, and her stream of communication falters just slightly. It is for such brief moments that Rose likely doesn’t notice, but it’s still an unpleasant reminder that some of his finer telepathic skills are a little out of practice. He focuses onto what he can still sense from her – passing thoughts, lust, anticipation – grasping onto these abstract strands so he isn’t swept away. After a few moments, they find a balance together.

Having hyped this up for her so much, the Doctor is suddenly anxious to get started, fearing it won’t live up to the expectations he’s built. Is it only so great for him because he’s a Gallifreyan? Will a human not get as much out of the experience? Fantasising about the idea of doing it was one thing; staring down the reality of making it happen is another.

But as Rose’s mind nestles inside of his and she makes herself at home, he breathes a little easier. Tension he hadn’t realised he was holding melts away. A warm, comfortable sense of calmness suffuses through him with every robust double heartbeat. It just feels right, like he’s been lost and wandering and finally found his way home. Rose always has this effect on him, but he doesn’t think he’ll ever quite get used to it. His mind drifted alone for too long.

“Rose,” he breathes aloud. It was meant to be an acknowledgment that they’ve reached a suitable equilibrium, but it comes out more as a sigh of pleasure. An offering of gratitude. An exultation. Some combination thereof. But his reasons for doing it are irrelevant, because for the first time, he
hears the word filtering through her ears. Processes the sound of his voice through her perspective. It’s something he never would have believed, had she told him at any time prior, but in this moment, it’s sensual to her.

He didn’t know exactly what to expect going into this; what it would be like to get a steady stream of Rose’s unfiltered, uncensored perception of him. But this initial sample is enough to leave him dumbfounded. The Doctor? An elderly, out of practice Time Lord? Poster boy for asceticism? Champion of geeks everywhere? Sensual?

He still doesn’t understand what Rose sees in him, but he knows this is but a preview of what’s to come. He’s going to do a lot more than say her name before the night is through – what will she think then? How can he prepare himself adequately, when her reaction to something so minor is enough to bring the gears in his mind to a screeching halt?

She’s going to destroy him. But it’s going to be brilliant.

Opening his eyes, he finds her are still closed.

“I know I’ve said it’s easier to close your eyes,” he says. “But can you open them, now?”

She slowly lifts her reluctant lids, squinting and blinking for several moments as though the soft firelight of the room is harsh sunlight. Every moment her eyes are open he is mesmerised by them: her pupils wide, glassy orbs in a pool of dark honey. But she continually loses focus as though she’s disoriented, so he can’t hold her gaze for long. They’ve never done this with eyes open before, and it can take a bit of getting used to. There’s so much input to the brain in the midst of a connection like this; having to process visual inputs on top of it all can be taxing.

“You still feel me?” he asks.

She nods, too overwhelmed to speak. Not a good sign, he takes it, that she’s overwhelmed before they’ve really done anything, rendered speechless by merely opening her eyes. But they’ve made their agreement, and he’s too desperate for this to indulge the worry that she’ll pass out anymore. As long as she’s still freely consenting (and she is, enthusiastically in his mind), he doesn’t see how anything could change his mind now.

“I need to try something,” he says quietly, doing what he can to minimize the sensory overload. “To make sure this will work.”

“‘Kay,” she nods.

Slowly, he shifts his fingertips away from her temple, trailing slowly down her cheek, her throat, until his palm comes to rest on her collarbone. There’s no disruption in their link. Her transient fantasies, excitement, and jitters are still flowing through his point of contact.

“How about now?”

“Yeah.” She gives him a smile. It seems to be getting easier for her to keep her eyes open.

“Good.” He grins back. “It’s not exactly convenient to have to have my hand on your head the whole time. How about…” He lifts his palm, until only the tips of his fingers caress her chest, teasing the tops of her breasts. He fixates on her telepathic signature, clutching onto to the outstretched tendrils of her mind, and it almost works. But his pinkie finger accidentally lifts away from her skin, and the thread he was hanging by suddenly breaks. Her presence starts to slip away, and he doesn’t react quickly enough to catch it: in an instant he’s left alone in his mind. He can’t even finish his sentence as the abrupt solitude crushes him.
But Rose swoops in to save them both. Immediately realising he’s gone, she loops an arm around his shoulders, slipping one hand beneath the collar of his shirt. Palm pressed against back, she buries her other hand in his hair, and something magical happens. Her mind swiftly and smoothly weaves itself back into his, with a softness that leaves him breathless. She’s never initiated the link on her own before, and he wouldn’t have bet anything substantial that she was capable of it yet. He thought for the foreseeable future he’d always have to be the one to do that.

Impressed and immensely proud of her initiative, a flood of affection washes through him, and quickly overflows into her mind as it does. With a soft gasp, she closes her eyes as she’s inundated with it, clenching her fist in his hair. Watching her physically react to something he’s given her is but another teaser of what’s ahead, and there’s twinge of excitement in his shorts.

“Brilliant,” he whispers. Convinced enough that they have a functioning system now, he rolls her gently onto her back and settles between her legs, suspending himself above her. Ensuring both his hands are securely on her skin for extra precaution, he kisses her, deep and urgent, unable to temper himself anymore. She doesn’t complain, but matches his frantic pace, scratching her nails on his back.

It’s even better than the kiss in the garden. It would be heady enough on its own – her soft curves beneath him, the delicate desperation in her kisses, the firm tug of her hand in his hair. But having a direct line to everything she’s feeling, too is simply intoxicating.

His body hovering carefully over hers makes her feel protected. Cherished. His lips are slightly cool to her overheated skin, and he tastes like clean water, minerals, a hint of sugar. His hair sifting between her fingers is pleasant to her, turns her on. Pulling him closer with the hand between his shoulder blades makes her feel powerful. In her eyes he’s the saviour of the universe, and she’s the luckiest woman alive to have him in her arms, if only for the evening.

The hand in his hair drifts lower, over his ear, until she cups his cheek in her hand, splaying her fingers, brushing her thumb over his jaw. She likes the textures she finds there. The prickly hairs of his sideburn, the smoothness of his cheek, his angular jawline. Despite his slim frame, she considers him strong. Inhaling a deep breath through her nose, she gets a whiff of his aftershave, a crisp foresty scent that makes her head spin. Everything is so manly. It saturates every cell in her body with arousal. Her skin flushes with heat from head to toe, moisture pools between her legs, pulsing with need.

With such solid proof that she is attracted to him, to everything about him, the Doctor is at a loss. His strongest impulse is to contest and deny such notions, but this time he can’t. Her thoughts are completely genuine, and the physiological signals are entirely unquestionable.

She’s tried to tell him, a couple of times now, how much she fancies him, but it’s never been as tangible as it is now. He’s suddenly dizzy, his equilibrium thrown off. Hyperaware of the planet spinning beneath him, the galaxies hurtling through space. And though he possesses a respiratory bypass, he can’t seem to flip it on. He’s panting between their rushed kisses.

Overwhelmed, he reluctantly pulls away. With a few jagged deep breaths, some of the disorientation subsides.

“You were right,” Rose confesses in a rush, nodding vigorously.

Pride washes through him. Knowing she’s going to enjoy this at least almost as much as he will boosts his confidence.

“I know it’s not easy,” he sobers up a little as his breathing stabilizes. “You’re still working on
maintaining this naturally. But I’ll do my best to keep it active. So long as we’re touching, it shouldn’t break. But the more skin is touching, the easier it’ll be. The less you’ll have to think about it.”

She nods again, swallowing hard.

Both his hands are already beneath her top now, but he hooks his thumbs around the hem so he can hike it up her torso, and she lifts up her arms and wrests it off the rest of the way so he doesn’t have to. He nods down to her bra, and she unclasps it and wriggles out of it, as well, faster than he’s ever seen her do before. Rewarded with the lovely view of her chest, he allows himself a few moments to admire her perfection. He could stare at her all night and be content – if her smooth, fair skin didn’t look so tantalising to taste.

He thinks back to earlier today, how positively she responded to stimulation there.

Curious, he lowers his head to her breast. Pulling its peak into his mouth with his teeth gently, he draws a circle around her nipple with his tongue. Rose bites back a moan, and his head spins with the surge of pleasure that pours through their link. It feels impossibly good. It’s not confined to where his lips touch: ghosts of pleasure trickle between her legs, tingles and tiny muscle spasms as though he’s touching her there, instead. It spreads through her body, leaving no muscle group untouched; back arching, fists clenching, legs writhing.

Okay, theory confirmed. Human nipples a bit more sensitive than Gallifreyan. He notes the observation, and continues to stroke the sensitive bud with his tongue, more to gratify himself than Rose, though he’d never admit it. He doesn’t have to learn to enjoy the exotic, unfamiliar stimulation; his physiology responds just fine on its own. Before long he finds himself grinding his now-aching erection against her thigh.

Feeling him react this way to her pleasure, his rigid length pressing against her because of what she feels, Rose is suddenly empowered. Inhibitions lowered. Impatient for even more.

Rearranging her hands, she starts undoing the buttons on his shirt, starting nearest the collar, working frantically. Eager to touch him and to learn what her touch feels like to him. Keeping one hand on her skin at all times, he helps her divest him of the shirt one sleeve at a time. For once, he doesn’t have another one on underneath. Now that it’s likely he’ll be disrobing in a rush every night, he figures it’s just easier this way. She presses both her palms against his chest, then slowly guides them lower, mapping the contours of his torso. She relishes every inch she touches – the slight musculature of his pectorals, the manly hair. His ribs protrude through his skin in some places but it’s not offensive to her. She doesn’t find him scrappy, but perfectly proportioned. Biting her lip, she broadcasts a vivid reminder that she fancies everything about him.

He can hardly stand being bombarded with such compliments, forced to look at himself through such a glorifying lens. If he weren’t experiencing it so intimately, he’d never believe she actually felt this way. It seems almost insufferably vain not to turn away from it; and yet, he physically can’t. Having their minds joined together is so divine, nothing she could think would make him purposely sever it.

Deep down, he can’t help but think he doesn’t deserve any of this. The killer of his own kind, taking a lover? The ancient destroyer of worlds, seducing a young mortal?

But Rose detects this fleeting insecurity, and insists that he does deserve it. He deserves her affection, and what’s more, he deserves to feel so much pleasure that he sees a supernova behind his eyes.
With Rose’s soft persuasion, the self-deprecating thoughts vanish from his mind as though they were never there.

With only both of their growing desire left in their wake, he groans with anticipation, grinding against her again.

Rose pushes back against his shoulders, and flips him onto his back with ease. Still dazed by her blatant adoration for him, he’s hardly in a position to take the lead, and happily submits to her control. He couldn’t possibly have prepared himself for this. It’s been so long he hadn’t accurately remembered how intense it is.

She throws a leg over his waist and straddles him, but doesn’t quite touch his erection. The gentle weight of her breasts brushes his chest as she leans forward. His arms wind around her back, his hands touching everywhere he can to sustain their connection, each of his fingertips humming with the current as he concentrates on making it even stronger. Using her newfound abilities to find his most sensitive spots, she kisses her way along his neck, lingering at each one, making him thrust helplessly into the air.

She loves making him squirm like this, and loves the way he tastes now. Saltier than usual. Not so different from a human bloke, she thinks. And he’s warmer than usual, too, flushed with arousal as much as she is, and it turns her on even more.

“Why did we wait so long to do this,” Rose murmurs, breathless next to his ear.

He mumbles out a garbled sentiment of agreement, just before she grazes her tongue along the shell of his ear, then nibbles his earlobe between her teeth before swiping it with her tongue, too. Shivers course through his body; he lets out a sharp gasp as a bright flash of pleasure lights up their link. With only a split second delay, Rose shivers, too.

He didn’t even know he had that one, ‘til now.

In retrospect, Gallifreyans may have been boring sexual partners compared to humans.

“Rose, come on…” he begs, rolling his hips again.

She takes mercy on him and wriggles back until her bum rubs against his length.

“Oh!” she cries out just as the warm friction of the movement brings him a rush of relief.

Spurred on by this tempting flicker of his pleasure, she lifts off the bed momentarily to rearrange herself; aligning her centre with the length of his erection. Then, slowly, she rocks forward.

*Oh*, is right. Oh, yes. Her fingernails dig into his sides as her eyes roll back, and the way she breathes out his name is the most erotic thing he’s ever heard.

He thought it was overwhelming before, feeling Rose in times like this through a filter. Her sexual excitement is particularly potent, and when it transmits to him long-distance, it can be so intensely arousing that it in itself becomes pleasurable – heightened sensitivity, increased blood flow, vivid fantasies. It greatly facilitates his own arousal, and makes any subsequent stimulation that much better. A convenient shortcut, considering their biologically mismatched sex drives.

But all that is incomparable to this. Either his memory hasn’t done the experience justice, or Rose is simply much more adept than his previous partners.

He certainly wouldn’t complain, if it was only his own sensations he was feeling. Rose’s softest
curves rubbing against his aching member, clothes or not, is superb in itself. It’s the stuff of fantasies. But as if that wasn’t enough, he can now feel everything that Rose does, too. Every single inch of her body is now an extension of his own. Every nerve ending she stimulates alights in his own mind, as though they belong to him. And he can feel everything. The persistent, solid heat of him beneath the fabric, the delicious friction that brings heat rushing between her legs and sends intense swells of pleasure down to her toes. The slick moisture seeping into her knickers as she moves. The tension building in her belly, coiling tighter and tighter as she perfects the angle of her thrusts.

His length pulses ever harder as she rolls back and forth, again and again, chasing two sets of pleasure now. The fact that they’re still half-clothed doesn’t matter. Nothing does except finishing together. How it happens is suddenly irrelevant.

He moves his hands down, slipping beneath her shorts, squeezing her bum beneath the fabric, pulling her down against him harder.

“That’s it,” he encourages, closing his eyes as the onslaught begins. He’d normally need much longer to climax this way, but Rose is nearly to the point of no return, and she’s dragging him along with her.

Rose sobs out a curse above him.

Their pleasure, physical and mental, intertwines seamlessly. The Doctor loses track of whose neurons are whose as they all fire at once. A million tiny lightning strikes in the synapses that are indistinguishable as Time Lord or human. Just as Rose wished, a supernova bursts behind his eyes, blinding him as they stumble towards a peak together. Reality fades from their grasp, until all that exists is the friction of two layers of clothes. Wriggling limbs, cries of pleasure, the spasms of involuntary muscles. The effects of two nervous systems in overdrive synergise, extending the ecstasy longer than either of them could ever experience on their own.

As the pleasure finally ebbs, the dizziness from earlier starts to return. It’s been so long since he’s had one like this, he feels lightheaded.

If that went on mere seconds longer, he might have been the one passing out.

She collapses on top of him, her limbs jelly.

For a long while, they don’t speak, they simply lie together, hands rubbing on bare skin, basking in the satisfaction. It’s different than the times they’ve already had sex, in the best possible way: they both already know exactly how the other felt during the entire experience. Not a moment is wasted in anxiety that either of them performed less than admirably. The only thing tempering Rose’s euphoria is that it didn’t quite go as she had planned.

“It wasn’t how I imagined it, either,” he confesses aloud.

“No,” she giggles as she looks up at him, chin on his chest. “But ‘s okay,” she adds. “It was lovely.” Using all her strength, she lifts up on wobbly muscles so she can bring her mouth to his. The kiss is lazy and sloppy, both of them fatigued.

“Always wondered…” she begins as she rolls off of him, flopping onto her side. He turns towards her so he can maintain as much contact as possible, skin touching everywhere it can, their mouths close enough to touch again whenever either of them feels the impulse. “What it feels like for a bloke.”
“And?” Struck with the impulse, he kisses her gently.

“It’s similar. But it’s also like nothin’ I ever felt… it’s more… concentrated for you.” She returns the gesture. “’S almost… explosive.”

He laughs at that, and only just now remembers he has a soiled spot on his shorts. But it’s not important right now.

His mouth meets hers again, and lingers this time, a slow, heated kiss that kindles the fading embers of arousal. With every brush of his lips, he sends a bouquet of gratitude for being willing to try this, and assures her that he’d very much like to do it again. Sooner rather than later. Preferably before Rose goes to sleep tonight. Fortunately for him, she returns the sentiment, and then some. She makes it very clear that she’s not yet had her fill of him.

He smiles so widely that it messes up their kiss.

Not for the first time, he’s overcome with the urge to tell her he loves her. But he stifles it down before she can decipher the ephemeral thought.

With or without a confession, the Doctor is still consumed by a sense of possessiveness. He never wants to let her go. Never wants to be apart from her. He never even wants to break this link, even temporarily. Sod saving the universe; they can stay on Kaelondaia forever, talking and making love with minds intertwined. Vulnerable though the thoughts are, these he doesn’t try to hide from Rose, and she treats each one as a treasure.

*Sounds good to me,* she responds through their link, so they can keep kissing.

As their kiss grows deeper, their hands wander – his to her breasts, hers to his hair. Their link is flooded with both of their memories of their recent encounter, the transcendent seconds of bliss they shared together, and it brings both of them back to the cusp of intimacy. Rose is the first to be noticeably aroused, moaning into his mouth, tugging on his hair. But it doesn’t take the Doctor long to follow suit, and he’s hard again in a matter of minutes.

*Really glad,* he groans as she throws a leg over his hip, brushing his erection, *you didn’t pass out yet.*

*Mmh,* she agrees. More than ready for another round.

*I was quite looking forward to* – he groans as she sucks on his bottom lip – *shagging you properly.*

*Yes,* she rocks into him.

*Want to know* – he gasps as her pleasure surges through him – *how it feels when I’m inside you.*

*Fuck, yes.*

He breaks them out of the kiss, and deftly reaches down to unfasten Rose’s shorts. She does the same to his, and just for an instant, they both forget about skin contact. When their connection is momentarily broken, they both gasp, and their eyes meet immediately, sorrow and pleas for forgiveness exchanged in their gaze. He reaches for her face, touching a few fingers to her temple for the fastest reunion. It only takes a second before they both exhale with relief. He keeps his hand there as Rose gets rid of their shorts, with only a little help from the Doctor’s opposite hand.

Both of them finally bare, the Doctor guides Rose onto her back, and settles some of his weight on top of her before removing his hand. With so much skin touching now, the connection will no
doubt thrive regardless of where his hands are.

He closes his eyes and focuses on the feminine biological signals flowing into his mind. Rose is keening, hot and damp between her legs, her racing heartbeat throbbing in her centre, still swollen from her first orgasm. Every breath is a slow, ragged gasp. Desperate for them to be joined properly, she suppresses the urge to fidget beneath him. She embraces him warmly from within their link, basking in the fullness that being together like this brings. And yet, her body reminds him, between her legs she’s empty and aching for him. It’s time for both worlds to collide.

Leaving a hand on her side for good measure, he brings one down to her knee, lifting it up to give him more room. She takes it one step further, wrapping her leg around his, resting on the back of his thigh. He aligns himself properly, and his eyes flutter closed as a slick wetness coats the head of his cock. He feels himself there, thick and warm, teasing her entrance, and her body beckons him inside, her interior walls clenching and expanding in preparation.

He decides he’s too curious, though, to rush to his final destination. Both to tease her and to experience more of her distinctive feminine pleasure, he guides member higher instead, tucked between her folds, searching. The moment he finds what he’s looking for, he swears he almost loses consciousness. For a few seconds, he almost wishes he had one of these. It’s more sensitive than any similarly sized area of his body; the lightest pressure brings almost overwhelming sensation. There’s dynamite contained in this little bundle of nerves. He repeats the motion, grazing the head of his cock over her clit again and again.

And, stars, what Rose feels as he touches her there. Pleasure, yes, of course, but there are other things, too. She can indulge him this way just by lying there, and it makes her feel powerful. How natural it feels to please one another, how easy this transition to physical intimacy has been... it feels like they were made for this. She laments how utterly stupid they are, to not have been doing this all along.

He’s warm and solid and she can feel the contours of him, foreskin and veins and all between her folds and these details only turn her on more. Because she knows it’s enjoyable for him, in a way touching her this way with his hands or his tongue isn’t. It’s something that caters to them both, and she appreciates that.

For precisely that reason, he can’t wait any longer. He repositions himself back to her entrance, and slowly pushes inside.

Rose gasps, and his vision goes fuzzy with the onslaught of unfamiliar sensations it brings.

It’s fantastic as it is, delving inside of Rose Tyler, the slick warmth enveloping him, drawing him deeper. It’s enough to make him see stars on its own, and he can’t blame human blokes for so often finishing too soon. But tonight, as much as he is being surrounded, he’s being filled. It’s something his own biology is incapable of emulating. Deep, receptive muscles stretch to accommodate him, and it could almost be uncomfortable, if it weren’t so immensely fulfilling and intimate. As the soft contours inside of her cushion and welcome him, she relaxes beneath his weight, the satisfying pressure of him inside her slowly calming tense muscles. Her other leg wraps around his waist, and she pulls him closer, digging her heels into his bum to take him in deeper because she feels so complete when they’re connected.

Every thought from her mind is telling him move, move, move but he can’t. Not yet. He wants to savour this. He kisses her, instead, thanking her for being so willing to try this with him. For opening her mind to him. For sharing herself so intimately with him. For the way she’s holding him right now. For everything.
She rolls her hips, and he shifts inside of her, bringing a burst of pleasure for them both, and their kiss is broken as they groan in harmony.

Though he mourns leaving her silky, sweet lips, he pulls back and starts to move.

She implied that it was different, the way he experienced sex. She must have been right, because hers is different, too. It builds so slowly and for so long that it consumes her whole body. Her hands clench into fists on his back, her toes curl where they’re resting on his backside, her largest muscle groups contract and relax in a slow, regular rhythm as her body prepares for release. It leaves her breathless; the most beautiful sounds falling from her lips as she draws closer.

They’re both incapable of any semblance of conversation as they become lost in one another. With double the neural signals to receive, every ounce of their fused brain power is dedicated to sensory input; there’s none left to string together a coherent sentence. Their only concept of reality is each other; nothing exists beyond this bed, nor even beyond where their skin touches. Amidst light caresses and warm shivers of pleasure, his sensations and hers compete for their attention but neither ever wins out. A lull in pleasure for one is a spike in pleasure for the other. It never lets up, and neither of them could possibly handle any more, but they greedily chase after more nonetheless. Rutting faster, begging each other for nothing specific.

Together they climb, their pleasure melding together for the second time. Telepathy notwithstanding, the laws of biology dictate it shouldn’t be possible to experience both perspectives, certainly not at the same time. The sensory overload is enough to drive them both to near insanity. It’s too much to process. Emotions swirl chaotically through their minds, until he can hardly distinguish whose are whose. Impatience to finish. Reluctance for their union to be over. Gratitude that they’ve finally given in to their desires. Fear that they’ll be separated. Joy. Lust. Love. He hardly dares think it, but it’s unmistakable.

Before either of them can dwell on concrete words that don’t do justice to their tumultuous feelings, the Doctor rocks into her harder. Her curves cushioning the impact gloriously, their skin slick with sweat reducing the friction. As they both race to the peak, he reaches a hand between them to tend to her clit, and the added dose of pleasure causes them both to shudder, falter in their rhythm just enough to send them tumbling over the edge.

It’s not a supernova he seems this time, as they ascend together. Nor even a hypernova. It’s only Rose. Her lips parted, face contorted in pleasure. Leaving crescent-shaped indentations in his back as she clings onto him. Breathing out his name in a way he hopes he’ll never forget, no matter how many times he regenerates. He calls out her name one last time too, as she flutters around him and he spills everything into her. Eight limbs tremble through a harmony of soft sighs and rough moans.

The next few minutes are a blur.

He doesn’t recall collapsing on top of her, without enough decorum to support some of his weight so he doesn’t crush her. Doesn’t remember slipping out of her, or removing his hand from between their bodies. But somehow he’s ended up lifeless atop her, his face smushed into her pillow, whispering her name between panting breaths. She kisses the side of his neck, humming contentedly, and he’s relieved she isn’t uncomfortable, because he doesn’t know how he could move. Her hands are still on his back, and she rubs them up in down in slow, soothing motions, guiding him gently down from heaven.

He can still feel her in his mind, sated, weightless, exhausted. In love with him.

He’s too bloody knackered to be stressed about the potential ramifications of that last one, at the
moment.

It feels wonderful, being loved.

It feels like only a moment later he’s startled awake.

Rose is talking to him.

How long has she been trying to get his attention? What did she say?

“You did!” Rose exclaims. She sounds indignant.

“I did what?” he mumbles, lifting his heavy head just enough to speak without the pillow muffling
the words.

“Fall asleep!” She’s still annoyed, but a bit amused, too.

“I…” He lifts up a little more, using his elbow for leverage to look at her. “Did I?”

“You fell asleep, mister.”

He groans sleepily and rolls off of her, guilt catching up with him.

“Blimey. I’m sorry.” He rubs a hand down his face.

“And you were worried about me passin’ out!” She’s definitely amused now, a playful smile on
her lips.

“Listen, you don’t understand, it’s…” He runs a hand through his hair, scrambling to defend
himself. It’s been so long… he expected to be a bit lethargic after, but forgot just how wonderfully
exhausting it is. “An intimate telepathic encounter is a precious thing for a Time Lord… it… can
make us a bit drowsy…”

Her hands come to rest on his face, and she shakes her head with a laugh. His stomach swoops with
the realisation their link is still quite active. Apparently, he’s the most adorable thing she’s ever
laid eyes on. She kisses him, a chaste peck on the lips.

“It’s for good reason,” he continues, since she seems to find him cute rather than insufferable right
now, for whatever reason. “We’re not meant to be apart after the first time. Aside from
circumstances like ours, where it’s happened backwards, a great deal of bonding happens
afterward. Forms the partial connection at a distance that we already have.”

But cute or not, she doesn’t care to hear his excuses, no matter how valid they are.

“Okay, mighty Time Lord. Sounds like you need your rest.”

“We both do,” he plays along, nodding. Normally he wouldn’t tolerate a jab at his ancestry, but
he’s still quite inebriated with those warm, fuzzy bonding hormones he mentioned. As such, he
doesn’t see the point in arguing. The sooner he lets it go, the sooner he gets to fall asleep with Rose
in his arms. She gathers the blanket from the foot of the bed and pulls it halfway over them both,
and his eyes drift closed again.

“Let’s sleep then. Like we’re ‘supposed to.’” The sarcasm in her tone is evident, but he knows
she’s only teasing.

“Mhm.” He wraps an arm around her, nuzzles her nose, he steals one more goodnight kiss before
sleep pulls him under once more.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Ay! I’m actually out of town rn and going to be quite busy tomorrow/the rest of this week, so I'm posting a little bit early! Hope you don't mind ;) This chapter is definitely an important one, though I can't say why (yet). Hope you like it!

Thanks to Amber for the helpful beta work! Though I tinkered with it quite a lot after she finished, so please forgive any mistakes.

For such a long time, the Doctor used sleep strictly for utility – to quickly recharge spent cognitive faculties – that he’d basically forgotten what it’s like to really succumb to it. To relish the laziness and lack of responsibility.

When he stirs to consciousness, he’s once again surprised by how different it feels. It’s the same familiar sensations of the previous morning, if only more intense. But it’s so unlike how he usually feels upon waking – his mind wide awake and ready to get a jump start on a new day – that it’s still as disorienting as the first time.

He’s actually groggy. Like he needs a few minutes to warm up his thinking muscles.

And there are other things, too, that feel different.

He’s still unclothed, for one thing. Hardly a common occurrence when he’s alone. And even without clothes, he’s very warm. Overheated still from the exertion last night, or maybe just from being trapped under a blanket with a human. Perhaps both. He’s just a little bit sticky, too, but… he likes it. He’ll carry any evidence of what happened last night proudly.

And there’s that light, weightless feeling only a night with Rose can bring. Like at any moment he could lift away from the bed, taking the sheets and blankets with him as he floats straight into heaven. That is, if heaven existed someplace other than right here. For at least a few more minutes before the reality outside of this hut catches up with him, he lets himself bask in it.

Memories of his and Rose’s evening slowly replay in his mind, and the anticipation builds all over again. Not the relationship anxiety that makes his hearts clench uncomfortably… it’s gentler than that. It flutters with thousands of tiny wings. Fills him with confidence and hope. He was excited before, to share this with her and to make her feel good, but now that they’ve actually done it and she enjoyed it so much… he’s a bit chuffed.

It’s a strange paradox, being more satisfied than he’s been in centuries and yet, still saturated with desire as though he’s been deprived as long. How long will it take, or how many iterations of passion, to satisfy this craving? Or will it only strengthen with time, as their connection does?

Does it matter, though? It’s hardly what he’d call a problem.

His time senses, with a delay, tell him he’s slept for four hours. It’s far more than usual for him as it is, let alone when he’s slept three days in a row. A quick peek from under his eyelids confirms the sun hasn’t risen here yet. But there’s no chance he can fall back to sleep; he can’t remember the
last time he felt this well rested. Not just adequately refreshed, but properly relaxed and revitalized, mentally and physically.

With a pang of disappointment, he realises that at some point during the night he and Rose were disconnected. All he’d really like to do is cuddle up to her, wrap himself around her, soft beneath the blankets, and solder their broken link. Then the time waiting for her to wake could be spent showering her slumber with soft kisses and touches, memorising every unique taste on his lips, every curve and contour beneath his hands. Immortalising her in his mind.

But it would be stupid to think touching her that way – body and mind – wouldn’t get him hot and bothered in seconds flat. Whether with an untimely erection or a randy slip of his mind, he’d end up stirring Rose before long, and he doesn’t want to wake her prematurely again. He did that yesterday, and she needs some proper rest before they get caught up in anything again.

Just to ensure she’s in a deep sleep, he gently rests a hand on her temple, just to check her brain waves. Out cold, indeed.

Swiftly to take away the temptation, and quietly to prevent waking her, he folds the covers back and rolls out of bed.

He stands next to the bed, gazing down at Rose’s sleeping form. Blimey, that is a sight, even in the dark. The blanket is pushed down to her waist, and she’s on her side, her flawless breasts reflecting the dim blue starlight, enticing him. But then, in the same breath, a droplet of drool by her mouth makes him chuckle noiselessly to himself. It’s incredible, how even her imperfections are perfect. Her hair spread across the pillow, frizzy and tangled, only makes him want to comb his fingers through it to calm it. The smudged makeup around her eyes only makes him want to carefully wipe away the pigments with a cloth. Her every detail is tantalising, and it’s not fair.

How could he possibly ever go to sleep again without the certainty he’ll be waking up next to her?

A dark thought strikes him that someday he will have to again. But he rebels strongly against it. Recalls his deal with himself. If he can help it, he’ll never sleep without her again.

He turns to the window, and wishes the sun were up to shine some light on the morbid thoughts. They never seem to leave him alone for too long.

He doesn’t want to stray far, so he decides to head out onto their little private deck while he waits for her to wake up.

Likely not many people are awake yet, but he doesn’t want to chance putting on a show for anyone, so he retrieves his trunks off the floor before he heads out. No use in bothering with a shirt – it’s rather warm this morning. Humid, too, like a new tropical current drifted in overnight. A storm approaching, maybe?

Not wanting to succumb to any objectionable thoughts again, he swipes the artificial gills off the desk by the wall where he left them – something to occupy both his mind and his hands while he waits. Tinkering always does him good.

For a while, though, he doesn’t need them.

The moonlight glinting off the dark water, the rhythmic push and pull of the tide against the coast soothe him. And as he makes himself comfortable on the spacious couch, an unusually strong breeze drifts over him. It’s a warm current, much warmer than the surrounding air, telling him it’s come from far away, and it confirms his earlier suspicion. A storm is moving in. It doesn’t bother
him, though – in fact, it feels nice on his exposed chest. All his nerve endings are still ultra-sensitive. Gazing up at the swirls of stars in the sky, he imagines which of them he’ll take Rose to next.

A canyon trail they can explore hand-in-hand. An empty meadow where they can make love. A waterfall as a backdrop for picnic lunch. Shores like these, perhaps, where they can ceremonially promise each other forever.

Part of him, the very old, rational part of him, recoils at these romantic notions. And that same part spoils the daydreams by suddenly flashing memories of the cave writing in his mind, even darker and more ominous than it had been originally. With this memory come others, equally unbidden – Daleks swarming Satellite five, Rose walking out of the TARDIS with golden light radiating off her skin and flowing in streams out of her eyes. Glimpses of her mind being incinerated as the Vortex consumed her from the inside.

That’s his reality, that lonely demon inside him says – catastrophe and loss. Entertaining the notion of a future with a human is mere fantasy.

But even now, his connection with Rose keeps him buoyant enough to keep from drowning in that darkness.

For every horrifying memory of the last time they’d encountered Bad Wolf, he’s flooded with soft waves of memories of their intimate night. A larger part of his mind wants to linger there, rather than confront repressed memories and looming fears, and he gives that majority free rein. Thinking about Rose is so, so much more pleasant.

That was the best night he’s had in this lifetime, no question. Possibly ever.

Becoming one with Rose, their minds finally in sync with their bodies in a perfect harmony. Experiencing first-hand how her mind emptied itself of everything but him. Touching and holding her as her pleasure became his own. Seeing her tremble, feeling her writhe, hearing her sob with pleasure.

It was good before. And he absolutely does not regret giving things a go the human way, not at all. Rose was more than ready for it, and it turned out to be a fitting segue: a means to become introduced to both aspects of this intimacy before they combined them.

But the human way is nothing compared to his way. It’s like comparing a town fair to Disney World. They don’t belong in the same category.

His fingertips and toes are still a bit tingly just thinking about it. His insides still feel gooey, his bones soft.

He savours it for a time, striving to overpower his fears with the residual high. It’s what Rose would want him to do: live in the moment, enjoy it while it lasts. Though he really wishes she were awake so they could enjoy it together.

To distract himself from both extremes of thought, he decides to get to work on the gills.

But before he can even get the device open, a flash of light illuminates the sky to the distant south, faster than he can look up.

It must have been a flash of lightning, out of sight beneath the horizon? There’s no electricity on this planet yet, so there’s no other source he can think of that could have caused such a bright burst of light.
Overhead, the sky is still clear, but upon closer look, he can see storm clouds obscuring the sky in the direction he saw the light. Intrigued, he pauses his work, eyes and ears trained in the direction of the cloud cover.

Twenty-one seconds pass before the echo of the crash of thunder whispers in his ears. He imagines it wouldn’t have been audible to Rose at all. It was definitely lightning, then. He doesn’t know how far the horizon is on this planet – at least not off the top of his head – but it must be at least four miles away, given that magnitude of gap between light and sound.

He alternates adjusting parts and watching the storm developing for a while, trying to determine whether it’s moving this way or not. Contemplating how he and Rose could pass the time while they’re holed up inside all day, if it is.

Before long, he finds himself desperately hoping it does move this way. They haven’t yet been able to spend an entire day in bed, and it sounds simply divine.

It isn’t until just after the orange arc of the sun first creeps over the horizon that he sees the first distinct bolt of lightning flash in the distance. Definitely moving this way, then. He grins broadly at the prospect, but tries to rein in his imagination, focusing instead on the deconstructed device in his hands. He could easily wake Rose even from out here if he accidentally got himself too turned on.

In a couple of hours, he nearly has the electrolysis figured out. All that’s really left is the gas separation. But he needs some more tools from the TARDIS to get it quite right, so he puts the project on hold until he can take a trip back for more supplies.

The colours of sunrise have long since faded, and the sun is partially obscured by dark clouds, but the occasional booms of thunder have become less frequent for now.

He’s pondering whether the storm will pick back up again as it moves closer when he hears some rustling from inside. But before he can get up to investigate, Rose calls out his name. She sounds worried.

“I haven’t gone!” he shouts back frantically. He nearly drops his hard work into the sea as he springs to his feet and leaps off the couch. Dashing back inside, he finds her sitting up in bed, holding the covers over her torso, with the most beautiful smile in the universe reserved just for him. She looks as happy to see him as he is to see her, though he wouldn’t believe it were possible.

Rose lies back as he climbs under the covers and rolls gently on top of her, welcoming her to consciousness properly with a kiss.

The good morning kiss slowly turns into a good morning snog, wandering hands and quiet sighs of pleasure. And as the heat builds between their bodies, their minds grow restless.

But this time, all it takes is a fleeting thought that he doesn’t want to wait any longer to know what she’s thinking, how she’s feeling – and she’s there. Her mind reunited with his, easier than ever. He’s still blown away by how quickly Rose is taking to telepathy, and they both celebrate the victory for a few moments.

But after that, all they can both seem to do once they’re connected is confess in jumbled thoughts how much they’ve missed this in their time apart (even though most of it was spent unconscious, for her part), and tease one another with fantasies of what they’d like to try next. Rose’s ideas are unsurprisingly more brilliant than his, and he’s starting to Harden against her thigh when he remembers what he’d seen outside before she woke.
Storm moving in, he says through their link, so they don’t have to stop kissing yet. Her lips are so gorgeous.

So? All the more reason to stay in bed. She splays her fingers on his bum, and briefly scolds him for putting on clothes before she tugs him closer, creating delicious friction against his growing erection. The kiss is broken for a moment as they both gasp with the surge of pleasure.

Thought you might want to get some food before we’re stuck inside for the day.

At the mention of food, Rose suddenly can’t disguise the fact that she’s quite hungry. She had only picked at her meal the night before, preoccupied with worry about him. Guilt floods through him for making her suffer through that, but she quickly reassures him that she’d do it anytime. She knew he was stressed.

“Come on,” he breathes quietly, reluctantly separating their mouths. He brushes his lips along her jaw and throat, loath to stop kissing her altogether. “We’ll make it quick.”

Rose isn’t shy about letting her irritation show through as he rolls off of her, so as a gesture of goodwill, he sustains contact for a little bit longer. Her hand comfortably in his, he silently promises her one more time that they’ll have all day to please each other as many times as they’d like.

They only bother with the bare minimum of clothes, both wanting to get back to this as soon as possible. Rose even foregoes her bra and knickers, and he can’t help salivating a bit when he realizes he will be the sole proprietor of that information.

When they step outside, the storm is a fair bit closer to the island than the Doctor expected it to be. The sun is completely concealed behind the clouds now. It hasn’t started raining yet, but it seems imminent.

At least this gives them a valid reason to hurry through their meal without having to confess the truth to their hosts.

Rose decides to grab a jumper with a hood at the last moment, for fear that it’ll be raining by the time they’re heading back. The Doctor is fine without one; little rain never harmed anyone. It’s the lightning he’d like to avoid.

When they arrive at Kalei’s house, Kairi answers the door.

“Morning!” she greets them with a smile, a half-eaten piece of sweet bread in her hand. But upon seeing them, her eyes go straight to their hair. She covers her mouth with her free hand, failing to suppress a giggle. “Have a nice night?” she asks.

The Doctor feels his face turning bright red, and stares down at the ground, running a hand through the evidence. He should’ve straightened it up.

“Yeah, thanks,” Rose replies directly, clearly understanding but not shying away from the innuendo.

Kairi leads them inside without further harassment, but as soon as Kalei sees them, he has some inappropriate comments of his own to make.

Normally it’s Kenai that does the scolding, but this time Karina is the one to shush them.

Kenai brings over some bread and fresh fruit for them from the kitchen, and they take a seat on the
couch in the main living area to tuck in. Breakfast is never a formal event like the other meals. Kenai lets them know the fish are bouncing back better than he would’ve believed possible. He predicts within a week it’ll be like nothing ever happened, and Rose and the Doctor are both overjoyed to hear it.

The jokes out of her system, Kairi fills the Doctor in on the progress of her model. She even invites them to come take a look, and as soon as they’ve taken the edge off their appetites, they happily accept.

The precocious teen has created a replica of the mountain and coastline with actual seawater to scale, and built an initial prototype of the screw. It’s not delivering water yet, but the Doctor spends a few minutes helping her see the flaws in its design, steering her model in the right direction for modification. And of course, he reminds her she’s brilliant, and insists she’ll have it ready to go in no time.

Light flashes through the open window in Kairi’s room, and it turns all three of their attention outside. A rumble of thunder rolls around the house with only a few seconds delay.

The Doctor glances across the room to Rose, who had taken to browsing through Kairi’s dresses and skirts when the discussion grew too technical. She grins over at him, and nods subtly to the door, clearly excited that their cue to exit has finally arrived.

“We ought to be going,” the Doctor announces to Kairi with a little more glee than the situation calls for. He tries to tone it down a little. “Don’t want to get caught in the storm. Think you can handle the rest on your own?” he asks.

“Definitely. Thank you again for your help.”

She leads them back out into the living area where everyone else is still gathered, settled in for a rainy day.

“Right, then.” The Doctor raises a hand in a tenuous goodbye, not really a wave, but not a salute either, something in between.

“Aa,” Kalei pipes up when he realizes they’re leaving. “You don’t think you can just stay with us for the day?”

The boy seems to be quite taken with them.

The Doctor exchanges a look with Rose, unable to keep his mind off the plans they’d made for their return. She looks about as impatient as he feels, and seems a bit nervous that he might cave and agree to stay for the day. Relieved, he smirks, just slightly, a barely detectable quirk it’s likely no one else will pick up.

“Sorry, Rose and I have some... er, business to attend to.”


“Kalei, mind your manners,” Kenai butts in, though he can’t help cracking a smile, either.

They must be more obvious than the Doctor thought. He can feel his cheeks and ears going red again.

“Maybe check your hair next time,” Karina adds. “Then they might lay off the jokes.” She gestures to her children and husband.
This time, even Kenai chuckles.

“Hah… er… well… yes…” the Doctor stutters out, staring at the wall rather than any of their faces. “Thank you again for your continued hospitality,” he finally manages a complete sentence. Setting his hand on the small of Rose’s back, he starts to lead her towards the door. “We’ll drop by again tonight, as long the storm has cleared by then.”

“We look forward to it,” Kenai says with a nod, still grinning.

“Goodbye, dears,” Karina adds.


As soon as they shut the door behind them, the Doctor lets out an exasperated sigh. They turn to each other sheepishly.

“Well, you weren’t subtle about that,” Rose accuses.

Before he can defend himself, another flash of lightning strikes off the coast, with a peal of thunder much louder than the previous one. And that precise moment, it starts to rain on them. Not a drizzle, but a proper soaking rain.

Staring out at the angry, turbulent sea where the bolt struck, the Doctor is suddenly caught off guard by a tingle of his time senses. A prickle down his spine.

The storm is moving in too quickly. Unnaturally so.

Glancing up at the clouds, he finds them racing across the sky as though in fast forward, a speed he’s never seen on a habitable planet before. Gooseflesh spreads over his arms as an alarm sounds in his mind again.

Something isn’t right here. Doesn’t belong. And it’s bigger than just this planet. Something is about to happen here to alter both his and Rose’s timelines.

Dread pools in the pit of his stomach. His every hair stands on end with the ominous static electricity building in his mind – the imminent threat of a lethal shock to the natural order.

A bolt of lightning strikes again, frighteningly close to the shore – the crack and rumble of thunder is nearly deafening. There’s but a millisecond delay between the sight and the sound. They’re too close to the storm now – they’ve missed their window for safe passage. They have to get back inside the house.

He turns to Rose to tell her this, but his eyes nearly bulge out of his skull when he sees that she’s no longer beside him. She’s running across the sand towards the boardwalk, apparently believing she can outrun the storm and make it to the hut in time.

What is she thinking, taking off without him like that? Why didn’t she at least grab his hand, his arm, something?

He takes off at a sprint after her, but can’t go nearly as fast as he’d like with sand beneath his feet.

He shouts her name, but the sound is completely lost as another bolt of lightning touches down – this time it hits the very wooden pier that Rose is headed for. It’d surely have caught fire if it weren’t pouring rain.
“Rose!” He calls her name again, but she’s too far ahead of him. With the torrential rain and her shoddy human hearing, she can’t hear him. She reaches the top of the stairs up the pier before he reaches the bottom. He takes the steps three at a time, and when he reaches the top, Rose is only about fifty feet ahead of him. But she’s running fast – much faster than she could down on the sand.

He suddenly catches a detail he didn’t notice before. For some reason, she hasn’t put her jumper on, but she’s holding it over her head to protect her hair from the worst of the rain.

A jumper that has a metal zip.

“ROSE!” he calls one more time, at the top of his lungs, and finally she hears him, whirling around. She looks confused by the panic on his face, as though he’s silly for shouting.

Has she lost her mind!?

“Get down!”

“What?” He doesn’t hear the word, but only sees it formed by her lips as another strike hits, on the water to their right.

He’s almost there. Just a few more strides and he can toss the jumper far away, get them both on the ground and lie on top of her, shielding her from danger. He can withstand vastly higher amounts of voltage than she can.

But before he reaches her, there’s an ear-splitting crash as light flashes yet again, searing white and blinding… directly where a confused and impatient Rose once stood.

She disappears in the intense light, and the Doctor’s vision is consumed by it – there’s only a blank canvas of white in front of his eyes. It lasts longer than the others, not just twenty or thirty microseconds. Hundreds. The sickening feeling that this is defying all the laws of the universe strangles him again, as whole milliseconds race by and the assault of light and crackling continues. He charges forward with all his might, two more long strides in slow motion, hoping, pleading he’d gauged the distance wrong, that his time senses are malfunctioning, that she hadn’t been…

The light finally vanishes, and the Doctor skids abruptly to a stop.

Rose is sprawled on the ground, a lifeless heap of limbs at his feet.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

To be totally honest I'm less than happy about the way this chapter turned out. But I wanted to stick to schedule. I'm going to be working on a manuscript for work for a while, which will limit my leisure computer time due to my eyes having limited tolerance for screens... I hope to stay on track but I wanted to get this one out regardless. Especially since I left you guys with such a bad cliffie. I hope you guys like it!

It's unbeta'd! Forgive my mistakes >_<

Also, I did my best on the medical research, but please also forgive any errors on that front :P I'm on my way to a Ph.D., not an M.D. lolololol.

The Doctor’s knees buckle beneath him and he crumples to the ground next to Rose. He presses two fingers into the side of her neck, tries to ignore the pounding rain and howling wind and concentrate only finding the right spot. Every muscle in his body freezes. Waiting for a heartbeat beneath his fingertips.

But there’s not even a whisper of a pulse.

“No…” he commands, as though her unconscious body will heed his admonition.

Fumbling in his shorts for the sonic, he does a scan of her heart for electrical activity, but detects none.

Asystole.

It feels backwards, but he’s fleetingly grateful it isn’t in a shockable rhythm, because the closest defibrillator is inside the TARDIS, and she’d be braindead long before he could get her there. Calling on dormant medical knowledge, he immediately goes through the motions of resuscitation. Switching on his respiratory bypass to give her as much oxygen as he can, he takes a deep breath and seals his mouth over hers.

It’s the only time he’s ever touched Rose’s lips and felt anything but joy. Instead, it’s only a gruesome reminder of her condition. Her lips don’t mould against his soft and warm; they’re cold and wet from the rain, and utterly unresponsive. Too pliant, too yielding beneath his mouth. Without one of his hands holding her head in place, it lolls limp to the side. He never thought something so pure and beautiful as a kiss could be twisted into something so excruciating.

His hearts are racing like they never have before, hands shaking where they’re resting on her body. Every breath is a ragged gasp. Nausea churns in his stomach. He wants to run around and scream and plead to someone for help but he’s the only one on the island who has even the slightest chance of saving her. Grave statistics run through his head unchecked. Even in the most medically advanced eras, the average chance of survival in these circumstances is less than fifteen percent.

He should have been watching her more attentively, prevented her from running off. Or perhaps he
should have listened to Rose when she said they should stay in the room and forget about breakfast. Better yet, he should have rushed them off this planet as soon as they’d seen the Bad Wolf inscription.

Maybe he should have never taken them here in the first place.

Rose is only twenty and she might die right here because of his negligence.

Doing his best to hold himself together, he starts the first round of compressions, using his weight to push as hard as he can, hoping it doesn’t break her bones. But a Rose with a few cracked ribs is better than no Rose at all.

He gets to fifteen and stops to check for a pulse again. Still nothing.

She needs epinephrine; her chances without it plummet to less than three percent. But all he has are his hands and his sonic screwdriver.

Impulsively, when his lips touch hers again his mind reaches out, searching desperately for her.

It only takes a moment for her to answer his call.

Soft and warm and familiar, tendrils of her mind swirl at the edges of his, already so attuned to him that they find their way back to him, even in unconsciousness. She can’t communicate with him in any substantial way, can’t use words or emotions, but she’s reaching out to him. Even if her body is hanging on by a thread, she’s alive in there. Confused. Scared. He can’t reassure her with words, but he embraces her mind with his, exuding a sense of comfort and peace. He doesn’t know how he’s able to summon either, as he doesn’t feel either one himself. But if Rose has even a shred of awareness in there, he wants to ensure she doesn’t feel frightened or alone. He breathes comfort into her mind as he breathes oxygen into her dormant lungs.

He can’t let her die like this: pumped full of an artificial sense of security by the very man who’s put her in harm’s way. He has to bring her back.

Suddenly, he remembers something.

There are some telepathic abilities he has never divulged to Rose, and didn’t plan to. He can warp, hide, or implant memories. With the briefest touch, he can scramble someone’s thoughts until they go insane. With a few seconds of contact, a series of simple commands to the brain, he can induce cardiac arrest. Provided they don’t have developed mental barriers, if he can touch someone, he can kill them.

He’s never used his telepathic abilities for malevolent purposes, and he never intends to. But if he can stop someone’s heart, he should also be able to start it. He can hijack Rose’s brain and force it to overload her system with epinephrine.

It’s the highest degree of violation. It flies in the face of informed consent, defies the natural order.

But right now, it’s his only option to save her life.

With a few milliseconds of analysis of her neurological signature, he deploys the appropriate orders, then pulls away from her mouth and resumes compressions to ensure her heart will push the hormone where it needs to go.

One. Oxygen to brain. Adrenaline to heart. Two.
He counts mechanically to distract himself from completely breaking down. Maybe he already is. With the rain pouring down his face, he wouldn’t be able to tell if he were crying or not.

When he goes in for a third morbid kiss, he reinforces his command, hating himself for having to do this to save her. He only hopes she’ll forgive him, if she makes it through this.

He never dreamed he would think such a thing, but he’s once again relieved to leave her lips. He never wants to feel them so lifeless again.

One. Hold on.

Two. Rose.

Three. Stay with me.

Four. Please.

Five. Don’t leave me.

Seven. Rose.

With a loud, heaving gasp, Rose jolts to life.

His eyes dart to her face as his hands pull away from her chest, and yes!!! Her eyes are open. Definitely open.

There’s blinking! Cheeks, lips moving, forehead scrunching. Alive!!!

Relief rushes through his body, deliciously warm and fuzzy.

“Rose!” He yells down to her, euphoric.

She tries to sit up, but something prevents it, weakness or pain or both. She rolls over slightly onto her side instead, coughing and spluttering water out of her lungs.

She doesn’t respond to her name, and looks confused and pained. She puts a hand over her heart, wincing. It’s only then that he notices the branching red veins protruding from the skin on her arms. No doubt other places on her body he can’t currently see.

Lichtenberg figures.

The designs are commonly seen on scorched organic matter and polycarbonate after a storm. It’s rare to see them on flesh, due to how unlikely it is to receive an adequately high amount of voltage and live to show them off. In fact, he’s only ever seen them on skin one other time, and it was his own – when he was struck himself in a previous incarnation. The patterns are caused by ruptured capillaries near the surface of the skin from the excessive temperature of the electrical discharge. He is capable of withstanding much higher voltage without disrupting either heart’s sinus rhythm, but he had the lightning scars on his skin for a few hours. Rose may carry them for longer.

Rose is breathing heavily, but her eyes drift closed as her head comes to rest on the wood beneath her.

“Hey!” He lightly slaps her cheek a couple times, needing to keep her conscious. She blinks her eyes open reluctantly, looking to him for instruction.

“What’s your name?” he asks. He has to shout a little for it to sound clear over the rain.
“Rose,” she answers, voice raspy and not nearly as loud. And somehow, despite having narrowly escaped death, she sounds annoyed.

“What’s my name?”

“Doctor.” Yeah, definitely annoyed.

“What planet are we on?”

“Kaelondaia.”

“How many fingers am I holding up?” This one he does just for fun.

“Four.” She cracks just the teeniest hint of a smile, and he can’t help but return it.

Lightning flashes to their right somewhere with a thunderous clap, striking one of the nearby huts. It does no damage, but both he and Rose flinch away from the sound. He hunches down further, ensuring he’s below the level of the wooden railing beside them.

“Can you move? We’ve got to get you inside.”

She nods her head, and he helps her roll over so she can crawl along the rest of the way to the hut. He crawls along with her, though not before taking off one of his shoes (rubber soles) and holding it above her, protecting her from any future strikes.

It’s slow going. The soaked wood isn’t easy on their hands and knees, as Rose is still out of breath and in evident discomfort.

He’d much rather be carrying her, but that would just be asking to be struck again. They have to stay low to the ground, and Rose seems to understand that. Still, it’s miserable to watch her drag herself towards the door, exhausted and in pain. They have to endure several more close lightning strikes, and each one makes him cower with terror, paranoid that it will somehow find a path to Rose. Not to mention his ears feel like they’re bleeding now. Rose’s eardrums may well be ruptured.

The minute or so it takes them to reach their hut feels like an hour.

Once they’re safely inside, he stands and carefully scoops her up in his arms properly and lays her carefully on the bed, not caring that she’s dripping wet. She relaxes a little, sinking into the mattress and trying to calm her breathing. But before he can lie down next to her and soothe her himself, he has a more important job to do. Pulling out the sonic again, he quickly flicks through the settings and starts to examine her for any obvious signs of other bodily injury. To his surprise, he only finds one real injury, a nasty second-degree burn on her hand where it had touched the metal zip on her jacket. He quickly heals it up with the appropriate setting, and Rose thanks him. She hadn’t realized how much it was hurting until the pain was gone.

“I can fix these, too,” he says, gesturing to the branching burst capillaries on the hand he’s holding, extending up her forearm. “But it’ll take a bit longer.”

“Doesn’t hurt,” she says through her teeth, fidgeting.

Even with the burn gone, she’s still panting and clearly uncomfortable.

“Where does it hurt?” he asks.
She places a hand over her chest again, and he could just kick himself. Of course. A side effect of the epinephrine is a heart rate and blood pressure out of control. Her hand is trembling in his, most of her body quivering with the excess of the hormone. Chest pain is to be expected in such a circumstance.

But it’s not as simple to treat as a few skin burns. Not something the sonic can handle. He knows how he can help her, but isn’t sure if he’s ready to confess what he had to do to keep her alive. He deliberates for a long moment, biting his cheek.

“If you’re okay with it, I can help with that, too.”

“H-how?”

“I…” He wavers again, recoiling at the mere thought of what she might think. But there’s no time for guilty vacillating: Rose still needs him. “I went into your mind, just for a moment, while you were unconscious. You needed epinephrine and didn’t have any on hand. I used some of my stronger telepathic abilities to dose you from the inside. It was the only way I could get your heart started again.” He pauses and looks down at her, waiting for judgment or shock or horror, but none of them come. “Now that it’s beating again, I can go back in, send a few of the opposite signals to your brain. Correct the imbalance of hormones.”

“Okay. Do that.” She nods, completely unfazed by his explanation of what he’d done and acquiescing to his request to do it again. For a moment, he just stares at her, overwhelmed by how thoroughly she trusts him. To manipulate her brain to the most sensitive degree without a second thought. He confessed to being furthest thing from human just now, and she should be terrified but she isn’t. She doesn’t ask questions about how it works, or suggest less invasive alternatives. She trusts him to make the right call. Trusts her with her life.

Wanting more contact for the precision required for what he’s about to do, he stashes the sonic and sits down, resting a hand on her temple.

Without hesitating further, he directs the appropriate signals to her brain, to accelerate reuptake and metabolism of the epinephrine, as well as circulate the appropriate vasodilating neurotransmitters to counteract its effects in the interim.

Right now, he really is her Doctor. He’s always had some distaste for her using a possessive pronoun in front of his name (not that she does it often), if only because of his aversion to commitment. But she’s just retroactively and proactively given him permission to make life-saving medical decisions for her. Her endearment suddenly feels so true, he almost wishes she’d say it now.

“My Doctor,” Rose breathes out as her body starts to relax.

That floating feeling from this morning suddenly returns as his hearts swell with affection.

She’d heard him. Of course she’d heard him.

Rose’s pulse and systolic pressure start to drop. Before it dips too far, he ceases his telepathic directions, and slowly starts to retreat from her mind.

But before he can completely sever their link, a burst of golden light flashes brilliantly from the depths of Rose’s mind. A high-pitched screech pierces the silence in his head, and, desperate to escape the sudden ambush, he flees from her mind.

But even when they’re disconnected, the onslaught continues: blinding, deafening, scorching.
Whatever it is, it’s not confined to Rose’s mind: it’s a telepathic signal, intensely powerful, interfering with his own telepathic wavelength, clawing its way into his mind.

He gasps out as he lets go of her, getting to his feet and stumbling away.

“Agh!”

“What’s wrong?” Rose asks, sitting up.

He doesn’t answer her, clutching the sides of his head to try to stop the noise and the pain but it doesn’t help. Vivid memories of Satellite Five inundate his brain. A glowing, dying Rose. So many Daleks, so much death.

Something catastrophic has happened. He can sense rigid timelines softening around him now, deforming, changing. This moment ripples through time and space in every direction, broadcasting its incongruity. Rose doesn’t have the power for such manipulation. This isn’t Rose’s telepathic signature. It’s Bad Wolf’s.

Slowly, the effects of the intrusion start to wear off and he lets his hands fall to his sides, panting, staring at Rose in horror. She’s abandoned the bed completely, standing right in front of him, gazing at him with wide, anxious eyes.

“What is it?” she asks, completely unaware of what she’s just done.

“No,” he shakes his head in disbelief. “No,” he repeats, over and over, instead of answering her. Spiralling rapidly into a panic.

Did he not completely rid her of the residual Vortex energy? Is it starting to consume her again, as it did before? Will it take more than just his own death to finish the job this time?

“Doctor what’s goin’ on?” Out of patience, Rose grabs onto his shoulders and forces him to look at her. “What’s the matter!?”

As he meets her eyes, though, they suddenly flash with a bright light. A golden yellow consumes her irises for a split second, telling him his speculations are correct. And faster than she can blink, it’s gone.

He swallows hard, trying not to panic.

After a moment to sober himself up a bit, he realises he has to act fast to figure out exactly what this is. Especially given the likelihood that it’s life threatening. But there’s nothing he can do until he gets more information. And Rose will never let him get more information until he tells her what’s going on.

He motions for her to sit on the edge of the bed, and when she doesn’t move, he takes her hand and reluctantly leads her there himself. Sitting down next to her, he suppresses his instinct to pace and rant. Tries to regain his composure. She deserves to know what’s happening anyway.

“What’s wrong Doctor. Tell me what’s wrong rightnow.” Both her her hands curl into fists in his shirt, demanding answers.

“It’s all right, Rose.” He puts one hand on her waist, and another just under her chin, tilting her head so he can look at her properly. “Just sit still for a moment.”

Worried and filled with excess adrenaline as the Doctor is, his eyes could have easily deceived him
before. Fear can manifest physically as hallucinations; any decent psychologist could tell you that. Both hearts in his throat, he stares into her cider brown eyes. Waiting.

He doesn’t have to wait long before another flicker of vivid, bright gold emanates from her irises, just a fraction of a second. His hearts palpitate in his chest and he looks away, afraid to see it again.

“No.” He feels like he could scream. Destroy something. This is exactly what he’d been afraid of the night before. This is Bad Wolf. This is an imminent separation, or death. Whatever cataclysm in their timeline has occurred, it can’t be good.

“Doctor, what!” Rose is getting hysterical.

“Bad Wolf,” he murmurs, barely audible.

For a long moment she’s speechless. Processing.

“What did you see?”

He dares a glance up at her face, and is relieved her eyes are still their natural colour.

“Light, in your mind. The same light that was there when I absorbed the time vortex. And just now, your eyes were glowing. Just like they did before.”

A tear rolls down Rose’s cheek, and his hearts clench in his chest.

“What does this mean?” she asks. “Am I gonna burn up?”

“I don’t know,” he confesses, never having felt so helpless. He wants to reassure her, but doesn’t want to lie to her. “As soon as this storm clears, we’re getting you to the TARDIS to run some tests.”

She doesn’t look at all consoled by the idea of tests.

“Am I gonna die?”

“No,” he insists, and the word cuts through the tension too harshly. “No,” he repeats, softer, taking her hand again. “Whatever it is Rose, I’ll do everything I can protect you. I promise.”

She nods, but still doesn’t look mollified.

“I’d like to go into your mind again,” he suggests. “Try to get some information from you directly. If you’ll allow me.”

“Yes,” she agrees instantly. “Please, Doctor.”

He doesn’t relish the thought of confronting that thing again, but ‘please’ is a word he can’t say no to. Especially not coming from Rose.

He gestures for her to lie on her side, and wraps an arm securely around her as he lies down next to her. He wants to comfort her to some degree while he does this, but this is all the intimacy he can manage for the moment.

As soon as he crosses the threshold of her mind again, it becomes clear that something is growing within. Burgeoning. Something golden and transcendental, getting stronger and consuming more and more of her mind. But unlike the first encounter a few minutes before, it doesn’t torture his mind with dissonant interference. And unlike on Satellite Five, it’s not burning her mind up this
time.

The lethality of the Bad Wolf entity was immediately obvious when Rose burst out of the TARDIS doors on that ship. Her physical form couldn’t contain such a massive quantity of energy; it was eating her alive from the inside. Her mind was on the verge of an apocalypse, screaming that it was about to explode.

But right now, it’s calm. Neither her body or her mind recognise this energy as an invader or threat that must be ejected. It’s as though it’s not something foreign at all, but something that’s been there a long time.

Is it possible the dose of voltage to her neurons activated remnants of her union with the heart of the TARDIS, residual energy left dormant until now? It’s frustratingly intangible, but so clearly real: buzzing in the background, racing through the highways of her mind. A hint of something ancient that triggers his time senses as it trickles through her system. It sends light scattering everywhere it goes. Not destroying or erasing. Healing. Altering.

But altering what? He can’t quite pinpoint it. It’s not human, but nor is it distinctly alien. It’s just… energy. And from the feel of it, a force of life rather than death.

His mind slowed down enough, he suddenly can’t ignore the fear from Rose’s mind overflowing into his. He’s been so fixated on observing and analysing, Rose has only been able to get hazy flickers of his thoughts. Too vague to give her any real consolation.

Reassured enough for the time being, he refocuses his efforts, concentrating on opening his mind up more to Rose to share these findings in detail, allow her to feel what he’s feeling from this ethereal presence in her mind. But in addition to that, he reminds her that no matter what, he’ll always be here. That even if his judgment is flawed, and this thing is more malevolent than it would like them to believe, he’ll keep her safe. He overwhelms her with these thoughts and exudes a sense of security and serenity.

She starts to breathe a little easier as she welcomes his reassurance with open arms, but suddenly, he has an even better idea.

With a moment of concentration and a few adjustments within their link, he starts to reconstruct the garden. It’s the perfect place for them to hide away from the rolling thunder and merciless rain that only serve to remind them of her brush with death.

He imagines how they may pass the time, lounging in a field of flowers together, a plush blanket beneath them. Maybe Rose could climb onto his lap and he could cradle her against him as they wait out the remainder of the storm sharing languorous kisses.

Rose isn’t shy about being on board with that idea, but when the landscape of the garden takes form around them, they’re both stunned into a silence that puts these fantasies on hold.

Sunlight brilliantly illuminates their surroundings. More sunlight than should be possible. And yet, it doesn’t burn their eyes to behold. It feels natural, as though this is the way this place was meant to be viewed, or their eyes were designed for more intense light. In addition to the light raining down in sheets from the sky, everything within view gives off an ethereal golden glow that seems to emanate from within. The phenomenon doesn’t discriminate between the living and the inanimate: flower blossoms, trees, and birds are affected just the same as fountains and benches. They all emit a radiance one might expect from Mount Olympus, or some other mythical heavenly place. There’s no real-world analogue for what they’re seeing that he can think of, no matter how he wracks his brain.
It feels counterintuitive to interpret this renovation to the garden as ominous, beautiful and seemingly harmless as it seems, but they both do. A chill runs through them both as they process the breathtaking sights.

He turns to Rose, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her against him, and she squeezes him tightly.

Both of them are speechless for a time, still taking it all in.

“Whatever this is Rose,” he rubs her back and kisses her temple. “I’m not going to let it hurt you. If it makes any plans too, I’ll destroy it. No matter what, I’m going to keep you safe.”

He holds her for a long time, and both of them try their best to comfort one another. Their willpower occasionally slips and their fears seep through, but they never last long. They’ve both become quite adept at sending the right wavelengths to soothe one another.

He loosens her grip around his waist just slightly, and pulls back enough that he can lean down and press his lips to hers.

“How do you feel?” he asks softly.

“Mmm, little better now.” She grins, biting her lip.

“You are in curiously good shape, considering.”

“’Cept my head,” she adds, melancholic.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

He kisses her tenderly again as a distraction. He savours the feeling of her kissing him back, her lips warm and smooth as they melt into his. It helps shake away the memories of feeling them cold and lifeless.

Normally, he’s the one jumping to the worst possible conclusion. He isn’t sure why he’s not doing that now. Something about this new energy – it’s giving him a sense of hope he can’t explain. He was terrified by the memories, and the gold in her eyes, but it’s hard to feel scared in here. It may be naïve and idealistic, but he can’t help the inclination to believe this is different. That Rose is not at risk. It’s as though the angelic light has had an intoxicating effect, temporarily dampening his ability to reason.

He hopes he doesn’t kick himself for succumbing to it later.

They ease out of the kiss slowly, still holding each other close. Rose hums contentedly, resting her head on his shoulder. They linger in an embrace for a long moment, swaying lightly together.

“Oh my God,” Rose breathes into his neck after a time.

“What is it?” he asks, worry returning with a vengeance.

“I got struck by bloody lightning.” She giggles a little, and he exhales with relief. He’s inexplicably glad to hear that sound.

“You did.” He grins despite himself, elated that she’s alive to tell about it, and in his arms no less. “This is a new level of jeopardy friendly.”

But at her reminder, the harrowing images of what happened assail him anew, and he’s reminded
of the fact she ran off by herself. Put herself in more danger.

Anger suddenly sizzles up inside him, spilling into Rose’s mind.

“Rose, why did you run off like that?” he asks, all seriousness now. He pulls back to look at her, meeting her eyes awaiting explanation. “I was about to insist we go back inside. Didn’t you realise how dangerous it was? That the storm was too close?”

“I did.” She clutches onto his shirt, her mind pleading for his forgiveness. “I knew it was dangerous but… ’s like… I dunno what happened. Something was telling me that I needed to run. And I just listened to it. I didn’t even think.”

“Something like what?” He narrows his eyes.

“I dunno, ’s hard to explain. Just, that voice in your head. The one that tells you to just go for it when you’re second guessing something. Or tells you when to run away.”

“Hmm.”

It does seem to lend credence to his prominent theory that Bad Wolf is entangled in all this. Bad Wolf scattered pieces of herself across time and space – messages. He only discovered so after the fact, but those messages had all along been a trail leading them to Satellite Five. And it’s seeming more and more likely it’s what led them to this planet. To that cave. And what compelled Rose to sprint off on her own in the middle of a lightning storm. It tingles in the back of his mind again, that sense that timelines are quivering and vanishing around them, aftershocks of this event are rippling through the universe.

“Can we stop talking about it, just for a little while?” Rose asks unexpectedly. “At least until we know for sure what’s going on? I can’t stand thinkin’ about it anymore.”

“Of course, Rose.” He pauses his chaotic analyses for now, and eases them out of their embrace. He takes one of her hands, and opens his other arm away from them, indicating she can choose which path they follow. “Lead the way.”

Rose begins to feel better as soon as they’re walking side by side together, fingers intertwined. Being here takes her mind off the real world, and he knows that. It’s why he brought them here in the first place.

Rose leads him to an area of the garden he hasn’t seen yet.

The path leading there is not an archway of red roses, but a long marble staircase. The stairs are deep enough to take several strides between them, giving a sense they’re more for decoration than utility. The stairway is flanked by two miniature aqueducts of marble flowing with rivers of crystal clear water. Short waterfalls cascade gently at each step.

The courtyard waiting for them has a similar layout to the section they were in before – a neatly divided neighbourhood of flower blossoms and walkways. But the botanical selection is different here: dominated by lavenders and white lilies splotched with violet centres. And unlike the other garden, this one has a large grassy area in the centre, enticing its passers-by to a picnic in the sun.

The Doctor is about to ask if he should conjure them a blanket as they step into the grass, but Rose beats him to it.

“Let me see if I can.”
He grins at her, proud of her initiative.

It only takes a few seconds before a plush purple quilt appears in the centre of the grass.

“Nicely done,” he congratulates her.

“Gettin’ the hang of it, yeah.”

He settles down onto the blanket first, and Rose does exactly what he hoped she would: settles onto his lap, straddling him carefully. She runs her fingers through his hair, gazing between his face and their surroundings every few moments. Resting his weight on one arm, he places his opposite hand on her hip, thumb rubbing the skin just beneath her shirt, and savours the feel of her hands. One rests lightly on his shoulder now, the other tucked between the open buttons on his shirt, tracing slow, sensual circles on his chest.

His eyes flutter closed with a sigh. He could get used to this, ignoring their problems and responsibilities in here.

“Why d’you think it’s all glowin’ like this?” she asks softly.

“There’s an excess of energy flowing through you right now,” he explains, trying to make it sound as mild and nonthreatening as he can. “I think this is a side effect of that. The light is in here even when the garden isn’t, though it’s not as readily observable or concrete –”

Rose interrupts his explanation by pressing her mouth to his. She wraps her arms around his neck and presses her body right up against his, and he has to steady himself with his other hand to prevent them from tipping over. He yields to her completely, responding to the insistent brushes of her lips with only tenderness. She breathes out a sigh and sinks into it, telling him that for now, all she wants is to forget her questions and get lost in him.

Which is exactly as he intended.

They’ve already said all they can, and superfluous discussion would only lead to more speculation and worry for both of them. He’d like to get lost in her, too.

He’s more delicate with her than usual, considering he did have to resuscitate her mere minutes ago. But they end up horizontal despite his efforts, him on the ground, his arms secure around her back, tethering her body to his as though gravity won’t be enough. Neither of them escalates the intimacy further, hindered by lingering fears deep beneath the surface. But both are content to immerse themselves completely in this gentle pleasure, unhurried kisses and lingering touches.

They stay entwined for such a long time, even the Doctor loses track of it. But he’s okay with his time senses being dulled by her lips. Even if he doesn’t count the minutes, the more of them they spend kissing, the better. He’s had his first tangible taste of the torment he will endure when he inevitably loses her, and he doesn’t want to waste a second of whatever time they have left.
I'm back, baby! Boy, is it good to be back working on this story. Truly the best antidote for drama. Hope you guys enjoy. Only about 5 chapters left of this story... damn will I be sad to see it end.

Rose has to hand it to the Doctor for keeping a relatively cool head through all this. Since they returned to the hut, he’s done his best to stay optimistic (which seems almost paradoxical, in itself), and she has taken encouragement from the fact that he hasn’t been freaking out. At least not very much. She expected him to be about a million times more worried than she is about this whole thing, but that’s far from the case. Now and then, small bursts of anxiety mar the ambiance in the garden, but he does a decent job of warding them off.

Much of the time, all his focus is on keeping her calm, and it’s miraculous how well it works. Even after all the training he’s taken her through so far, it still surprises her how much more powerful the Doctor’s mind is than hers. How irresistibly persuasive his gentle suggestions are. Trying to ignore the sensation of calm he’s offering is like trying not to drift off in a cosy bed after a long day. Why resist?

It certainly has been nice to spend a couple of hours lying in the grass with no obligations besides snogging. Normally, she might be a tad impatient by now, but with the looming questions of her health and the future, neither of them feels it’s the right time for a shag. Without breaking their link, the Doctor checks the outside world from time to time to see if the storm has calmed enough to brave the trip to the TARDIS. But over time, these pauses become less frequent. Whether he’s forgetting, or becoming more and more reluctant to part with her even briefly, she isn’t sure. But whichever way, she doesn’t mind.

The Doctor has a way with this telepathy thing. Time seems to speed up while they’re connected, almost to the point that she wants to tell him to slow it down for them.

She wonders if he would. She thinks it’s within the realm of possibility for a Time Lord to be able to manipulate time itself.

“Not quite.” The Doctor breaks them out of a kiss with a chuckle. They’ve shifted gradually over time: he’s hovering over her, supporting his weight on his elbow rather than crushing her. “I can’t manipulate time without using ethically questionable technology. But I can manipulate your perception of it. It’s difficult, though, and not without risks.”

“Should’ve known.” She grins happily, almost forgetting about her situation. But the golden glow around his tousled hair acutely reminds her of the circumstances, and her smile falters. “Want to check on the storm again?”

His smile falters, too.

“Okay.”

Rose almost wishes she hadn’t asked, because within seconds they’re disconnected and heading for
the door of the hut.

The storm hasn’t just let up – it’s completely paused. In fact, it’s almost too calm, like they’re in the eye of a hurricane, and the inevitable second wave of destruction could strike any moment. It’s quiet in the absence of the torrential rain and constant crash of thunder, but the sky is still a dark, ominous grey. The light breeze on her skin is a different temperature than the surrounding air, and storm clouds race through the sky overhead, turbulent currents still on the move. This really could be their only window to the TARDIS all day.

Every occupant of the island has sought shelter indoors, making it feel like a mistake to have stepped outside at all. A calamity waiting to happen. Rose doesn’t find it likely that anything worse can happen than being struck by lightning and nearly dying, but it’s still eerie to be outside. The village and the surrounding beach are so empty, it’s as though they’ve been evacuated pending a natural disaster. A rumble of thunder echoes in the distance with a greenish light, and Rose longs to return to the sunshine and chirping birds of the garden.

The Doctor is holding her hand, at least, but she thinks it’s more to prevent her running off again than for a sense of comfort.

And suddenly, he’s doing a much less impressive job of being optimistic. His worry starts to compound hers as they make their way across the boardwalk, walking at a rate too brisk to be leisurely. And just a minute ago he was doing so well. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that now they really have to confront what happened? (Apart from the hundred thousand volts or whatever.) And that if there is anything wrong, he’s going to have to take action to fix it? Is he thinking back to the last time Bad Wolf was inside her, and he had to sacrifice his own life? Is he afraid of dying again? Should she be?

God, she wishes he would go back to being cool and calm about it. This is a definite downside to the automatic communication thing.

“What is it?” the Doctor suddenly asks, looking over at her in more of a glare than anything.

“What’s what?”

“You’re tense. Walking too fast for you?” He slows down his pace, if only marginally.

“Er… no…” She’s not sure how to respond. She didn’t expect him to pick up on that. Stupid. How much longer will they both continue to underestimate the potency of this thing? They both should’ve learned their lesson by now. Always assume it can transmit. Always. “Just… you’re a bit tense is all. And you weren’t before.”

To her surprise, the Doctor sighs and turns his head to stare straight ahead.

“What’d you want the defence lessons for if you weren’t going to use them?”

“Oi! ‘S not my fault!”

Blimey, he’s grumpy when he’s nervous.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean that. Just… I tried to explain before. You’ve got to actually try to block me out if you want to. If you’re trying to hear me, then you will.”

“I know… just… didn’t have enough time to think about doin’ that is all.”

“You’re right. Sorry. I’m just…”
“Do you not think I’ll be all right?”

“I do.” He turns to her as they stop at the top of the stairs leading down to the sand. “I’m only anxious to find out what’s going on.”

“Okay.”

They’re quiet the rest of the way, but the Doctor doesn’t let go of her hand. The sand is mushy and cold from the rain, but the air is crisp and warm, drier than usual. It almost feels like a new beginning, and she can’t help but wonder if there are more of those on the horizon.

She doesn’t feel any ill effects from this thing. In fact, there have been a few undeniable beneficial effects. She got struck by bloody lightning – and she’s got branching blood vessel tattoos on her arms to prove it – but she’s fine. She’s walking and talking and functioning normally. The Doctor scanned her pretty much everywhere with the sonic and came back with nothing. How’s that even possible?

But even worst case scenario… if there are still some remnants of Bad Wolf in her, didn’t the Bad Wolf bring life? Okay, well, it killed a few Daleks. More than a few. But it saved a bunch of people aboard the satellite. It saved the Doctor. Rose always feels guilty that he sacrificed one of his lives for her that day, but on the flipside, if she hadn’t gone back to him, he would have died anyway, and she thinks he wouldn’t have been able to regenerate himself out of that one.

Whatever this is, she wants to believe it’s not a bad thing.

She thinks back to what she’d learned the other day, how strong emotions can overpower unwanted ones from the outside. She concentrates on the optimism and hope these thoughts bring help to cancel out the Doctor’s negativity, and it actually works fairly quickly. She grins to herself, proud of her progress, and doesn’t bring it up again.

With how tenaciously the Doctor is leading her through the sand, it doesn’t take long at all to get back to the TARDIS.

The infirmary has been bumped close to the console room, and before she knows it she’s perched on an examination table, gripping the edges of the thin, hard cushion to take the edge off her anxiety.

“Why don’t you lie down?” the Doctor says absently as he swipes on his glasses and collapses onto a rolling stool. The first thing he does is get a pair of gloves from a rack on the wall, pulling them on with crinkling and slapping noises that run chills down her spine.

“’M fine,” she insists, gripping the table harder.

He pauses in the middle of searching a drawer of the nearby counter at her tone, glancing over at her.

“I just want you to be relaxed, that’s all.”

“I’m relaxed,” she lies through her teeth.

“Okay.” He resigns that she isn’t going to acquiesce, and starts rounding up supplies from various drawers and cabinets, arranging them on a metal tray. It feels a bit too much like an operating room for her liking.

“Is all that really necessary?”
“What?” he asks, turning to her with an expression of innocence. “It’s not like I’ve got a scalpel or anything, just basic, run-of-the mill diagnostic tools.”

“Like what?”

“Like…” He tears open something plastic as he walks over to her, and holds up the object in question. “Cotton swabs.”

She relaxes a little. Seems harmless enough.

“Open up,” he says.

She stares back at him, confused and just a little affronted.

The Doctor opens his mouth, pointing to it with his free gloved hand.

Oh.

“What are you gonna do?”

“DNA sample. Here, you can do it. Just stick it under your tongue for a bit, that’ll do it.”

He hands her the swab carefully by the very bottom, and she takes it and does as he requested.

“Can’t you figure this out with your hands, or whatever?” she asks as she hands it back to him.

“There’s a lot of information I can get from sensory inputs,” he explains, taking the swab from her and immediately dunking it into a long tube of clear liquid. He seals a cap over it hastily. “Temperature, respiration rate, pulse… and if I can taste it, mineral levels, electrolyte balance…”

He tears open another piece of plastic and pulls out what looks like a toothpick, handing it to her like he did the swab. “One more. Just scrape the inside of your cheek a little. Not enough to hurt yourself, just to collect a few thousand cheek cells.”

She takes it from him and follows his brief instruction, and he rolls away to retrieve something else.

“But I can’t analyse DNA with a simple touch,” he continues his earlier thought. “Or view cellular structures with just my eyes. Glasses or not.” He returns to her, takes the toothpick, and wipes the end of it on a rectangle of glass. A microscope slide, she guesses. He covers it with a square of plastic and sets it on his metal tray.

He then picks up the tube with the cotton swab and wheels himself over to what looks like a fume hood from her high school chemistry class.

“Expectin’ some noxious gases?” she asks.

“It’s not a fume hood,” he says matter-of-factly. “It’s close, though. Biosafety cabinet,” he pronounces with enthusiasm. “It’s designed to protect the sample, not me. I can’t have your genetic material getting contaminated with mine, or that of the countless species of bacteria, viruses, and fungi no doubt floating through the air.”

“Right,” she rolls her eyes at the unpleasant reminder.

He gathers some bottles and boxes from a nearby cabinet and runs them over to the safety contraption. He then picks up a spray bottle from next to it and squirts its contents onto one glove, then rubs his gloved hands together, spreading it over his hands thoroughly.
He extracts liquid from various bottles and vials and transfers them here and there with some sort of high-tech blue syringe device, rushing but never seeming to make a mistake. It’s fascinating watching him work, even though she has no idea what he’s doing.

But when he’s occupied for more than a minute or so, Rose loses her ability to focus on watching him, and anxiety creeps up on her. She’s optimistic he won’t find anything that indicates she’s in mortal danger. But now that he’s actually collecting samples from her mouth and doing analyses on them that she doesn’t even understand, she’s feeling out of her depth. She has no idea what he may find. She could be a mutant now, one of the X-men, or some other alien invention that’s far from human.

“This sort of PCR would probably take an hour or two in your time,” he calls back to her after a minute, almost as though he knew the silence was becoming uncomfortable. Just hearing his voice is enough to bring her out of the spiral. “But with the equipment I’ve got, it should only take, oh… ten minutes?”

“Impressive.” She tries to smile, but it doesn’t quite work.

“I know,” he cocks his head to the side. Only a small, sealed vial of liquid in his hand now, he walks over to a large cube-shaped piece of equipment on a nearby counter, presses a button, and places it carefully into a rack that ejects itself from the side. He types furiously for a few moments on a user interface mounted on the front, eyes glued to the small screen. “This primer too…” he mumbles to himself. “Cover all our bases.”

She decides not to ask any questions about this particular process, figuring he’ll tell her the important stuff when he’s ready.

“Right!” he exclaims, whirling around just as a green light flashes on the machine with a crescendo of beeps that remind her of the sound the washing machines at the laundromat make when they begin a cycle. He claps his hands together, and walks back over to his tray of instruments. He places the tray on a small cart by the counter, and rolls it the few feet across the floor until it’s next to her table.

Much to her dismay, the tray has a needle on it.

“What’s ‘at for?” she asks,


She grumbles, but sets her forearm on the cart. She covers her face with her other hand, and turns her head resolutely away from her arm, even though he hasn’t started anything yet.

“What’s the matter?” he asks.

“I just don’t want to see it, all right? I don’t like needles. Or blood.” She huffs angrily.

“Rose, just out of curiosity, what sort of tests did you imagine me doing?”

“I dunno! Less invasive ones?”

“Fair enough,” he concedes. “I promise, though, I’m very good at it. I have a touch more experience than your average phlebotomist. It’ll just be one teensy little poke.”

“Right.” He ties a strip of latex tightly around her bicep.
“You know, I actually don’t need much. If you prefer, I can prick your finger.”

“No, that’s worse,” she says.

“I agree. More nerve endings in your fingertips.” There’s some clattering of supplies on the tray. “Make a fist.”

She does, wincing a little at how sweaty her palm is.

“Rose Tyler, single-handedly took down the emperor of the Daleks, but can’t handle a needle,” he quips.

“Shut it.”

“I’m afraid I need both my hands, but you can hold on to whatever else you want, if you’d like,” he offers, an olive branch.

On his suggestion, she reaches her hand out, keeping her eyes firmly shut, until she finds his hip, then reaches her hand around and squeezes his bum.

“Woah!” he jumps a little. “Maybe not the best idea to startle someone who’s about to stick you with a needle?” He chuckles a little.

“Sorry.” She relaxes her grip, but can’t help cracking a smile.

He lightly presses a couple fingers into the dip of her elbow, shifting in tiny increments. A cold, wet piece of cotton rubs against the skin he just touched, and alcohol burns her nose.

“There’s really no better way to do this in the future?” she asks.

“I’m afraid humans don’t ever develop the ability to spontaneously bleed,” he says through another round of chuckles. At least her silly questions are inadvertently lightening his mood. “All right, little pinch.”

It’s really not so bad. Every other time she’s gotten blood drawn it’s been worse. It’s a little pinch, like he said. But she still squeezes his bum a little for good measure.

“Okay, about ten seconds…” She feels a slight tug on the needle as he attaches a vial. “Relax your hand.”

She doesn’t try to count, fearing it’ll only make it seem longer, but it is fairly soon that the needle slips back out.

“There we are. Done.” He presses a cotton ball against her elbow, and places a piece of tape over it to hold it in place.

She opens her eyes and looks down at the harmless ball of cotton.

“Not so bad, eh?”

“S’pose not.”

He swipes up the dark red phial from the tray and walks over to another piece of equipment, adjacent to the first.

“What’re you gonna do with this one?” she asks. She winces a little, holding her other hand against
the cotton and tape as her skin starts stinging. Damn needle.

“Basic blood panel. Well, basic for my standards, not the standards of 21st century Earth. Might take a little longer than the PCR.”

Next, he pulls out what looks like a Gameboy and various white cords that resemble Apple headphones.

“All right, now I really need you to lie down,” he says as he approaches the cart and sets the device down.

“Why?” she asks, apprehensive.

“I’m gonna do an electrocardiogram, and you need to be relaxed and stay relatively still for it.”

“You can’t do that with the sonic, or somethin’?”

“Why are you opposed to this one? It’s completely painless.”

“It’s not gonna help you figure out what’s changed, is it?”

“Rose,” he continues calmly despite her defiance. “You’ve just been struck by lightning and you got overdosed with adrenaline, can I please just check your heart?”

She sighs angrily. “Fine.”

“Thank you.”

Rose lies back reluctantly.

“You’ll also need to, erm, take your shirt off.”

“Seriously?”

The Doctor sighs, but takes her hand.

“Rose, I cannot get all the information an ECG provides just from the screwdriver. I can get simple information – blood pressure, heart rate, and a basic detection of electrical signals, but nuanced electrical impulses require a little something extra.” He gazes into her eyes and softens his tone to his most persuasive purr. “I just want to make sure you’re all right. It’ll only take a few minutes. Okay?”

“Kay,” she agrees, unable to resist those eyes.

With one light squeeze of her hand and a smirk, he turns away to give her a measure of privacy. He pulls the cart further up along the edge of the table, and busies himself with pulling the ends of the wires out of plastic wrappers.

Figuring she might as well get it over with, she wrestles her shirt off and lies back down.

She exhales deeply and slowly, trying not to be embarrassed. He has seen them before, after all. But it’s awkward now, somehow. The circumstances are too cold and professional.

He turns around, and he only glances down briefly to ensure the task is done, but she thinks she sees his cheeks flush with a tiny bit of pink.
Without letting his gaze linger, he picks up the first cord and peels off a sticker, then places the sticky pad near the middle of her chest without so much as glancing at her breasts. She’s not spending even the slightest effort on maintaining mental barriers, either, but she doesn’t feel the faintest flicker of arousal from him.

She can’t help but feel a little bit disappointed, even though she would feel awkward if he was getting aroused. But she tries not to dwell on it. It’s no surprise to her that he is good at turning himself off when he wants to.

The pads are small. Smaller than ones she’s seen on TV shows. No larger than a dime. Future technology, she assumes.

A second pad goes only a couple inches from the first, on the other side of her sternum. Four more along her ribs, just beneath her left breast, close enough that it makes her breath catch several times. But the Doctor still seems unaffected, as though he’s really just a random cardiologist and she’s just a random patient.

“Okay, just hold as still as you can. Try not to take deep breaths, and no talking.”

He punches in a few things on the device, then sets it down on the cart and stares down at it, rather than over at her.

“Should only take about two minutes.”

He periodically pushes buttons and swipes his fingers across the little screen. Rose is anxious enough that she counts a few seconds go by, but once she gets to thirty and he still hasn’t glanced over, she just closes her eyes. Without him talking to her, or even looking at her, in his effort to avoid potential awkwardness, it feels like he’s not even there anymore, and her thoughts take a downward turn again.

He’s taken blood and cells and spit and now she’s tethered to a bloody machine. She’s starting to feel more like an experiment than a human. It’s chilly in here, too, to the point that she’s suppressing shivers. The cold, clinical atmosphere of this miniature medical facility has seeped into her bones. Tests are properly running now. No turning back, deciding she doesn’t want to know. Mere minutes until they give definitive answers. What if he does find something bad? Could the results of one of these ‘run-of-the-mill’ diagnostic tests be her death knell?

It feels like more like ten minutes have passed when the Doctor finally looks away from the tiny screen.

“All right, all done.” He removes the electrodes from her skin carefully, as though peeling a plaster from a wound. Once they’re all gone, he reaches for her shirt and hands it to her before quickly turning around again. “Completely normal.” Rose breathes a sigh of relief she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Somehow,” he adds, as though he can’t believe it.

“That’s good, right?”

“Yes,” he assures her, glancing up at her face. “Very good. Just a few more things to check while we wait on the results of the others.”

He reaches for the tray and picks up the slide he’d smeared with her cheek swab, and heads over to a different counter with a microscope.

She’d forgotten she let down her tenuous barriers, because she suddenly feels a spark of nervousness from him again. It’s not like she didn’t already know he was anxious; he’s never such
a mute except when he’s both severely worried and focused. She worries her own spirals of anxiety are worsening his, but only briefly. He does have much stronger barriers than she has, and could easily block such a signal if he wanted to.

It only takes him a fraction of a second to adjust the microscope, and he takes off his glasses to peer into it, twisting a few knobs with delicate precision until he finds the right position for viewing.

“Nothing out of the ordinary here.”

He straightens up and pulls the slide out. He reaches for a clear bottle, and squeezes a drop of liquid on the slide, then does the same with another bottle of dark purple liquid. Both droplets on the slide, he covers it with a clear slip once more and places it back under the lens. After several more seconds of peering into the eyepiece again, he steps back and runs a hand furiously through his hair.

“That’s impossible,” he mutters to himself.

“What?” she asks, alarmed.

He doesn’t answer. A machine beeps, and he runs from the microscope over to the contraption that made the washing machine noise earlier, scanning the text on the screen.

“What?” he spits out at the screen, his trademark of frustrated bewilderment.

“What?” she repeats herself, angry and impatient now.

“Your DNA it’s… it’s still 100% human, but…” He dashes back to the microscope, leaving the sentence unfinished.

“But what?” she gets up this time, walking cautiously over to him.

He remains silent for a few long seconds, staring into the microscope again.

“Impossible,” he repeats when he finally pulls away. When he turns around, his eyes are wide, his lips parted in shock. He finally registers that she’s standing there, waiting, and he begins to try to explain, though it’s full of jargon.

“This serum,” he snatches up the clear bottle and holds it up, “is a cocktail of biological signals to speed up the cell cycle, along with nutrients to make accelerated growth possible. And this one,” he holds up the purple bottle, “is a powerful oxidising agent. It damages DNA, creates additional mutations to accelerate cellular aging by a specific magnitude. Relative rates are known for most known species in the universe. At least as of the year 62700 or so.”

“The point,” she reminds him.

He takes a deep breath, stopping the incessant flow of words. “Rose, your cells aren’t aging at all. At least not visibly. They look how a Time Lord’s would. It appears there are new protective mechanisms in place, or your existing ones have been significantly enhanced.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Well, if your cells aren’t aging, you aren’t aging. At least not at nearly the same rate you should be.”
“I’m not aging?” She pauses for a moment, brainstorming the implications of that. “I’m like you?” she asks with a flicker of excitement.

Another machine dings, and the Doctor leaps over to it without responding to her question. He scrolls down the screen so fast she doesn’t know how he’s actually reading anything displayed on it.

But when he turns away, he looks even more awestruck.

“Normal, everything is normal. How is it all normal?” He looks positively unsettled by such a notion.

“Oi, don’t seem so disappointed that there’s not bad news!”

“No, I’m not!” He tries to assure her, unconvincingly. “It’s not… it’s just that… hang on.” Suddenly, he dashes out of the room altogether, his trainers crashing down the hall.

Rose growls audibly, frustrated that he isn’t finishing any of his thoughts and leaving her hanging like this. It’s her life on the line here.

But it’s only a few seconds before they come pounding down the hall again, clutching another handheld device. This one is black and covered in antennae like something from the original Ghostbusters.

“Sit down,” he commands with a nod to the exam table, either bored with or too impatient for politeness anymore. She does it anyway, hopping back up on the table and holding her breath for whatever he’s about to do. “Hold still,” he adds, stopping about two feet from the table.

Easier said than done when she’s close to hyperventilating.

He punches a few buttons on the device and points the antennae in her direction, and it makes a few bizarre noises – from whirring to whooshing to crackling – that go on for several long seconds.

And for several more agonising seconds after the ruckus ceases, the Doctor stares down at the small user interface, utterly silent, his face contorting more and more with shock and confusion.

“That’s impossible!”

“What is it!?” She demands, finally raising her voice.

“This device,” he shakes emphatically it in the air, “it measures electromagnetic radiation. All sorts. Most existing wavelengths, in fact. It also stores a database of the electromagnetic signature of thousands of living creatures – humans included. But your signature, that is, your signature now, has no match in the system.”

“What’s that mean?” her voice jumps an octave in panic.

“You have more energy coming off you than any human should. More than any organism should, actually, save for species like me. It’s far closer to the signature of a Time Lord than a human. A Time Lord or maybe –” he cuts himself short, and starts furiously pressing buttons again.

“Maybe what?”

“Protoplasm,” he says without looking up.

“Proto-what?”
“The TARDIS.”

“What?”

“Rose, the TARDIS. I told you this ship’s alive. But she’s got loads of energy signatures most living creatures don’t. Like protoplasm.”

“What’s protoplasm?”

“Morphologically unstable organic matter,” he explains, scrolling through something on the device. “It’s what allows the TARDIS to travel through space and time the way she does without her computers exploding. And what allows her to exist in a different dimension, and change the layout of the interior on a whim – Aha! TARDIS! Here it is! I manually input these data second I bought it. Didn’t come standard – this is hardly Gallifreyan technology. But I knew it’d come in handy someday.”

He starts laughing enthusiastically as he walks to the side of the table so she can see the tiny screen.

“Look at this, Rose. This is mad. Here you are” – he points to a squiggly graph that resembles a readout from a heart monitor – “here’s a reference human, and here’s the reference TARDIS I installed. You’ve got fingerprints from both. A perfect mixture of the two!” When she looks over at him, the Doctor is smiling like a lunatic.

“You’re happy about this, so I’m guessing I should be too?”

“It’s the TARDIS, Rose. It must be. From when you were Bad Wolf. Some residual energy must have been left behind, dormant. Hidden. But when that lightning hit you, it must have activated that presence. Not to such a degree that it would burn up your mind again, but just enough to cause changes at the cellular level. The perfect balance.”

“What are the chances of that?”

At Rose’s question, the Doctor’s smile fades as he’s struck with yet another epiphany. His eyes go wide.

“Maybe it wasn’t chance.”

“What?”

He circles around to the front of the table again and his eyes zero in on hers. He’s standing so close his thighs are touching her knees.

“Earlier, you said you felt like something told you to run.”

Rose gasps, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Could have been Bad Wolf all along. Leading you straight into the lightning strike just like it led you back to the Game Station. It planned this from the beginning.”

“Oh, my God.” She gasps out a few breaths, trying to process everything. “You sure it’s not threatening my brain, or anythin’?”

“One hundred percent positive.” He nods resolutely, leaving no room for doubt. “That’s what I was checking for.”
“Oh, my God.” A hint of a smile breaks free. “Doctor, what does this mean, though, really?”

“It means you won’t live to be a hundred, you’ll live to be a thousand, maybe ten thousand. Maybe indefinitely. It means you’ll never get degenerative diseases like cancer. It means…”

“It means I can stay with you,” she finishes.

He exhales in disbelief, and it’s almost a chuckle. His expression is torn, like he wants to both laugh and cry but neither is winning out. His eyes sparkle with happy tears; trembling breaths disrupt his gorgeous smile. He runs his hands down his face, smearing some moisture on his cheeks, and takes in a ragged breath like the next one could be a sob.

“Forever,” Rose adds softly.

Suddenly spurred to action, the Doctor brings his mouth down against hers. His hands reach up to cradle her face, gentle but unyielding. His lips move with the unrestrained passion he so often holds back. Yet it’s not rough or rushed, but sweet and tender, as though she’s the most fragile of gifts. Thankful she’s already sitting down, Rose wraps herself around him, losing herself in the soft caresses of his lips, in all the possibilities their future holds now. The last of the tension in her muscles melts away. Their minds gently and easily intertwine with the renewed physical closeness and they bask in relief together, dream peacefully of a life without the threat of mortality.

When they finally break apart to catch their breath, the Doctor turns surprisingly sombre.

“If you want.” He shrugs, as though he’s indifferent. But Rose knows better.

Evidently, so does he, because his serious façade cracks almost instantly, revealing a huge smile beneath it.

Rose shakes her head and pulls the Doctor’s mouth back down to hers.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Back with another update guys! Forgive me for the time between updates. Truth be told, I'm trying to drag this out a little at this point. I don't want it to be over! But also, this chapter gave me a lot of trouble. It's a bit long, and there's just a lot of important ground covered here and I wanted to make sure it was done right. I hope you guys like it. <3

The Doctor is quite familiar with the concept of adaptation. Living creatures adapt to their environments, even when surrounded by distressing stimuli. Desert dwellers learn to survive sweltering summer days; the metabolic rate of most species slows in response to a scarcity of food; a person with chronic disability learns to live with it.

So, too, the Doctor has learned to live with the unrelenting threat of mortality. Until this moment, he hadn’t realised that all his previous memories with Rose were tinged with dread. Even in the most enjoyable, intimate moments, the burden of certainty that she was a temporary presence in his life tormented him. That persistent, unsettling feeling in his gut that he was making a mistake. The incessant whispers from the dark depths of his mind, warning him that he’ll suffer for succumbing to something as human as romance.

This burden has been so constant in his life, he hadn’t realised how heavy it had become. The double-edged sword of adaptation: it facilitates survival, but over time it can cause one to forget what it’s like not to need it. Forget there’s a better way to live.

Only now that it’s been lifted does the Doctor finally realise what he’s been missing. For the first time, he’s able to pour all of himself into a kiss and savour each moment just because it’s wonderful, not because he doesn’t know when it will be his last. Not because he’s trying to engrave the memory of her lips in his mind to sustain him once she’s gone and he’s forced to carry on. He’s never known what it feels like to experience a touch from her without wondering in the back of his mind how much longer it will last.

He doesn’t even attempt to hide any of these revelations from Rose, too inflated with the sense of relief to do anything but trust her with all of them.

With her legs wrapped around him the way they are, her soft moans and the way their minds are intertwining so easily, the Doctor can’t help imagining what it’d be like to shag right here on this exam table. Why bother moving? He has every capability of keeping Rose artificially comfortable despite the less-than-ideal cushioning.

Now that the potential threat to her life has vanished, the adrenaline rush from mere minutes earlier suddenly finds a new outlet. Rose’s enthusiasm for his idea quickly manifests as intense arousal that winds its way into his mind. Potent as ever, it seeps into his bloodstream, circulates through his system until he’s flushed and dizzy from it.

He still finds it unfair that she knows how to get him hot and bothered and helpless in a matter of seconds now. Especially now, when she is not nearly as affected. Obviously turned on, yes, but her focus is not nearly as singular as his. Other subjects are competing for attention in her mind.
Questions about the nature of her new existence are interrupting her fantasies, and the curiosity starts to put a damper on her passion.

The Doctor gently and wordlessly tries to convince her to let the questions wait until after, letting his hand wander under her shirt, tempting her with promises of things he’ll do to her, but it doesn’t have as much effect as it normally does. Instead, he starts to wonder about the answers to some of her questions, too. It becomes rather distracting, and not at all conducive to setting a sensual mood.

He supposes there will be plenty of time for shagging later. Centuries of it, if they’re lucky.

Still, she has to shove his chest with a fair amount of force to break their kiss.

“Will I still have to sleep like a human?” she pants out. He huffs out a chuckle against her cheek at her first choice of question.

“I imagine so.” He nods gently. He takes a moment to dampen their connection. It’ll be easier on her to be able to formulate her questions properly before she asks them, and easier for him to focus without the overload of hormones. “Like I said, you’re still 100% human. Just… enhanced. So I think your brain will function basically the same, including the need for a nightly recharge.”

She’s quiet for a moment, and without thinking he lowers his mouth to her neck, still inebriated from the effects of her aroused mind. The hand beneath her shirt climbs a bit higher, grazing her breast. She sighs and clutches a fistful of his hair, but the distraction is short-lived.

“Will I still get sick?” she asks, tugging back on his head.

He pulls back again somewhat reluctantly.

“You’re still susceptible to human diseases, if that’s what you mean. But you’re still not likely to contract much while you’re traveling with me. You’re up to date on immunizations.”

“Will I have to do anything differently?”

He can hardly hear her thoughts anymore, but it almost sounds like she’s disappointed. Like she wants a reason to separate herself from humanity, for some tangible proof that she’s different from the rest now.

“Like what?” he asks, puzzled.

“I dunno.” She shrugs.

“I don’t think you have to change a thing. You’re just gonna age a lot slower.” He hopes this affirmation will reassure her that she is different, but it does the opposite. She frowns a little, cogs visibly turning in her mind.

“Can I regenerate?”

This question is sufficient to completely snap him out of the aroused haze she so easily put him in. He pulls back a bit more, taking his hand out from beneath her shirt. Placing his hands on the table on either side of her, he hums and gives it a moment of thought.

“I don’t think so.”

There’s a moment of silence as her forehead scrunches up.

“Why d’you look unsure about that?”
He exhales slowly. Damn, she can read him even better than she used to.

“You can’t regenerate,” he clarifies. “But... something similar is technically possible.”

“What? Seriously? What’s similar to regeneration?” She sounds more surprised than he would have thought. And a little frightened.

“I never told you this but...” He reaches behind his head, pulling on the collar of his shirt. He didn’t tell her about this for a reason, and doesn’t know if it’s a good idea to spill the beans now.

“What?” she pressures him.

He sighs again, dropping his arm.

“Jack Harkness is basically immortal.”

“What!” she spits out, bringing her hands up to her head in disbelief.

“He died. You brought him back. Well, Bad Wolf did. I sensed it as soon as he was created. He was a fixed point in time. He can’t regenerate, exactly, but... he can’t die. Even if he’s killed, he’ll come right back. It’s why I ran away from him.”

“Doctor, how could you do that? He probably needs us! What kind of curse is that, living forever surrounded by a bunch of mortals?”

Biting his tongue, he gives her a pointed look.

“Right.” She catches her mistake and softens her harsh tone. “Sorry. But not anymore, right? I mean, I’m not totally mortal anymore.”

He brushes both past the accusation and her apology.

“I think his immortality was an accident. You couldn’t control the power you held, and when it was unleashed on him, it completely overwrote his biology. But this is different. I’m not sensing you’re a fixed point the way he is. Something is preserving your life, but not eternalizing it.”

“So what does that mean?”

“Well, I don’t think you’d pop back up if you...” He leaves the end of the sentence hanging, for fear of completely ruining the nice mood they’d built up.

“So, still gotta be careful, then?”

He half-grins at her attempt to lighten the mood, but doesn’t answer. He can already feel himself deflating from the inside now that they’ve inadvertently brought up death again. He can’t let that happen. He simply can’t. Especially not now.

It was barely a few minutes that lasted, his naïve bubble of imagining Rose was safe from death now. His – their – lifestyle is dangerous, full stop. He’s living proof of that: exactly zero of his nine deaths have been due to old age.

“But I mean, if I’m not murdered or anythin’, will I just live forever?” she asks, and he’s relieved to keep talking. Talking keeps his brain at least partially occupied.

“Not forever. I can’t even live forever. I’m not literally immortal. But compared to a human lifespan, it’s just easier to think of myself that way, sometimes. And it’s like I said, I can usually
sense that kind of permanence.”

“So, how long then? I mean, am I gonna outlive you?”

So many morbid questions. Can’t they go back to being carefree and snogging? He realises how sentimental she’s making him lately, and how ridiculous it is to think such a thing at a time like this. But he felt a lot better about their prospects a few minutes ago. Is simply celebrating the moment too much to ask?

But it’s selfish to deny her answers. This is her life, her mortality they’re talking about. She deserves to know, and on her own terms.

He considers what happened, that Bad Wolf’s power was essentially drawn directly from the heart of the TARDIS.

“I think your mortality is probably connected with the TARDIS’,” he answers slowly.

Rose considers that for a moment, biting the inside of her cheek.

“An’ how long does she live?”

The Doctor rarely entertains such questions, but he does know the answer to this one. His and the TARDIS’ connection is uniquely powerful. He knows that whenever he passes on for good, the TARDIS won’t survive much longer. He’s the only one who can operate her, keep her healthy, and their lives are intertwined. If he were ever separated from the TARDIS, it would crush him, but if she were ever separated from him, it would kill her.

“Her life is connected to mine. We’ve been together so long, if I died, she would too. Fairly quickly. So, in essence…”

“Mine’s connected to yours, too.”

He nods bleakly in affirmation.

“What’s that look for? Isn’t that a good thing? It’s perfect.”

He sighs.

“It’s just like you said, Rose. Immortality, even quasi-immortality, is a curse. I never wanted to lose you, but I also never wanted to bring something like that down on you.”

“But you didn’t. I did. It was me, making the decisions when I was Bad Wolf. I must have decided this, way back then, even if I couldn’t remember.”

“I suppose so.”

“I did promise I’d never leave you. This is the only way I can keep my promise.”

His hearts swell despite the guilt.

“But I can’t regenerate.” It’s not a question, but he responds anyway.

“You won’t need to.” He’s resolute. “I’ll protect you, no matter what.”

“But what if…”
“Don’t,” he bites back, fury bubbling up inside him. “I will. The same way I have up until this point. If something is that dangerous, I’ll go alone.”

She doesn’t bring up the times he couldn’t save her, and he’s thankful for it. He won’t make such a mistake again. There’s no way any Dalek scum is going to take her from him now. He won’t allow it.

But Rose also doesn’t try to fight him on his insistence he’ll take some missions alone, which is glaringly out of character. He knows she won’t be likely to take a decision like that lying down, she never has. She must not think he means it.

“I’m serious, Rose.” His fists clench with his jaw.

“You’re not gonna ditch me anymore.” She crosses her arms, just as resolved as he is. Apparently, she was just humouring him by staying quiet, never planned to let him go through with such a thing. “I thought we established that.”

“You can’t regenerate, Rose!” he lashes out, nearly shouting despite being so close. “Isn’t risking your life selfish to the people who love you?”

Oops.

He takes a step back, mortified.

Rose gasps softly, and he stifles down one of his own.

Swallowing hard, he backpedals as fast as he can.

“You mother?” he manages to choke out. “Your friends?” Hearts in his throat, he gulps down another breath and stares at her, waiting to see if she’ll let his slip-up slide for the millionth time or if she’ll finally call him on it.

She does look undeniably disappointed, but miraculously, she lets it drop.

“It’s not about me bein’ selfish, though. It’s just about doing what’s right. You of all people should know that. Aren’t you doin’ the same, after all, risking your life even though you’ve got loads of people who care about you?”

“I can regenerate,” he insists. But knowing that fact doesn’t make much difference to her, he knows that. So he changes course quickly. “Just, don’t go throwing yourself in front of bullets. Please. I can’t lose you. Especially not now.” He can hear how desperate he sounds, but right now he doesn’t care.

She’s quiet, waiting for him to say more.

He closes the distance he put between them, and takes both her hands in his. Stares down at them, trying to keep his voice steady as he says his next piece.

“I once told you you could spend the rest of your life with me, but I couldn’t spend the rest of mine with you.”

“I remember.”

“I meant that. Because I really never thought it’d be possible. And… I just don’t want to squander this one chance I’ve got. You’re it. You’re the only one. I mean, you were… before, but… now…”
He closes his eyes with a grimace, cringing at the words coming out of his mouth. All this hope is properly bad for his eloquence. And his dignity.

It’s a good thing Rose is the no-nonsense type. This would be so much worse if they had to play traditional human courtship games; if he had to play it cool now so he wouldn’t seem desperate, like losing her wouldn’t totally destroy him.

“I know.” She’s sombre. “It’s not exactly easy for me, either, though, you know. When you go changin’ everything about yourself.”

Oh.

His hands fall away from hers.

“You mean… That is, if I… you’ll stay with me if I change again, though, won’t you?”

Panic suddenly bubbles up in his chest. It was exceptionally hard on her last time. He was born arse over elbow for her; if she had snogged him the very moment the regenerative fires subsided he would not have protested. But it took her days to accept that he was the same man underneath. Weeks to stop acting like he was a stranger when they were alone. Months before she had the regained the level of trust and fondness in her eyes when she looked at him.

Is she unwilling to put herself through that again?

“Of course I’ll stay.” She wraps her hands around his back and tugs him closer. But she looks down at his shirt, as though she’s still withholding half the truth.

“I’ll be the same man, up here.” He tries to reassure her. She looks up, and he taps his temple.

“You’re right. Just not easy to get used to, y’know.”

“I know. And honestly, Rose, I do my best not to die. It’s a defining character trait of mine, believe it or not. But, it’s sort of…” He hates that he’s thinking it, and doesn’t want to bring it up at all. But whether because Rose considers it herself, or he accidentally leaks it while they’re connected, it’s bound to come out soon anyway. “Inevitable that we will have to even the odds at some point. I do have two regenerations left.”

Rose’s face falls substantially at this idea, and he wants to kick himself for it.

A couple of things cross his mind, though. First, the deal he made with himself a few days ago: if need be, he can cancel his remaining regenerations. Second, the fact that he knows damn well why this is his youngest-looking incarnation yet. Without much deliberation, he decides to go with the second point to try to lift her spirits.

“But, you should know…”

“What?” She perks up at the potential.

“Well, when I changed last time, I did it for you. I turned out like this,” he from his head to his toes “because my subconscious thought it was what you wanted.”

“Did you get struck by lightning too?” she asks, scrunching up her face like she doesn’t believe him. “You’re sounding loopy.”

“No! I’m just saying that… it isn’t purely a lottery, though I like to pretend it is sometimes. I can’t
really come out with two heads, or no head.”

“Great time to have a lark, when I’m watchin’ you die.” Her sarcasm is made more evident by her glare.

“Sorry,” he says, unconvincingly. “But… the truth is, there are certain factors that can affect the outcome. Like, in the early days of the Time War, for example. I needed strength, and resilience, and less empathy. So that’s the sort of man I became. The version of me you met. I can change into whatever I need to be, based on the life I’ve had preceding the change, the circumstances I’m in at the time of my death. And sometimes, that can include certain… strong emotional factors.”

He doesn’t say love again, doesn’t even think it. He’s careful not to, even though it’s so clear when they’re in each other’s heads he’s starting to forget why.

She hasn’t said it, either, though.

But the way she looks at him then, eyes bright and glassy, lips parted but holding back a gasp, he knows she’s thinking it.

“I was only thinking about you, while I was dying,” he continues, blowing past the moment. “I really, really wanted you to like me when I came out the other side. And you know what I was like before, I was…” he trails off, hesitant to slander his previous incarnation. Without him, he’d have never met Rose. He owes him everything. “But you made me who I am now. And it could happen again. I can change into whatever you need me to be. That could even mean staying the same.”

“Really?” she cracks a little smile, encouraged.

“It’s never happened to me before, but I wouldn’t say it’s unprecedented in the universe at large. And even if I don’t stay the same, I promise you, I’ll make sure you’ll still like me.” He offers a gentle smile, and she returns it easily, pondering the possibility for a moment. She does seem uplifted at the idea.

“I’d never leave you, though,” she says. “You know that. Even if you do change. You’ll still be the Doctor.”

“Always.”

Waiting a long moment to ensure she’s depleted of questions for the time being, he leans down to capture her lips again. He intends it to be brief, chaste, even, but before they know it, hands are wandering and soft sighs are echoing through the infirmary.

Though he still thinks it would be brilliant fun to shag on the exam table, he really should be taking better care of her than that today. She deserves the best.

“Mmh, want to head back?” he asks, breaking away.

“Really?” she asks, not bothering to hide her disappointment.

He chuckles against her lips.

“You were ready to have your way with me on this table a few minutes ago, what’s stoppin’ you now?”

“Nothing. I’m sure it’d be lovely. But I think you’ve been battered around enough for one day. And this table seems, er… conducive to bruises.” He taps his palm on it, and it gives just the unpleasant
thump he predicted.

“I’m not as fragile as you think, y’know.” She narrows her eyes, derisive.

He only wants her to be as comfortable – no, more than that: spoiled – as possible, but he expected such a reaction. He continues with hardly a pause, trying a different avenue.

“No, you’re right.” He nods. “Not fragile at all. Tough as nails, you are.” Though he’s making a joke of it in this moment, he knows it to be entirely true; he’s seen firsthand just how resilient and capable Rose is. “But…” he lowers his voice. “It’ll be so much more comfortable there. It’s warmer… there’s a real bed. With real sheets. Soft ones, too.”

She does look enticed, but still hasn’t recovered from his jab at her fragility.

“Also, I just thought, since it’ll probably be our last night here, you might like to stay in our room for it.”

“Last night, really?”

She sounds disappointed, and her uncertainty gives him pause. They’ve done what needed to be done here, haven’t they? The fish are bouncing back. By the looks of it, Kairi’s project doesn’t need further input from him. Usually, Rose is ready to move on precisely when he is.

“Well, the problems are solved. Nothing left to see I haven’t shown you. Time we moved on, isn’t it?”

“Suppose so,” she shrugs, running her hand down his shirt. “It’s just been so lovely here…” she trails off, lost in thought. Silently toying with a button on his shirt. After a few moments, he begins to wonder whether she’s actually thinking about the island anymore or just imagining tearing off his shirt. He hopes the latter.

Suddenly, she shakes herself out of the trance.

“Where to next?” she asks, looking up.

After a moment of thought, he realises he doesn’t know.

“I haven’t thought about it much, actually.” He frowns a little. He only just now realises how odd that is. Before today’s cataclysm, he hadn’t given any thought to their subsequent destination. Despite the fact that this trip has been (romantic rollercoasters aside) rather uneventful compared to other of their adventures, he’s been so wrapped up in everything with Rose he hasn’t been yearning to leave.

He always grows bored of any environment, eventually, becomes antsy to refresh his senses. Without the constant stimulation of fresh scenery and people, his mind crawls back to the past. Old demons and persistent fears wear down his psyche. So he avoids such circumstances whenever he can. He may have been forced into a nomadic existence initially, but now his wanderlust has become his most reliable coping mechanism.

But these past several days with Rose, he hasn’t once felt that urge. The deep tug to flee to greener grass. He’d be content to stay here several more weeks, years even. It was mere habit that made him suggest it was time to go.

But at the same time, the fact that Rose is going along with it so easily reinforces that line of thinking. Even if they’d both be content to stay, they’re more than content when they keep
travelling.

“Oh?” she asks to break him out of his reverie. She sounds like she doesn’t quite believe him, and he can’t blame her.

“Off the top of my head, though…” He squints up at the ceiling to concentrate on potential locations, knowing looking anywhere on her body would distract him too much. “The golden mountains of Sbardha, perhaps? Orrrrr…. the infamous hypernova of the Taraka galaxy? Or, oh! I never did take you to Fentonillo. The aromatic planet. Even the dirt beneath your feet is vanilla scented.”

“What, seriously?” she sounds intrigued, but sceptical.

“Oh, yeah,” he nods, grinning. “You thought apple grass was nice, wait’ll you smell that.”

Rose giggles, and pushes him gently so she can jump off the table.

“We’ll figure it out later, hm? C’mon.”

She tugs on the front of his shirt and leads the way towards the hall.

When he carefully pulls open the front door and peers outside, it’s raining again. There’s a crash of thunder, but it’s muted and distant, perhaps a neighbouring island taking the brunt of it now. Still, it’s easy not to feel threatened by the sound from within the safety of the TARDIS. He has his reservations about letting Rose anywhere near a storm again.

But then he remembers something.

“Don’t worry,” he says, taking off back towards the hall. “I’ve got just the thing!”

He implores the TARDIS to move the storage room closer, and once the ship realises why they’re in a rush, the Doctor is able to retrieve what he’s looking for and return to the console in a matter of seconds.

“An umbrella, really?” Rose asks when he brandishes the object upon his return.

“Not just any umbrella. An electricity-resistant rubber umbrella.” He sidles up to her and hands it over for her to inspect.

“Why do you even have this?” Rose asks, turning it over in her hands. “Go walking through storms often?”

“They’re commonplace on Karabijali. Essential, actually. Electrical storms are a daily occurrence there. Everyone’s got one. This particular model was a gift from an acquaintance of mine. Well, friend, I suppose. Well, ex-friend. We didn’t leave things on the best terms.”

Rose rolls her eyes at his anecdote, and pulls open the door, opening the umbrella as she steps out.

The Doctor follows closely behind and takes over responsibility of holding onto it. Though it’s plenty big enough for them to both be covered, he errs strongly on Rose’s side.

The walk is fairly short, and they don’t fill it with conversation. They would have to shout to hear each other over the rain, anyway, and watching the distant flashes of lightning has both their minds busy.

He doesn’t know if he’ll ever see lightning again without it eliciting hair-raising terror. He should
be happy; it gave Rose a lifespan to match his. But each distant strike forces his mind to relive
every harrowing detail: the light swallowing her fleeing silhouette, her lifeless body crumpling to
the wood.

He’s anxious to get her back inside. Not just out of the storm, but bare in his arms. Maybe it’s vain,
or naïve, to think that physically covering her body with his will do anything to protect her from
any real dangers, but he can’t help it. When their minds and bodies are intertwined so closely, it
feels like she’s safer. The universe can’t take her without going through him first.

As soon as they’re inside, the Doctor is determined to waste no more time. He tosses the umbrella
to the floor with a splash, and guides her over to the bed. She sits down on the edge, and he kneels
in front of her, grazing his fingertips over the branching scars on her arms, still in disbelief at
everything that’s happened in the last half day. He brings his hands up to her face, touching her
temples to reunite them mentally. He’s had enough of talking and tests and numeric data; he needs
to quantify her vitality with his own hands.

Her lips crash down against his, her hands are working off his shirt as soon as he’s suggested it. All
their teasing from this morning and the infirmary table comes rushing back to them both. With the
head start, their minds swirl together with a heat and desire that quickly translates to desperation
for Rose. He has to slow her down with his hands tied around her wrists. Exude a sense of patience
into her mind. Once he’s helped her undress, he invites her to lie back on the bed, stepping out of
his shorts before he kneels down again.

He wants to take his time for this. Their first time united in this new, impossible timeline. His first
time touching her since he thought he would lose her forever. To see for himself that she’s real and
alive and his, and savour every moment. Every inch of skin. He can’t shake the feeling words will
never suffice again; but he can at least begin to show her how grateful he is that she’s here. How
beautiful and cherished she is.

His hands comfortably resting on her skin to maintain their link, he lowers his mouth to her ankles,
which gave way too easily on the boardwalk. Willing strength into them with each kiss. He climbs
up onto the bed as his lips ascend, showering her calves, knees, and thighs with tender kisses.

He’s then drawn to the scars on her arms, the only physical evidence of the transformation she’s
undergone. He almost wants her to keep them as battle scars, reminders of how resilient she is. She
silently agrees, but wishes his lips were elsewhere. Pleads with him to speed things up.

Want to take it slow, he says her through their link. I thought I lost you today.

She doesn’t respond with words, but their connection alights with understanding. Her sense of
urgency fades as she surrenders to his pace.

He’s gentle around her ribs, where faint bruises are forming from his own hands. Seeing the blue
and purple blotches sends him straight back to the boardwalk, to an ear-splitting crack and her heart
stagnant in her chest. But Rose brushes her fingers through his hair tenderly as her mind quietly
chases the memories away. He lets his lips linger on her chest as the sense of calm overrides the
guilt and anxiety, savouring the way her heart is thudding against her ribs now. Grateful for her
extraordinary ability to calm him, he spends some time tending to her breasts before continuing his
exploration. The way it makes her squirm, clench her fists in his hair, gasp out his name, it nearly
does him in.

He shifts his mouth up to her neck, where he can feel her racing pulse again. He can’t get enough
of it. And when he finally touches her lips, it’s almost like kissing her for the first time again. Mere
hours ago they were cold and still and her life was about to slip away forever as he touched them.
But now they’re soft and warm as she fervently kisses him back, and he wants to go on kissing her forever.

Rose promises he’ll never have to feel them that way again.

 Unexpectedly, a pulse of anger sizzles through him.

*Don’t make promises you can’t keep,* he commands, his eyes welling with tears.

*I never have.*

It’s not a tough act or a way to push her away. His default state is assuming everyone either leaves or dies. Because they always have. Every single one.

Rose knows that, but she’s trying to make him understand this is different.

And as much as his subconscious is fighting it, he can’t deny there’s an ember of hope inside him now that they may be able to spend forever together. And not only does Rose see that hope, she encourages it. With it with every tender touch of her hands, every brush of her mind against his, she stokes it, until it’s a raging fire in his mind. For a moment, he’s even angrier that she would do this to him, because though it’s a possibility now, it’s far from a certainty. And the more hope he has, the more devastated he will be if those hopes are ever crushed.

Fuelled by his anger and her determination, their kiss grows deeper. Messy and passionate. He settles lower on top of her, pinning her arms to the sheets. Their patience dwindles together, and he starts to grind slowly against her centre to bring some measure of relief.

He always knew she would slip away from him. Was convinced of it. It was only a matter of time.

But now… the test results flash through his mind. It’s more than possible. It’s likely.

*Forever,* Rose had said on that exam table. Not for the first time.

To everyone else, forever was an evocative vow; to him, it was always hollow. Meaningless.

But this time it means something. It echoes with truth. It carries more weight than it ever would.

The evidence is clear now. The numbers don’t lie.

*Forever.*

He slips inside of her heat at last, sighing out her name next to her ear.

Rose holds onto him tightly, pulling him in closer, deeper.

But unlike what usually happens, their physical senses quickly fade from their perception as something else beckons their attention. The Doctor’s time sense tingles in the back of his mind, tugging on every thread of his consciousness, screaming for him to pay attention to it. He strives to ignore it, not wanting to interrupt this moment with his untimely ability, but the itch becomes progressively harder not to scratch. He lets down his guard for but a moment, and it quickly overrides their entire connection.

Golden, chaotic threads of time. Fleeting, contradictory visions. Decades of possibilities branch from this moment and wind into the future, the pathways ambiguous and blurry.

He recognizes it instantly.
It’s their newly intertwined timeline.

He can see all that could be, but until a few hours ago, this could never have been.

It would only take an ounce of focus to elucidate one of those paths, and the prospect is painfully tempting.

But he has to restrain himself. As all time travellers should, he has a rule against letting people know their fate prematurely, and he knows that ought to extend to Rose. Besides, if he can help it, he doesn’t want to know either. Whether it’s a future that entices him or one that fills him with dread, he’s better off not knowing.

But he also knows more often than not, he can’t fight these senses. When they have something to show him, he usually ends up seeing it whether he wants to or not.

He tries to steer their minds away from the future, back to pleasure and intimacy, and it almost works. He almost overpowers them.

But now that she’s had a glimpse, Rose is eager to see more. Bolstered by Bad Wolf, her power alone starts to make them a bit clearer.

His only way of fighting back, he starts to move, hoping a focus on sensations can overwhelm the visions away. The way she swallows him whole with every thrust, the way every inch of him fills and stretches her. Rose breathes out his name as the physical world catches up with her, but her desperation to peer into the future doesn’t diminish.

His time senses are too potent to ignore unless they’re both determined to.

The Doctor holds Rose’s hand as they race down a hospital corridor crowded with panicked medical staff. A fresh surge of attraction rushes through Rose when she realises blue has replaced brown on his pinstriped suit.

He can’t help but smile as pride swells up inside him, and his mental fortitude to resist crumbles even further.

The TARDIS looks newly redecorated as they dance around the console initiating a dematerialization sequence. He can’t imagine doing that anytime soon, and concludes it must be far into the future. Perhaps even following a regeneration. Does this mean he may be able to stay the same for her, after all? A rush of euphoria floods through him at the thought, that translates to a wave of pleasure that brings them both to the brink of a climax.

He stops his hips and they temper themselves, both of them now loath for this to be over too soon.

It’s that moment that the Doctor realises something: he’d normally see both sides of the coin in a revelation like this. Both the desirable and undesirable potential futures.

He can just barely sense some less enticing potential futures looming in front of them, shadows breathing in the distance. Ominous storms, threatening sheets of stark white. Screams and zaps of lasers and whips of cold wind.

But inexplicably, the golden light lingering in Rose’s mind chases them away before the Doctor can make out enough details.

Rather than wallow in the knowledge they exist, known to him or not, he clings onto the bright threads of their one and only shot at this, because he never thought he would get one. Gravestones
punctuated his lonely timeline before. Definite ends were a perpetual certainty. But for once, a timeline with another person stretches into an indeterminate future. Now that the floodgates have opened, he’s having a hard time closing them. He wants to keep watching.

Rose’s bags and books are scattered around his bedroom; both their clothes hang in his closet; there are two toothbrushes on the counter in the loo.

A future Doctor stands next to an ocean next, wearing a black suit he doesn’t yet own, surrounded by familiar lavender sand as the sun sets over the horizon. He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly, combing a hand through his hair, messing up what was a pristine style. Reaching into the pocket of his jacket, he pulls out a pair of small silver rings inscribed with circular Gallifreyan.

The Doctor recognizes the trinkets immediately: they’re customary in Gallifreyan marriage ceremonies.

It literally knocks the wind out of him.

He suddenly feels a bit less guilty for not stopping this. With or without Rose’s persuasion, he was bound to have an episode like this. A shift in his timeline this critical wouldn’t remain stifled very long before its potential repercussions burst behind his eyes either way.

The events they’ve just seen are not set in stone – they’re in flux. All of them may occur, some, or none. But the mere possibility of some of them is enough to overwhelm their connection with a unique kind of hope.

Tears escape Rose’s eyes as the sprawling timeline shrinks and fades away, and the Doctor catches them with gentle kisses as he starts to carefully move again.

With a gentle nudge to her mind, he turns up the intensity of her physical sensations, and focuses solely on her as he settles into a new rhythm. Her pleasure quickly overflows into his body, too, and the building friction begins to drown out everything else once more.

Rose wraps her legs around him possessively, determined to let nothing interfere with their forever. She begs him not to stop even as she vehemently wishes this could last forever, scrapes her teeth on his neck when she can’t decide which one she wants more. But by then it’s already too late. Soft cries of their names fill the air as they’re finally overwhelmed by it. Stars burst behind their eyes as they succumb to the tremors of pleasure, rocking back and forth in unison until they’re completely spent.

They lie tangled together for a while as they catch their breath, reflecting on everything they’d seen. They don’t talk; they don’t need to. But wordlessly reassure one another they’re ready to pursue the enticing possibilities that lie ahead of them.

When he opens his eyes, can’t help his gaze from drifting down to her figure, still pink and glistening from exertion. But before he can admire the view for long, her eyes open, too. As soon as she catches him staring, he feels her twinge of discomfort.

“You’re beautiful,” he breathes.

He can feel her blush.

“Thank you for saving me,” she whispers to change the subject.

“Thank you for saving me.” She’s still so close to his mind, she understands that he’s using the word in a different sense.
She yawns, and her eyes drift closed again.

With one more kiss, he takes one of her hands in his, intertwining their fingers.

“You can sleep,” he whispers, brushing her hair away from her face. “We’ll have more time to talk tomorrow. And the next day. And the next ten thousand after that.”

She smiles, her eyes still firmly closed. He tries to stay strong as the strength of their connection starts to diminish when she slips towards unconsciousness. As much as he doesn’t want her to go, he can’t possibly force her to stay awake after everything she’s been through today.

But before she nods off, something startles her back to alertness. Her eyes open with a soft gasp. Has she detected their connection is faltering and started to miss him already, too?

“You said a telepathic connection like we have shouldn’t be possible with me. With a human, I mean. It’s possible because of this, because of Bad Wolf, isn’t it?”

Right. Just another question.

“Think so, yeah. It’s still a mystery to me how I never detected it sooner. Wasn’t looking, I suppose. And I gather the TARDIS helped keep it under wraps for a while. Waiting ‘til the right time.”

“’M glad it’s possible,” she murmurs. Curiosity sated, her fatigue catches up with her again immediately.

“Me too.” He squeezes her hand, and just barely manages to restrain himself from opening up their link fully again.

It’s less than a minute later she’s sound asleep.

The Doctor half regrets telling her she should sleep. A part of him (okay, a big part) wants her to stay awake all night so they can keep kissing and talking about their next adventure. Her exponentially greater need for sleep than his has always been annoying, but now that he’s likely to share a bed with her every night, he imagines it will be even worse from here on out.

He’s not at all tired. After everything that happened today, he has a lot to process. And he’s slept so many nights they’ve been here, he’s already overcharged as it is. Lying here yearning to touch her mind again, or worse, lusting after her while she’s trying to sleep, won’t be a productive use of his time.

He suddenly realises the constant pattering of rain on the roof has stopped, the storm either spent or else raging on somewhere out of earshot. Without the incessant rain drowning it out, he can once again hear the gentle crash of waves against the shore he’s grown accustomed to. It would be comforting white noise if his mind weren’t racing.

Storms, test results, regenerations, marriage proposals… it’s a lot to take in. It was all enough to put Rose out for the night, but it seems to be having the opposite effect on him.

He’s just about to get up and head back to the TARDIS to find a project to keep his mind and hands busy for the night, when there’s a tiny rap at the door.

Confused, and mildly alarmed, he leaps up to investigate, fishing his sonic out of his shorts before he heads to the door. But in the process, he realises both he and Rose are still completely naked,
and he’s suddenly gripped with panic.

He throws a blanket over Rose and pulls his shorts on before he heads to the door.

He opens it cautiously, wielding the sonic in one hand. But he instantly relaxes when he sees it’s Kalei, equally shirtless. It is still a bit warm out from the tropical currents the storm brought in. But he was hardly expecting visitors tonight.

“Hi,” the Doctor says quietly, not hiding his shock.

“Hi,” Kalei sighs, as though with relief. “I just came to check on you guys. I was worried when you didn’t show for dinner.”

Oh. He’d completely forgotten about dinner. Rose really should have eaten, too. Oh, well. She needs rest. She can catch up on calories tomorrow.

“Dad said not to bother you, but I had a weird feeling earlier. I just wanted to make sure.”

“Sorry we didn’t check in, Kalei,” the Doctor says, trying to ignore what Kalei said about having a weird feeling. “We had a bit of an eventful day. And we didn’t want to get caught in the storm.”

“Eventful?” he asks. “What happened?” His forehead scrunches with concern as he leans over to peer past the Doctor’s head.

The Doctor pulls the door until he’s squeezed between it and the frame, effectively blocking his view.

“Nothing,” he says gruffly, but his body betrays him by sending all his blood into his face.

Suspicious, Kalei’s eyes wander up to his hair, then flicker briefly to the side of his neck. He nods knowingly with a little smirk.

The Doctor slaps a hand over his neck and sighs, blushing even more. He doesn’t even remember that happening.

“Anyway, do you two want anything?” Kalei asks, sensitive to the Doctor’s discomfort. “I can bring back some leftovers.”

“Rose is already asleep,” says the Doctor. “And I can do without. We’ll definitely come round in the morning.”

“Okay,” he shrugs. He turns to go looking slightly disappointed, and the Doctor feels a tug of regret.

“Was there anything else?” the Doctor asks sincerely, and Kalei perks up.

“Well… I did sort of hope, maybe, I could ask for some advice. About Dakota. I never did tell you guys about that date.”

The Doctor’s stomach twists uncomfortably.

“Yeah,” the Doctor says with faux enthusiasm. “But I know Rose would want to be a part of it. Can we all three talk in the morning? I’m sure we can sort it out.”

“Yeah,” Kalei smiles genuinely, not discerning the Doctor’s interest is completely fabricated.
“Great.” Knowing Rose will be the only one Kalei needs, the Doctor returns his smile.

“Thanks, Doctor. Good night!” With a small wave, he turns and jogs away. He really has grown a bit fond of Kalei, and he doesn’t want to cause him any grief. By trying to help in this regard, he most certainly would. Rose will be far more helpful.

The Doctor cautiously closes the door. When he climbs back onto the bed, Rose whispers to him.

“What’s up?” she mumbles sleepily, stirring under the blanket.

“Sorry,” he whispers back as he lies next to her. “I hoped not to wake you. It was Kalei, he came by to check on us. I said we’d see him in the morning.”

“Kay. Good.” She cracks her eyes open, as though to ensure he’s securely back in bed. He suddenly feels guilty for considering leaving to work on other things. It’s what he’s always done when they’ve slept together before. But that was only ever in a platonic context. It feels different now, somehow, especially considering the day’s events. He doesn’t want to be apart from her. But nor can he lie here bored all night, his mind wandering back to her near-death experience or the prescient visions he’d conjured. So what solution is there?

She’s about to drift off again when a thought occurs to him.

“Rose.”

“Yeah,” she mumbles, eyes still closed.

“Since you’re up. I… I hate to ask, but…” His airway constricts before he can finish the sentence. His hearts clench tightly in his chest. Is this going to be too much? He shouldn’t be asking at all.

“What is it?” she opens her eyes, sensing his acute discomfort.

“Do you think… erm… could I stay with you tonight? I mean,” he lightly taps his temple.

“What d’you mean?” she asks, her confusion no doubt worsened by her exhaustion.

“I almost lost you today, and after everything, I… don’t think I’ll be able to sleep. But I don’t want to be apart from you.”

“I don’t have to sleep, Doctor. I can stay up.” Rose opens her eyes wide, and immediately makes an effort to appear perfectly alert.

“You don’t have to.” The Doctor chuckles. “You can sleep while we’re connected, I just need your permission to maintain it. It would mean I’d be able to see your dreams, if you have any, but that’s all. I won’t go snooping for anything else.”

“Yeah,” she nods, looking relieved that she doesn’t have to sacrifice any sleep. “Yeah, of course that’s okay.”

“Okay.” He still feels ashamed for asking, but he’s also flooded with relief that he can stay with her for the night. It’s so much better than tinkering.

“How’s that work, then?” she asks.

“Well…”
With a brief touch to her temple, he takes them to Rose’s garden in a few short seconds. It’s still brilliantly illuminated, and he already feels lighter as he takes in the familiar scenery and breathes in the chlorophyll and sweet pollen.

The blanket is still where they left it in the grass last time. He gestures for her to lie down, and she’s relieved to do so.

“You can just let yourself fall asleep,” he continues his thought as he nestles into the space next to her and holds her hand. “The same way you always would. You’ll be asleep in the real world, too.”

“Mhm,” she mumbles, snuggling up against him and closing her eyes.

“You might dream of me more than you normally would.”

“S’okay with me.”

She stays awake for a few minutes longer, happy to have him as a guest for the night. Cuddling is great, she says, but this is a whole new level of comfort. She’s never felt more… well, she can’t put a word to the feeling. The opposite of alone. Knowing he’ll be here with her while she sleeps, she feels safe.

Safe.

Knowing she shares the feeling of being safe when she’s close with him, his hearts feel like they could leap right out of his chest. He’s never considered himself very masculine, too geeky and slight to really fit the bill, but she makes him feel like a proper man. And he’s realising more and more just how much he likes it.

It’s obvious the moment she slips under. The stream of conscious thought abruptly halts, along with the familiar mixture of surface emotions swirling inside her. Her mind instead flits between abstract thoughts and recent memories quickly, processing and storing. And some moments, it’s completely blank. A peaceful stasis. But regardless if her mind is occupied or at simply recharging, it cradles his just the same, like he’s something that was always meant to be there. It’s next to impossible to dwell on negative thoughts while he’s surrounded by her like this, and he doesn’t try.

Though he’s not planning to sleep, he closes his eyes, content to spend the night basking in her presence, letting the golden light of this place warm his soul.

But after about an hour, Rose Tyler does have a dream.

And it is about him.
Chapter Notes

Here we are! I wrestled with this chapter a bit. There's more dialogue than usual, which always really trips me up. In my opinion, not my best work. I could have fiddled with it forever, I think, but there's some big stuff on the horizon that I'm too excited about to put off much longer. But it's an important chapter, nonetheless. So, without further ado!

Thanks very much to Amber for the double duty beta work!

When Rose wakes up, she’s not where she expected to be. She was certain she’d awaken in the garden with the Doctor, and find him just as he was when she fell asleep. If not lying with her, wandering around admiring the plant or avian life while she dreamt.

But she wakes to sunlight pouring in the open window of the hut, her mind and the bed rather devoid of the Doctor’s presence.

Still high on the excitement of her immortality and their future together, and pleasantly sated from last night, her heart doesn’t sink straight away. It must be well past sunrise now, with how bright it is outside. Even with the entire landscape of the garden at his disposal and whatever she may have dreamed of to entertain him, it’s no surprise the Doctor would have grown bored with that many hours of nothing to do but look at scenery. Plus, he had asked to stay with her in her mind, not the other way around. If she had asked, and he had still left prematurely without asking, she might be more upset.

Still, now that she’s awake, she does want him back as soon as possible.

But she doesn’t exactly feel like getting up yet. Her eyes won’t quite stay open, and every time she moves, even a little bit, just about every one of her muscles and bones aches. She’ll have to get some paracetamol out of her bag first thing, or else ask the Doctor to if he comes back soon.

She doesn’t hear him in the adjacent loo. He could be back at the TARDIS, or a mile down the coast with Kalei or any member of his family.

Her confidence in her telepathic abilities bolstered by the knowledge she still has some Bad Wolf up her sleeve, she closes her eyes. Concentrates on him while squeezing out any extraneous thoughts.

Doctor. If you can hear me, I’m up.

It’s not five seconds later the door to the hut swings open. Realising she’s still naked, she quickly pulls the blanket up over her chest. There’s no guarantee her attempt was successful; it could be Kalei or any other member of the village.

But it is the Doctor. He’s still shirtless, and looking at her with hesitant excitement.

“Did you call me?” Not bothering to close the door, he takes a few tentative steps toward the bed.
Intensely proud of herself, she smiles broadly up at him.

“Can’t believe that worked.” She shakes her head.

“Neither can I.” He smiles back. It’s a special kind of smile, one he normally reserves for when he encounters a new creature or substance that amazes him. Wonderment in his eyes, his mouth half-open like a little kid watching a magic trick. It’s not often she sees it directed at her.

“This is so brilliant, though,” she continues when he just stands there at the edge of the bed in disbelief. “Why haven’t we done it before? It’s so useful.”

“Well, I could’ve.” He shrugs. “But I didn’t think it’d be fair if it was only going in one direction.”

She’s silent for a moment, knowing he’s right.

“I knew it would happen for you,” he continues, sobering up a bit. “But I thought it’d be a bit longer. Bad Wolf really did a number on you.”

“’S it a bad thing?” she asks.

He pushes his bottom lip out, shaking his head.

“Don’t think so. Just surprising.”

“So does this mean… I mean we won’t be able to hear all each other’s thoughts all the time now, or anything?”

“No.” He reaches behind him to shove the door closed, then finally climbs up onto the bed. “You have to concentrate for me to be able to hear anything. Which you clearly already figured out. It’s like turning the dial on the radio. Have to tune in to the right frequency before you can broadcast anything. Otherwise it’s just static on my end.” He settles onto his side next to her, propping himself on his elbow, head on his hand.

She figured as much, but it’s still reassuring to hear it confirmed.

“Where’d you go, anyway?” she asks.

“The lavatory across the pier, if you must know.”

“Oh.” She chuckles at herself, like she was expecting worse.

“I didn’t think you’d be awake anytime soon. You were still in a deep sleep when I left.”

“Must’ve just missed you,” she blurts out, without thinking.

Oops. She shouldn’t have said that. The Doctor still doesn’t handle words like ‘miss’ very well.

His eyes fall from hers immediately, and he swallows hard as he stares down at the sheets.

“Or, I must’ve realized you’d gone,” she amends quickly. “That’s all I meant.”

“Right, yeah.” He sits up, and his hand moves up into his hair, tugging on fistfuls of it as he tries to find someplace to settle his wandering gaze.

“How’d you know I was in deep sleep?” she says, only to change the subject. Talking about something scientific tends to make him less uncomfortable. Put his mind at ease.
“Heh… uh…” His cheeks turn just a little pink.

Well, that’s not what she anticipated at all.

“What? Was I dreamin’ or something?” She doesn’t remember any dreams, but that’s not unusual. It’s rare that she can recall a dream after she’s woken up, and when she does, it’s usually a nightmare.

“Actually, that’s a myth…” As if on cue, he stops fidgeting and brings his eyes back to hers. “Lots of people think you dream during deep sleep. But, though it’s true that most dreams occur during the REM phase, that’s actually the lightest phase of the sleep cycle, when you can can be most easily woken.”

See? He always does sound more like himself when he’s explaining something. Correcting misinformation, in this case.

“Good to know,” she says. He’s still looking at her, apparently somewhat recovered from the awkwardness, so she tries again. “Was I, though?”

He lightly clears his throat, turning away again.

“I was, wasn’t I?”

“You don’t remember?” he asks, still staring at the wall, clearly getting frustrated that she won’t drop it.

“No,” she affirms, getting agitated right along with him. “What were they?”

“Erm…”

He may have hidden his face, but she can see his ears turning red.

Trying not to wince at the widespread soreness, she sits up, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t test me, Doctor. I’ll lift it straight from your head if I have to.”

He scoffs, glancing back at her. “You don’t have that sort of skill yet.”

Her jaw clenches tightly as she narrows her eyes, glaring at him. Whatever he sees on her face, it seems to be effective.

“All right, all right.” He holds his hands up. He turns toward her a bit more, and she takes her hand off his shoulder. “Well, it was… I was about to regenerate. And you were… scared. To say the least.” He looks down at his hand, tracing absently on the sheets.

Hmm. She can understand why he wouldn’t want to tell her about this. She curses her subconscious for making him see it at all. It’s not like he’s considering major plastic surgery against her wishes; it’s life and death they’re talking about. Biological processes he has no control over. She doesn’t want him to change, but she’d never want him to feel any guilt or doubt over the fact that he has to. And given how predisposed he is to blame himself, he’s no doubt feeling responsible for the fear she has, however deep beneath the surface it is.

“I s’pose I can’t lie to you, Doctor. I am scared. But I meant what I said before, about never leaving you. I know ’s just how you are, and you can’t control it.”

“It’s okay Rose,” he interrupts. “You’re human. You haven’t been brought up accustomed to that
sort of change. I wouldn’t expect you to ever embrace it fully.”

She places a hand over his, compelling him to look up at her.

“Maybe not. But I know what to expect now. We’ve been through it once together, and we can do it again. I’m not goin’ anywhere. Not ever.” She squeezes his hand, searching for him in the increased contact. Tries to funnel all her sincerity into the direct line. His eyelids flutter shut with a sharp intake of breath, his hand clenches halfway into a fist beneath her hand.

When he opens them again, it’s with a hint of a smile.

“I believe you.” He turns his palm around so he can hold her hand properly. But now that she can just barely sense him at the edge of her mind, she can tell there’s still something troubling him.

“Was that all?” she asks.

He pauses too long.

“Yeah.” He nods, breaking eye contact again.

She concentrates a little harder on the superficial emotions she’s getting from him. Not just troubled, but slightly nervous, now.

“Liar,” she accuses.

With a quick glance down to their hands, he pulls his arm away, too fast for her to stop him.

“What else?” she asks. She reaches for his arm, but he rolls away before she can grab hold. She dives for it again, but he turns around, swinging his legs off the bed like he’s about to get up altogether.

“Oi!” She throws her arms around him, clinging onto his stomach to hold him fast. But the sudden exertion makes the smarting ache in her muscles return with a vengeance. “Ow,” she whispers, hoping he doesn’t hear.

“Are you hurt?” he asks quietly, looking over his shoulder but not fighting her hold on him.

“Really sore,” she admits.

“Right,” he shakes his head, like he should’ve guessed. “A high voltage current can cause intense forced muscle contractions. That can lead to some severe delayed-onset soreness. I’ve got something in my pocket, if you’ll let me get to it.” He nods down to where her arms are blocking his access.

“I will. And I’ll take it. But only after you tell me,” she insists.

He sighs. “You don’t remember any of them?”

“They? Plural?”

“Oh, blimey.” He wipes a hand down his face.

“How many were there?”

He doesn’t answer.
She exhales sharply, and it’s almost a growl.

“Four,” he admits.

“Four!!!” she repeats, shocked. She slaps a hand over her forehead, as though she can hide behind it. In doing so, she forgets she was supposed to be holding on. But he doesn’t get up. He turns around, swinging his legs back up onto the bed, lying beside her again.

“Rose, don’t be embarrassed.” He rubs her arm gently. “It’s like I said. I was right there, it’s only natural you had a few dreams about me. I did warn you.”

“Yeah, I know.” She sighs. “Just, tell me what they were, okay? I have a right to know don’t I? Seeing as how you saw them?”

“Yes. You do. You’re right.”

“Were they all bad?” she asks, worried.

“No, no,” he rushes out, and she breathes just a little easier. She never would have agreed to the arrangement if she’d known it would end up causing him this much stress.

He takes a deep breath.

“There was one where you… that is, I… asked you to marry me.”

Rose looks down at the sheets, mortified. All her blood rushes into her head. This is what he really didn’t want to tell her, why he’s ready to spring off the bed right now.

There was that one image in the timeline: a vague possibility, at least, that he may consider a proposal in one future. It must be what triggered the dream. But it’s so early in their tenuous relationship right now, she never would have brought up something like this consciously. Asking for trouble, that is. Especially with someone as panicky about commitment as the Doctor.

Any second, she expects there to be skid marks on the bed where the Doctor used to be.

He can barely handle her telling him she missed him, let alone fantasising about marrying him.

Christ.

“Doctor, listen,” Rose scrambles to come up with an explanation. He hasn’t taken off yet, so maybe she still has a chance. “I think that’s just because of, y’know, what we saw… I’m not… I mean… I don’t want… I don’t think it means anything –”

“It’s all right, Rose,” he says, touching her arm again. It sounds oddly reassuring, and free of panic. She looks up at him, expecting to find terror in his eyes. But there is none. He only looks concerned about her. “It was a nice dream.”

He smiles. Actually smiles.

What is going on here?

“It was?” she asks, dumbfounded.

“Yeah.” He shrugs a little, like it’s no big deal. “And I won’t pretend it hasn’t been on my mind, too, since… you know.”
She just stares at him for a moment, at a loss for words.

“Oh... kay.” She chuckles breathily, trying to contain her embarrassment before he can feel it too intensely. Still convinced he’s playing up his comfort level to make her feel better, she changes the subject as quickly as she can. “Good. Thanks. What’re the others?”

“Well, there was one you and I got in an argument. We went somewhere dangerous; I don’t even know where. You must have gone against my instructions and risked your life, because I was angry. So angry I stormed off. You went searching for me on the ship, but couldn’t find me.”

Rose is silent for a moment, taking that in.

“That… I can actually see happenin’,” she admits.

“You should know, though, Rose, I wouldn’t do that.”

“You have done that.”

It’s a low blow, and she knows it. But it was mere months ago he would disappear in the depths of the TARDIS for hours on end, and she never knew if it was to avoid seeing her, or simply because he wanted time to himself, or perhaps had secret work to do. Was always too afraid to ask. It was only right that he needed his own space. She did live with him, after all, and they weren’t in a committed relationship.

Still, her heart ached the whole time, every time. She always missed him dreadfully, and couldn’t stop wondering whether there was something specific she’d done wrong. Or if her only sin was getting too attached.

“Not anymore. Not ever,” he insists, shaking his head. “There’s no argument that would make me run away from you now. Not even within the TARDIS.” He scoots a bit closer and takes her hand, his eyes boring into hers.

He’s serious, and she’s rendered speechless again.

Rose has known for some time that her (former) mortality weighs heavily on him. So heavily that he wouldn’t allow himself to get closer than arm’s length. Not just to her: to anyone. But she can’t believe how far he’s come in the span of a week. Being able to use his mind to its fullest potential, to interact with another person on a deeper level, has helped him immensely, she knows that. But now that so much worry about her lifespan has been lifted, too? He’s almost a completely different person. Rose is suddenly flooded with sorrow that the Doctor had to live that restricted life for so long. Isolated and repressed. He deserves so much more.

Unable to find any appropriate words, she leans in for a kiss, thanking him with her lips instead.

He grins, evidently satisfied with her choice of response.

“All right then, what’s the last one?” She feels ready for it at this point. She can’t imagine anything worse than the proposal one. At least not on his end. If that didn’t send him running, she isn’t sure what else could.

But the Doctor blushes again. Drops her hand in favour of rubbing the side of his neck compulsively. And once again, he refuses to look at her. His eyes wander around the room instead, as though searching the structure for a good enough lie to cover up the truth.

“Er...”
“Doctor.”

“Listen, can we just… forget about the last one? It was nothing.. it’s not important.” He screws his eyes shut, running a hand through his hair aggressively.

Rose grows even more suspicious. She clamps her hand around his arm, forcing his attention back to her. Ready to pull it out of him by force if she has to. He claims she isn’t skilled enough yet, but she’s surprised him a lot lately. Perhaps he doesn’t quite know what all she’s capable of.

“What was it?”

“Rose, please. Can we just forget it?”

“Doctor, if it’s that bad, you’re gonna end up thinkin’ about it later anyway. I’m gonna find out. Let’s just get it over with, yeah?”

He looks away from her again, focusing on anything and everything except her face.

“I was, er… you were…”

Rose’s stomach is in a knot. What could he possibly not want to tell her so badly? Worse than a wedding? What other horrors are hidden in her subconscious that she’s unaware of?

“Your mouth was, erm…” He nods down, but the direction is somewhat ambiguous.

“What?”

“Blimey, Rose, don’t make me say it.” He finally looks up at her again.

It takes her a few seconds of staring at him before it finally clicks.

“Ohh, you mean?” She nods down roughly to his crotch area.

“Yes.” He says it so reluctantly, like he’s ordering his own execution with the single syllable.

She’s a bit surprised at herself when she starts laughing. But the ridiculousness of it combined with her sense of relief makes it hard not to.

“’S that really it?” she asks.

“What d’you mean?” he asks in a high-pitched voice. His eyebrows pinched together like he’s offended she thinks it’s funny.

“You had me thinking I murdered you.”

He just barely breathes out a little ‘huh,’ flopping softly onto his back. Equal parts relieved and confused, he stares up at the ceiling for a long moment before turning his head.

“So it’s not a big deal?”

“Not to me.” She shakes her head. “I mean, I wish you hadn’t seen it, if I’m honest. But, it’s not the first time I’ve had a dream like that. You know that.”

“I know that?” he asks incredulously. The look on his face makes her think that, somehow, he did not know that.
When will he bloody learn?

“Doctor, you know I’ve fancied you for a long time now. And I mean come on, we’ve shagged now. Several times. Why’s it a problem?”

“No, it’s not. A problem.” He stares at her, searching her face like he’s trying to decide whether she’s being sincere. “I just didn’t... want you to think I was... I dunno. Some sort of pervert.”

Only he could take someone else’s dream and give himself a guilt complex over it.

“Doctor, it was my dream, not yours. ‘Sides, you’re the furthest thing from a pervert. For a long time, I didn’t think you even did the whole... sex thing. I was convinced you didn’t.”

“Well, I don’t,” he admits. He turns onto his side again, facing her properly. “Not usually. It’s rare that I experience this particular kind of... attraction to someone. I’ve lived for nine hundred years but I can count the number of partners I’ve had on one hand.”

“Sounds about right.” She grins, not at all surprised. The uncharacteristic confession is another sign he’s finally relaxing about it.

But she reconsiders the premise for a moment. She doesn’t remember this specific dream, but it’s not the first of its kind. Perhaps part of the reason he was embarrassed is because it’s something he secretly wants.

“Is it... something you’re interested in, though?” she asks, keeping her tone as casual as she can.

“Hmm?”

She glances south again, raising her eyebrows suggestively.

“Oh. Er...” he looks away again, fidgeting with the sheet. “No.”

“No?” she counters, surprised.

“I mean, not that I wouldn’t... I’ve just... I’ve never thought about it.” She swears she can see him sweating. She thought he’d get less uncomfortable talking about this sort of thing after they’d broken the tension, but it doesn’t seem to have improved yet. She wonders if it’s inexperience, shame, or some other factor.

“Never?”

“Have you?”

Clever, turning it back on her.

“Well,” she shrugs. “You did it for me.” Memories of that afternoon in the cave swim through her head, and she’s distracted by them for a moment. “Really well,” she admits, quieter. “I have been thinking about returning the favour.”

He’s speechless for a moment. When he finally says something, he speaks slowly, like he’s choosing his words carefully.

“I would... not... object to that.”

Rose resists the urge to roll her eyes. Are they talking about a blow job or a business deal?
“Don’t sound so excited.”

“Well, it’s just… I’ve never had anyone…” he gestures awkwardly with his hands. “Do that. Or done it to anyone else, before you.”

“What, never?”

He shakes his head. “It’s not like I wasn’t familiar with the concept.” Well, obviously. “Humans aren’t the only ones in the universe that do it. Lots of species do. Just, erm… not Gallifreyans. They were rather traditional. Everything we’ve been doing is… perfect. I didn’t feel the need to ask for any more. But when you expressed interest the other day, I was more than happy to oblige.”

“You were awfully good at it to have never done it,” she accuses.

“Well,” he tilts his head to the side, clearly taking that as a compliment. “I’m quite familiar with the anatomy.”

The way he talks about these things with such clinical professionalism never ceases to amaze her.

“So you’re not interested.” She phrases it as a statement, rather than a question.

She admits, it’s a first for a bloke. But the Doctor is unlike most blokes she’s known in many respects, so it’s not terribly surprising. But he didn’t need much prompting to do it for her, so she assumed he was familiar it. Though, she supposes familiarity with a concept doesn’t necessarily equate to experience with it. And though she hates to admit it, he’s always been a fast learner. And his patience and attentiveness must have helped, too.

Damn it, she’s getting a bit flustered just thinking about it.

“Should I be?” he asks.

She raises an eyebrow, surprised how flirtatious he’d made the question sound. He does know how to turn it on, when he wants to.

“You know where to find me if you change your mind,” she says, hoping her feigning disinterest will encourage him.

He’s silent, eyes roaming over her body as he mulls it over. But by the looks of it, he’s close to changing it already.

Worked like a charm.

She changes the subject, only to tease him further. It feels like he’s always had the upper hand in their physical relationship up until this point. She’d like to turn the tables a bit.

“All right, your turn,” she says.

“What?” He blinks as he shifts his gaze back to her face, coming out of a trance.

“Now you’ve got to tell me something I don’t know.”

“What?”

“You got to see four of my dreams. ‘S only fair.”

He sighs, clenching his jaw. He does hate when she’s right.
“Fair enough.”

He chews on the inside of his cheek with a pronounced grimace. She gives him a minute to think of something.

“A few days ago, you asked if you’d ever been ‘the cloud.’ So to speak. If I’d ever felt something from you before I knew what was happening, telepathically.” He gestures between their heads.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I said I had, but I didn’t say what.”

Rose had completely forgotten about that. She’s already satisfied with the confession he’s chosen, before he’s even made it.

“What was it?”

“Well, one night, we had just gotten back from Gharaqib.”

“Where?” The name rings a bit of a bell, but she can’t place it.

“The king with the watch.”

“Ohh, the night you spilt your tea everywhere!” He was acting weird for days after that. She had chalked it up to their snog session in the cupboard, but always suspected something else had happened.

“I was making tea, and I started to feel… well. I don’t want to presume what you were up to, but I became very… excited… very quickly. So much so, actually, that I… solved the problem right there in the kitchen.”

“Oh my god,” she covers her mouth and giggles. “You didn’t.”

He nods. “It scared the daylights out of me. I had no idea what came over me.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, trying to fight back her laughter. Before the other night, she never considered the possibility he touched himself. It certainly wasn’t something she considered as a cause for his strange behaviour that week.

“Sorry for turning you on so much and not following through,” he says. Something she never thought she’d hear him say.

“You’ve made up for it.” She grins, and he does too.

She likes this. Being honest with each other. It’s so different from their usual routine, it’s as refreshing as it is comforting. Another tangible marker of how much has changed since they arrived here.

Suddenly, her stomach growls audibly.

“Hungry?” the Doctor asks.

“Bloody starved.”

“I could eat.” He agrees, nodding. “Let’s go, then.” He nods toward the door.
She moves to climb off the bed, but groans when the movement brings a fresh round of pain. She sits on the edge, dreading standing up.

The Doctor gasps. “Right!” He digs into his pocket and pulls out a bottle. He pops off the cap and tips the bottle onto his palm, until a familiar small white pill with a large ‘T’ falls onto his palm. He holds it out to her.

The Doctor’s special pain reliever.

He’s only ever offered it when something’s gone wrong and she’s been injured, but it works like magic. Better than any of the over the counter stuff she keeps stashed in her room. Lasts longer, too. He’d explained early on it carried no risk of dependency, and it’s never given her any apparent side effects, so she doesn’t hesitate to take it.

She does, however, hesitate to swallow it dry.

“Could do with some water, though.”

“Stay right there.” He stuffs the bottle back in his pocket, and leaps off the bed. He runs into the adjacent loo, and returns a few moments later with a small paper cup of water in his hand.

“Always prepared,” she says, before popping the pill in her mouth and gulping down some of the water.

“Always,” he agrees with a smile.

Rose sits there for a few moments, knowing the effects will kick in quickly. Something about the compound being absorbed through the stomach lining.

Before she realises what he’s doing, the Doctor walks up to the bed, her discarded clothes from the night before bundled in his hands. He holds them out to her.

“I could’ve got that,” she says, taking them gratefully.

“I know,” he says with a nod. After a brief search for his own shirt, he deftly buttons it up. “Just going to freshen up a bit while you get dressed.” He heads back into the loo. Rose has no idea what he means by ‘freshen up,’ but figures she’ll find out soon enough.

She’s only just pulled on her shirt and gotten to her feet when he emerges.

The only real difference she detects is that his previously wild, fluffy hair is now damp and freshly styled. It’s only then that she recalls Kalei and Kairi’s teasing from the other day, and how uncomfortable it made the Doctor. It makes sense he’d not want to repeat that incident.

Running a hand through her own hair, it’s as chaotic as she feared. Bound to bring more jokes this morning. She goes for her suitcase and reaches down to grab a couple hair ties, pulling her hair into a bun.

That dose of medicine is definitely already working.

More of her belongings are scattered between the room and the loo than she thought, and she realises she may as well pack them up now so they don’t have to make another trip. But it doesn’t take longer than a few minutes with the Doctor’s help.

They take the sheets and blankets off the bed and fold them up on the edge. They both assume their
hosts will want to wash them before any future visitor uses the room.

“We can come back here, right?” Rose asks, stopping in the doorway. A pang of sadness cuts through her as she stares back into the empty room. Their stay here has been a dream vacation like she’s never had. Almost a honeymoon. And she can’t help fearing once they’re back in the TARDIS, back to their usual routine, the Doctor will fall back into old habits. Avoid sleeping in the same bed, pretend he’s not attracted to her, push her away. That’s his M.O.

“Of course,” the Doctor says, darkening his specs into shades with the sonic. He perches them on his nose, picks up her suitcase in one hand, then holds out the other for her to take. “Whenever you want.”

Butterflies flutter happily in her stomach.

Maybe that was his M.O.

The Doctor who used to push her away would have replied differently. “I suppose we could, but why would you want to? There’s so many planets you haven’t seen yet.” She can just hear him now, listing off all the places they could go instead. Trying to mark off as many planets off his list as he can, trying to beat the timer he was convinced was following him around. Counting down the seconds until she was gone.

Rose knows the Doctor’s powerful, intrinsic sense of time will always be a part of him. But perhaps now it can finally stop haunting him.

Encouraged, she takes his hand and lets him lead the way along the pier.

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Rose hasn’t eaten so much food in quite a while. The entire family seems to have been made acutely aware that Rose was hungry, because there is a distinct departure from the usual light breakfast. In addition to the bread and fruit they’re normally served, there’s fried fish and hash browns made of the assorted colourful root vegetables she’s grown accustomed too. Though it’s delicious, Rose is admittedly getting a little fished-out. But Kalei and his family are so visibly glad the ruki are no longer in danger, she’d never be one to complain.

Once they’re finished eating, Kalei invites them both to his room. Something to show them both, he said.

“Is something up, Kalei?” Rose asks when he quietly closes the door. It’s rare he asks for time alone with them.

“I just… wanted your advice,” he admits. “About Dakota.”

“Oh, right!” She had completely forgotten to ask when they were here yesterday. The Doctor occupying too much of her thoughts, it seems. “I’m so sorry, I completely forgot. How did it go?”

“Good. I think. I don’t know. It was great, and I had so much fun, it’s just…”

“What?”

“Nothing happened. We didn’t even plan an official second date. He just sort of said goodbye like he normally would.”

“Was there something you hoped would happen?” she asks, slightly suspicious.
“I dunno…” He starts rubbing his neck like the Doctor. Has he always done that, or has he picked up the habit from the Doctor in the few days they’ve been here?

Rose glances over to where the Doctor is standing, completely mute, and sees he’s doing the same thing.

Blokes.

“I was kinda hoping to kiss him, I guess,” Kalei finally finishes.

“Oh!” Rose shakes her head. They’re both clueless.

“I mean, he did say my hair looked cute.” Kalei says.

“Okay.” Rose smiles. “Look, ’s okay if nothing happened. Dakota is a bit shy. I wouldn’t think he wouldn’t make the first move. But you could have, right?”

“I was too nervous.”

“Understandable. I’d say to just be patient. One day it’ll feel so right you won’t be able to wait anymore. Nervous or not, it’ll just happen.”

“You think so?”

She nods. “Trust me. He really likes you.”

He drops his gaze to the floor, chucking sheepishly.

“Thanks, Rose.”

After a moment, the Doctor cuts in.

“It’s probably about time we were heading off, Kalei.”

Kalei looks up at the Doctor and sighs. He looks forlorn, but not surprised.

“I figured this was coming. You two appeared up here so suddenly, I knew it was just a matter of time before you disappeared.”

A corner of the Doctor’s mouth pulls down, taking this as an accusation. He turns to Rose, silently asking for assistance.

“It’s true, we never stay in one place too long.” Rose makes light of it, smiling at Kalei.

“Well, I won’t keep you,” says Kalei. “But I do have something for you. I had a feeling you’d be leaving us soon, since the ruki have recovered.” He walks over to his desk and opens up a drawer.

While he searches inside of it, the Doctor closes the distance between him and Rose.

Kalei retrieves what he was looking for. He walks back to the two of them, and hands a small wooden object to the Doctor, then another to Rose.

Rose turns it over in her hand. It’s a small carving of a wolf.

It’s not on a necklace, but it’s similar to the carving he made for Dakota. It’s made from lighter wood, emulating a snowy wolf. Its fur is thick, resembling a lion’s mane around its neck. Dakota’s was howling and fairly still, but hers is clearly in motion; captured in mid-stride. It’s focused, its
ears raised and vigilant, as though stalking its prey. But its eyes are curiously gentle, as though it would never actually cause any harm to whatever it’s hunting. Looking for a friend, perhaps. The level of detail is astonishing.

“Blimey, it’s gorgeous,” she breathes.

Intrigued, she sneaks a peek over at the Doctor’s, and it, too, is different from the other two. Fashioned from a pecan-coloured wood, with a thinner coat that makes the wolf appear lankier than the others. Though it’s seated, its glare is predatory, a few of its sharp teeth just slightly bared beneath a curled upper lip. The hairs behind its neck stand ominously vertical. Its front claws dig into ground that isn’t there, ready to leap off its haunches and strike if provoked.

Like a guard dog.

She’d never thought of the Doctor that way, but now that she thinks of it…

Intelligent. Always on alert. Fiercely protective. Only attacks when the safety of its loved ones is threatened. It’s very him.

“Thank you, Kalei,” the Doctor adds, glancing over at hers, too. “They’re both brilliant.”

“You’re welcome.”

Rose throws her arms around Kalei, both in gratitude and as a farewell.

“They’re yours, as long as you promise to come back and visit,” he says as he eases out of the hug. “Preferably before the end of my generation,” he adds, a joke intended only for the Doctor.

The Doctor smirks, with an exhale that might be interpreted as a chuckle.

“We’ll do our best.”

“Bring it in.” Kalei holds his arms open for the Doctor too.

“No, no, I’m –” the Doctor holds up his hands, intending to decline.

Kalei will have none of it, and pulls him in for a hug anyway. By the looks of it, it’s just as crushing as the one Kenai gave him when they arrived. She hears at least one of his vertebrae pop at some point. Kalei taps his hands on his back a couple of times before he lets him go. The Doctor offers him a smile and tries to be subtle as he rubs his back with one hand.

They’re about to leave the room when Kalei startles.

“Oh! One more thing!” He goes for his desk again, this time reaching for a different drawer. “Here,” he says, snatching something up and holding out his hand towards the Doctor. It’s a handful of small, vividly purple flowers. They look like the one the Doctor was holding the other night, that Kalei had given him for luck. “Grabbed some more for you.”

“Those good luck flowers?” Rose asks.

“Good luck?” Kalei turns to Rose, his forehead scrunching up in confusion.

Rose opens her mouth to speak, but the Doctor interrupts.

“Yes! Good luck flowers, that’s what they are.” He’s talking loudly enough that Kalei’s attempt to contest him is silenced. “Thanks Kalei!” The Doctor scoops the flower buds up out of his hand,
shoving them in the pocket of his shorts.

“Sure.” Kalei says hesitantly. He looks perturbed, but doesn’t argue with the Doctor. “Enjoy.”

Enjoy? Good luck? What on Earth are these two conspiring?

Kalei opens the door for them, but Rose holds out her arm to indicate Kalei go first.

“After you,” she says. He walks through first with a shrug, and Rose turns to the Doctor. Clutching onto his shirt, she leans up on her toes to whisper in his ear.

“What’s with the flowers?” she tries to whisper, and barely succeeds.

“I’ll explain later,” he whispers back much more successfully.

Frustrated, she’s about to insist he tell her now, when she remembers how easy it will be to extract that information from him later. She logs it away to bring up again tonight, when he’s a bit more vulnerable.

“I won’t forget,” she warns him.

“I know you won’t,” he says under his breath as he follows Kalei out the door.

Upon hearing they’re leaving, Kenai has hugs for them both too. And Kairi and Karina.

“We can’t thank you enough,” says Kenai. “Without the ruki, we’d all have been evacuating by the end of the month. Starting over on a neighbouring island. You saved us all.”

“No need to thank us,” the Doctor brushes off the compliments.

“It was no trouble,” Rose adds, more sincerely.

“Kairi, we’ve just promised your brother that we’d be back for a visit in his lifetime,” says the Doctor. “When we do, I trust your project design will have become a reality?” He looks down to her expectantly.

“I hope so.” Kairi nods, sounding more confident than she looks.

“Good. I’d like to try it out, when it’s ready.” The Doctor gives her a wink.

With that, and a basket of sweet spiced bread to last a week, they head back to the TARDIS. The Doctor carries both the basket and Rose’s suitcase, insisting it’s no trouble.

Her hands free, Rose turns her wolf charm over in her hands, still blown away by the intricacy of it.

“The writing in the cave,” she muses aloud. “The howlin’. The golden eyes. They’re because of Bad Wolf, aren’t they?”

The Doctor nods. “Not only that. I think it’s the reason any of them are aware of wolves at all.”

“You think its effects can go back that far?”

“Oh, you’re a complicated event in time and space. It must have rippled back, altered a few details of this universe here and there.”

“Like how Bad Wolf kept followin’ us around, before?”
“Exactly like that.”

They’re quiet for a few steps, both lost in thought.

“Complicated, huh?” she teases, bumping him in the arm.

“Just the right amount.” He turns to her with a smile.

“So where to next?” she asks as they reach the TARDIS.

“Actually, an idea came to me last night while you were asleep.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“You’ll see when we get there,” he says, setting her suitcase down on the grating, and the basket on the jump seat.

Rose frowns for a moment, but doesn’t let her irritation linger. Kaelondaia was a surprise, after all, and it turned out wonderfully. He might be getting better at choosing locations.

“Okay, then.”

The Doctor pops a small piece of the bread into his mouth as he starts throwing all the switches and dials and buttons necessary to depart.

“I’m just going to get changed,” he says with gusto through a mouthful of bread, just as the ship lurches on take-off. “And then I’ll take us there.”

“I will too.” She has to nearly shout to be heard over the wheezing of the engines, but she’s used to that. “Probably wash up a bit first. I haven’t since… all that…” she trails off. “Anything in particular I should wear?” she asks as she pulls out the handle on her suitcase. Can finally just roll it around now that there’s not sand everywhere.

“Nope.” He shakes his head. “Won’t need a swimsuit though, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Winter coat?” she asks.

He continues his dance around the console, guiding them through the Vortex properly.

“Nope!” he calls from the other side of the rotor. “Regular old clothes will do.”

“Kay then. Want me to put that bread away?” The kitchen is on the way to her room (usually).

“I can get that.” He comes into view again. “Meet you back here in twenty?”

“Yep!” She heads down the corridor as fast as her heavy suitcase will allow.
I FUCKING DID IT. I got an update out. I'm going to keep the notes short because I'm very tired and may be falling ill so I need to get to sleep... Hope this is somewhat worth the wait (to those who are still interested anyway). Thanks v much to Amber for staying up late to beta this. <3

Staring up at the brilliant rainbow of explosions in the sky, his arm looped through Rose’s and weeks’ worth of professional sporting events waiting for them, the Doctor should be ecstatic. He was, in fact, until a few seconds ago, when the entertainment in the sky and the asphalt beneath his trainers and Rose’s presence next to him were all overridden by his merciless time sense.

One persistent timeline tugs hard on his mind, dulling all his senses of the real world until he has no choice but to direct his attention inward.

Without Rose here to shine a light to drive them away, the images hit him full force.

Fleets of Daleks race through a dark sky, slaughtering indiscriminately.

New holes are blown in the walls separating the universes, creating vacuums into the Void.

There’s a cold, dreary beach beneath a grey sky, wind whipping through his hair as if to warn of an approaching storm.

Somewhere amidst the chaos, Rose is screaming...

The details – locations and causes and outcomes – elude him, but these vague flickers are hauntingly familiar. Like the timeline they ignored the other night. And suddenly it’s all unambiguous in one respect: this is a potential future where he and Rose are separated.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, through a thick fog that muffles the sound, the Doctor can tell fireworks are still booming in the sky. And that Rose is saying something over the ruckus.

He shakes his head, trying to dispel the nasty images from his mind before they can get any clearer. Trying to pay attention to what Rose is saying.

“Don’t you reckon, Doctor?” she asks, nudging his arm. Waiting for a response to a question he hadn’t heard.

“There’s something in the air. Something’s coming,” he says, trying but failing to shake the fog from his mind, the leaching pessimism the visions have left behind.

“Where?” she asks, searching the display of explosions in the sky for what he’s referring to.

“A storm’s approaching.” He’s trying to explain why he hasn’t been paying attention, why his mood has suddenly plummeted and he can hardly think about anything but the dread settling in his stomach. Why else would anything she asked him go unnoticed, if it weren’t for something as horrendous as a premonition of such a nightmarish timeline?
But his brain isn’t functioning properly yet, bogged down by the weight of what few glimpses he’d gotten, so he’s failing spectacularly. She’s not understanding.

“Sky looks clear to me,” Rose says in a light tone, nudging his arm again, trying to lift him out of his mood.

“No, not here. There’s something...” He’s quiet for a few moments, trying to decide just how much he wants to reveal right here in the middle of the street. Or whether he should save it all for when they’re safely out of the public eye.

“What, Doctor?”

“I saw something,” he breathes, dropping his head and squeezing his thumb and index finger into his eyes, as though it will dispel the images and noises haunting him.

Instead of asking more vague questions, Rose squeezes his hand a little tighter, nudging at the edges of his mind with hers. Asking permission to shortcut this ineffectual conversation. When they started this, he had to tear down walls for them to unite mentally, but a delicate membrane seems to be all that separates their minds now, always ready to give way at the slightest prod.

The Doctor can’t believe they hardly made it a day before his newfound optimism about their relationship – which he thought was newly immortal – was called into question. He should’ve known better.

Truthfully, he doesn’t want to show her this at all, spoil the perfect evening they were having with this insufferable negativity.

Chances are he’ll slip up while they’re connected at some point later on and divulge everything to her, but even so, he doesn’t want that to happen right now. In the middle of a crowded street where dozens of strangers could recognise him from the torch lighting ceremony, or show concern over a crying woman accompanied by an older-looking man.

He fortifies that membrane, thickening his defences just a little bit, but Rose persists through his attempts to resist.

Impulsively, he lets go of her hand.

“It’s nothing,” he says, too harshly.

Rose’s features contort into a deep frown immediately.

“Can’t be nothin’, or you’d let me see it,” she accuses.

“Just not now,” he amends, trying to soften his voice but failing. “What did you ask me?” he asks.

“It’s nothing,” she says, clearly just emulating the way he’d said it. Still, he doesn’t want to irritate her further; he deserves to be mocked right now. So he lets it drop.

“All right then,” he shrugs. “Say, where’d you get those cakes with the ball bearings? I could do with a couple more.” He looks around the street, as though there will be a vendor cart serving up the cakes like hot dogs, but of course, the search comes up empty.

“Want to go back?” he asks.

“Think they’re out,” she mutters.

“How do you know?”

“I got the last one.”

The Doctor sighs. Somehow, he thinks she’s lying.

“Rose, what’s wrong?” It’s less a question, more a demand.

“Dunno why you won’t tell me what’s goin’ on,” she answers immediately. For that at least, he’s grateful: they’ve danced around their problems for hours on end before, reached record levels of communication failure.

And he figured as much.

“I just didn’t want to spoil the night.”

“Well you have now anyway, haven’t ya?”

The Doctor runs his hand down his face. She’s right. He should’ve just been better at masking his emotions. It just took him too long to get a handle on himself after something like that. It always does. He wonders what brought it on: a decision someone made? The events of today, settling a few puzzle pieces into place that makes that particular timeline feasible? Ugh, whatever it is, he’d like to undo it. But he can’t.

Them being here at the games could be the very thing that’s sending them careening into that very timeline, but he’d never know it. There’s nothing he can do to steer them into one over the other, and the very thought is enough to send him into a spiral of panic. Maybe it’s best to loop Rose into this, after all. She might be able to soothe him. She always finds a way to do that somehow.

“Want to head back to the TARDIS?” he asks during a lull in the ongoing explosions.

“To talk?” she asks.

He takes a few deep breaths, staring back at her while the fireworks pick up again. It’s jarring, hearing the whistles and bursts and fizzling in the sky, the distant cheers, but feeling so desolate inside. Like he doesn’t even belong in this dimension right now, but he’s trapped here against his will. Rose looks just as out of place amidst the celebration: worried, her eyes shining with unshed tears and that disappointment in him that makes his stomach turn because he knows he deserves it.

When they forged this bond between them stronger, when they made this unquestionable commitment, there hadn’t been a qualification that they’d only share the positives. He knew this was going to be the reality of their connection, having to share both the good and the bad. He just thought they’d get to enjoy a little while longer in their bubble of happiness over Rose’s extended lifespan before it was violently popped.

“Okay,” he agrees, too softly to be heard over the noise. But he nods, too, so she understands what he means anyway.

Without hesitation, she takes his hand in hers again and leads him back towards the TARDIS.

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“You sure about this, Rose?” the Doctor asks when Rose insists on getting straight to it as soon as
the TARDIS doors close behind them.

“Just come out with it, Doctor,” she says, exasperated. “Bloody hell,” she adds, under her breath.
At this point she must know he can always hear her when she does that, but she doesn’t seem to
care.

Without vacillating anymore, he beckons her closer to him and touches his fingertips to her temple
(it’s still the easiest place to form a link, even if it’s possible anywhere now).

He shows her everything he’s able to, all the flickers of doom he’d seen and heard and felt. Doesn’t
bother censoring it, because she’s going to find out the lot of it eventually.

The Doctor can feel the fear seeping into her bones as she experiences it second-hand. The flipside
of this connection: she can’t hide its effect on her, either. Once she’s seen it all, he pulls his hand
back and stares down at her, watching her pained face and waiting for her eyes to open.

“What is that?” she asks, failing to mask her anxiety.


“But we’re not together,” Rose says, desperately, as though she’s asking him to fix it for her right
now.

“You could feel that, too?” he asks. It hadn’t been explicitly shown, it was merely a sense that
permeated the timeline: grief. A mind aching with loneliness.

She merely nods. It’s a moment before she speaks again, but when she does, it’s with a new, but
familiar, determination.

“That’s not gonna happen,” she insists.

“Rose, you can’t know that,” he reprimands her gently.

“Yes, I can. We won’t let it.”

The Doctor bites his tongue, taking a deep breath instead of arguing again.

“It’s like we talked about last night. We’ve beaten everything else the universe has thrown at us.
This storm approachin’, whatever it is? It can’t be worse than the one that nearly bloody killed
me.”

The Doctor lets out a morbid chuckle, though he knows that can’t possibly be true. He has to take a
moment to mull over something to say without hurting her.

“It’s just... clawing at my mind, Rose. Telling me we’re not safe yet. That we may never be.”

“How can we live our lives like that?” she asks.

“I can’t help it!” he lashes out, defensive. “That’s how I see the universe. Every waking second, I
can see what is, what was, what could be, what must not. That's the burden of a Time Lord, Rose.”

“I know!” She clenches her fists by her face, trying to rein in her frustration. “It’s not the fact you
can see it that’s upsetting, and you bloody well know that! It’s that you’re dwelling on it. What
about all those nice futures we saw, those are all just as likely, aren’t they? Maybe this one’s a
chance in a million.”
The Doctor takes a deep breath, trying to calm himself, too.

“Maybe,” he hedges. “But they tend to make themselves known once a timeline has branched off to make it possible.”

“Well...” He can tell she’s scrambling now, to find a way to cheer him up despite everything. “Maybe ‘s only possible now because I saved you. If you’d been trapped in that drawing forever...” she trails off, evidently pleased with her hypothesis. “Nothing would be possible.”

“Maybe,” he acknowledges again, but his own mind remains unconvinced.

“It’s all gonna work out,” she says, rubbing his arm.

“We just finished discussing the fact that you can’t regenerate,” the Doctor snaps, throwing up his arms so that Rose’s hand falls.

“I wasn’t dead,” she voices the thought out loud, getting it out in the open. “I was there, I could tell.”

“But that doesn’t mean –”

“Well, if I’m alive, I’m never gonna leave you, so. That’s that.”

“How can you be so cavalier about this?” he asks, genuinely baffled.

“’M not tryin’ to be cavalier. I’m scared. Especially for you. Just trying to tell you that if I have any say in it, we’re not going to get split up. That’s what I was sayin’ earlier, actually. The universe keeps trying to split us up. But it never will.”

“Never say never,” he cautions.

“I’ll do what I like,” she counters.

He can’t help but smile. That’s his Rose. Her tenacious optimism is contagious. Even though he’s resisting it with every fibre of his being, it’s starting to seep in. It’ll probably take ten conversations like this before he comes to terms with this fully, but the process has already started. After almost two years with Rose, he still doesn’t understand how she’s so positive all the time. How she’s so good at lifting him out of his lowest lows.

He opens his arms for her, and she clasps her hands in his before sinking against his chest, resting her head in the crook of his neck. He rubs his thumbs along her hands, and this time, when she offers to reignite their link again, he accepts.

It’s like his veins are suddenly flooded with a warm, liquid sedative. Her optimism and love for him instantly numb his anxiety. She reminds him of what they’d seen the previous night: the rings in his hand, the renovated TARDIS probably decades in the future. As long as she’s here in his mind, her sheer determination to not let this frightening future happen seems like enough to prevent it. Rose Tyler has single-handedly altered the course of history twice now; he really shouldn’t put it past her to do it again.

“We’ve got more games to see, Rose reminds him. Maybe we can keep the TARDIS right here for a while. Harder for trouble to find us if we stay put, I reckon.

Fine with me.
The Doctor is tempted to guide them into the Vortex and stay there indefinitely, letting whatever storm this is pass them by unnoticed.

*Oh, rubbish,* pipes Rose. *You’d be bored in a week.*

*Oi,* he retorts gracelessly, *would not. Long as you’re there.*

*You’re sweet.*

*Well.*

He pauses, letting her compliment wash over him. She always seems to like it when he says anything remotely romantic. He should really try to do it more.

*Still,* he adds. *I’m all right with keeping things quiet for a bit.*

*Me, too.*

Want to head to bed? he asks.

*Mine or yours?*

*Mine.* He shrugs. *If you want.*

*I do.*

They hold hands down the corridor, only parting ways when Rose tells him she needs to wash up and get her pyjamas. Luckily, the TARDIS has placed their rooms directly across from one another for their convenience.

The Doctor heads into his room, crumpling to the floor to wrestle off his shoes before peeling off his suit. Down to just his shirt and boxers, he heads into his en suite to brush his teeth, and wonders whether he shouldn’t just take a shower. Nice and fresh for Rose. Glancing into his spacious shower, his gaze catches on various items he doesn’t recognise. Approaching slowly, he sees three unfamiliar soaps, new shampoo and conditioner bottles on the shelf next to his products, and a pink razor that he definitely doesn’t own on the soap ledge.

Oh, blimey.

He turns around, scanning the sink area. Two toothbrushes are perched in his holder. He opens the drawer containing his toothpaste to find two different kinds inside.

Mentally berating the TARDIS, he calls for Rose as he heads back through the door to go and find her before she goes hunting for her missing things. This ship has never been subtle, and does have a tendency for audacity, but it never fails to shock him whenever she pulls these sort of stunts.

He nearly runs into Rose in the doorway to his room.

“Rose,” he repeats, quieter. “The TARDIS, she –”

“Moved my things?” she finishes.

He nods, and points his thumb back towards the loo attached to his room.

“If you’re not ready for that, I will absolutely have a talk with her and make sure –”
“Are you?” she asks.

“I...” he stumbles over his tongue, not expecting her to turn the question back on him. “I don’t mind it.” He shakes his head, cringing at how that must sound to her.

“I’ll probably just keep it, then, if that’s okay. I mean, you did invite me to stay the night, didn’t you?”

“I did,” he nods with enthusiasm, trying to recover. “Yes.”

“Good.” She pinches his bum as she walks past him towards the bathroom.

He walks in slowly after her. She squirts toothpaste onto her toothbrush without seeming like this arrangement is odd, and he watches her for a moment while he contemplates whether he should still take a shower.

“D’you nee’ the shink?” She gestures down to it, her mouth dripping with green froth.

“No, I, er... no.”

Well, if anything will show her he’s actually okay with this, this might.

He pulls off his shirt and pushes off his boxers, enjoying the way Rose’s mouth falls open when she sees him suddenly naked in the mirror.

She turns around, as though checking if the mirror had deceived her.

“What’re y’doin’?” she mumbles through her toothbrush.

“Quick shower.” He reaches around her to collect his own toothbrush, then for the toothpaste and squeezes some on it and quickly steps into the shower and closes the curtain behind himself. Aiming for efficiency, he starts brushing even as he turns the water on and adjusts the temperature for something comfortable. Then something occurs to him.

“What’re y’doin’?” she mumbles through her toothbrush.

“Want to join?” he asks, poking his head around the curtain.

She shakes her head.

“took one before we left.”

It feels a bit too soon for that, anyway. She’s probably not in a very sexy mood, after what just happened. He certainly isn’t. Hopefully someday, though.

He’s done in a short two minutes, and she’s still washing her face when he emerges. He wraps a towel around the good bits and replaces his toothbrush before heading back to his room to get some fresh clothes, not particularly caring if he drips all over the floor. He gets a fresh pair of underwear and a t-shirt for the night, and rubs his towel over his head aggressively to try to dry it as best as he can. Sleeping with wet hair will surely leave him with the worst bedhead imaginable in the morning, but he can always wet it again tomorrow to set it straight.

He hops up onto his bed, making sure to leave plenty of room to one side. He tends to sleep near the middle, but he’d generally slept on the left side of the bed at the hut, so he does the same tonight. He wonders if Rose likes the right naturally, or has a preference at all.

It’s quiet in his room as he waits for her to join him. Aside from the sound of the faucet and Rose tinkering about in there, a bit too quiet. He finds himself missing the constant push and pull of the
tide, the gentle slap and spray of water against the wood beneath the hut. He suddenly wishes they were still back there now. He was starting to feel oddly safe there.

Rose has never slept in the Doctor’s room before. Each time they’ve wound up in the same bed before, it was either someplace outside the TARDIS they’d accepted hospitality that couldn’t manage to secure them separate beds, or in Rose’s room when she’d asked him to stay after a harrowing day or another. It doesn’t feel wrong though, or premature, her staying here tonight. The thought of always having her getting ready for bed in the loo attached to his bedroom, always settling under his covers, never again having to say goodnight to her in the hallway or the console room and miss her until morning... it’s a brilliant thought.

Well, he supposes the problem of their mismatched sleep requirements remains. They’ll still be more or less apart while she’s sleeping three or four times more often than he is. But if he does start to miss her while he’s mucking about in the middle of the night, he can still climb into bed and be comforted by her presence. It’s no longer off-limits.

The rules for their relationship have changed so quickly it makes him dizzy to think about it.

Rose emerges from the loo and hurries over to the bed, hopping up next to him with what he thinks is some excitement.

The first thing she does is reach for his face, cradling his cheek in her hand as she leans down to press her lips to his. It only takes a moment for them to reconstruct the bridge between their minds, a second to wordlessly agree on where they’d like to relax.

When he opens his eyes, he’s greeted by warm sunlight and familiar foliage. Rose pulls back and drops her hand from his face, opting to take his hand in hers instead as they both breathe a little easier in this place.

The divine golden light that consumed the garden the previous night has faded, confirming his theory the effects of Bad Wolf on her psyche were only temporary.

While Rose is wearing the same thing she is in reality – a pair of pink pyjamas, when the Doctor glances down he finds himself fully outfitted in his brown suit, tie and everything.

“I don’t wear this all the time, you know,” he complains, gesturing to the clothes.

“You do, though,” she teases, grinning up at him. “Before this week, I think there’ve been, like, five times I’ve ever seen you not wearin’ it.”

“Well, it’s not what I’m wearing now, is it?”

“Suppose not,” she admits. “I reckon it’s just my brain’s default picture of you.” After a moment of thought, she closes her eyes, her forehead scrunching up in concentration.

By the time she opens them again, his suit has been swapped for the clothes he’d just put on: dark blue boxers and a plain, white t-shirt.

“I was only teasing,” he says.

“I know. Still good practice, though.” She shrugs.

A proud grin spreads across his face. She’s a natural at this.

“Nicely done.”
“C’mon,” she says, tugging his hand. “Haven’t been this way yet.”

She leads him down a colourful cobblestone path that extends for a few dozen feet before winding slowly up a hill. Though it zig-zags back and forth like switchbacks on a mountain trail, it’s neither steep nor strenuous. Flowers line the trail as it ascends, some stemming directly from the rich green grass, others popping out from tall bushes. They maintain a leisurely pace, savouring the opportunity to escape from reality and admire the scenery. Relax. As the elevation gently climbs, the flora slowly changes colours. Red nearest the bottom, shifting through species from orange to yellow to green... all the way to purple when they near the top.

A quaint slatted bench lined with wrought iron greets them when they reach the summit, an invitation to admire the view below. There’s a small, aged wooden sign, too, presumably there to inform visitors of the hill’s name. But there’s only nonsense written on it, an assortment of letters that don’t form words in any language carved and painted into the wood.

“How comes it doesn’t have the right name?” Rose asks, nodding to the sign.

“Well, you don’t remember it,” he explains softly. “I can only enhance memories that have faded. I can’t recall things you forgot entirely, or never saw. Things like books and signs look authentic from a distance, but up close, they’re either empty or gibberish. I can insert something I think is appropriate, though, if you’d like.”

Rose doesn’t respond aloud, but seems agreeable to such a gesture.

Without being prompted further, he changes it to read ‘Rainbow Crest.’

“Fitting.” She smiles.

The Doctor holds out his arm, indicating she sit down. The view of the garden must be spectacular from up here; he can imagine why Rose wanted them to come this way.

But Rose shakes her head. “C’mere,” she tugs on his arm. “I wanna show you something first.”

She leads him toward couple of paths that lead off from the top of the hill, to a few special, fenced-off trees and bushes with their own signs and descriptions. But the scenery quickly starts to warp and fade away as it becomes clear Rose has something else to show him here. The path beneath them is replaced by familiar metal grating, the natural green of plants is replaced by the soft green glow of the time rotor.

They’re inside the TARDIS.

“The Doctor always said the TARDIS was telepathic,” a younger Rose explains to a sceptical Mickey. “This thing is alive,” she gestures emphatically to the console. “It can listen.”

“Well, it’s not listenin’ now, is it?” Mickey retorts, un convinced.

When was this? The Doctor racks his brain for when this conversation might have taken place. Mickey did not travel with them for very long.

“We need to get inside it,” Rose insists. “Last time I saw you, with the Slitheen, this middle bit opened, and there was this light, and the Doctor said it was the heart of the TARDIS. If we can open it, I can make contact. I can tell it what to do.”

Yes. Rose.
Startled, the Doctor glances around the TARDIS to find the source of the encouragement, but quickly realises no one had spoken. It was the TARDIS herself, quietly spurring Rose on.

*Oh.*

The Doctor’s hearts nearly come to a stop. The Doctor isn’t here. Or, he *wasn’t* here. Wasn’t originally present in this memory. As this conversation was taking place, the Doctor was aboard Satellite Five, facing certain death by a fleet of Daleks 200,000 years in the future.

Rose isn’t reacting very strongly to having heard the TARDIS in her mind; she hadn’t heard it the same way he had. To her, it was merely a sense in her mind, calling her to connect, rather than the concrete words that she could interpret.

“Rose,” Mickey interrupts his and past-Rose’s thoughts.

“Mmm?” Rose answers.

She’s formulating a way to execute this plan already, staring down the console without paying Mickey much attention.

“If you go back, you're going to die.”

“That's a risk I've got to take, because there's nothing left for me here.”

“Nothing?” Mickey asks, as surprised as he is wounded.

“No.” Past-Rose is dead set on it.

“Okay,” Mickey concedes. “If that's what you think, let's get this thing open.”

Memories blur a bit from there, as Rose drags the Doctor forward through time to a point when Mickey is no longer with her in the TARDIS.

Instead, he’s behind the wheel of a hulk of a yellow truck just outside the doors. A thick chain connects its rear bumper to a panel of the console; its diesel engine roars from outside as Rose and Jackie shout for him to go faster. Tires squeal and metal creaks and groans under the magnificent force until...

The panel explodes from its place on the console, yanked outside the TARDIS along with the chain attached to it.

The blinding golden light emanating from the mutilated panel calls to her again... *Rose...*

She’s helpless to turn away from it, and after merely a few seconds of staring into the heart of the TARDIS, Rose is consumed by it. The TARDIS doors slam closed of their own accord as the Bad Wolf is born.

The Doctor doesn’t have any time to process what he’s just seen before another, entirely different vivid memory takes its place.

They’re back on Tarohanda, standing just outside Kalei and his family’s home as rain pours in buckets down on the sand, thunder rolling deafeningly around his ears.

A chill runs down his spine as the Doctor realises precisely which moment in their timeline this is. The Doctor is just about to have the revelation that the storm is moving too quickly, to turn to Rose
and to try to tell her they need to go back inside.

But he’s viewing this memory from a different perspective now. Without context of his own, the Doctor would never know that he was present here with Rose at all. She’s not looking at him, staring instead straight into the storm, eyes fixated on the sea as the lightning strikes illuminate the dark sky just off the coast.

_Rose..._ the storm itself seems to call her as the rain falls ever harder, the strikes come ever closer.

There’s a pull deep in her gut, a force she can’t overcome, an instinct as powerful as the one to flee from death.

And so she takes off running through the sand, without so much as bothering to glance over at the Doctor. In this moment, it’s as if he doesn’t exist, the only thing that matters is running in the direction of this call...

_Rose...

As quickly as he’d been sucked into these memories, he’s spat back out of them, the stormy afternoon shrinking out of existence as the garden materialises in front of him again.

He buckles at the waist as he catches his breath, taking in everything he’d just witnessed.

No matter how bad it’s gotten, Bad Wolf has always protected Rose. Kept the two of them together, even when time and space and Daleks have tried to rip them apart. Even when listening to Bad Wolf’s ethereal call has seemed too dangerous, directly put Rose in the path of death, even, it’s always been to preserve what they have now. The chance of a future together.

_The storm he saw approaching earlier? They’ll stick that out together, too._ That’s what Rose was trying to tell him by showing him all this. Bad Wolf was created to get Rose back to him. She wouldn’t have let them get separated. There’s been so much proof of that up until this point.

If she needs to, she will tear apart universes to keep them together.

It’s mythical. Totally against science and logic and everything he believes in. Well, everything except one thing. He believes in Rose Tyler. More than anything. And the Bad Wolf is an impossible concoction of Rose’s determination combined with the TARDIS’ immense power, and both of their concern for him. With that kind of potency, how could she leave any stone unturned? Why go through all that trouble and then, even with full knowledge of all potential futures, merely prolong the inevitable?

He believes in Rose Tyler. He trusts the TARDIS. And he’s suddenly overflowing with faith.

Rather than spoiling such an experience with words, he closes the short distance between them and kisses her soundly. A slow kiss filled with such emotion that they both struggle to hold back tears.

“Please don’t leave me.” He pleads between kisses. The downside of Rose and the TARDIS giving him this kind of hope is that it makes him ever more worried he’ll be crushed if he holds onto it.

“Won’t. Can’t.”

They hold one another like they’re about to lose one another forever, tightly and with an edge of possessiveness. But their lips brush together like they’re made of the most fragile materials in the universe, slow and gentle and savouring one another. Both terrified these promises will be broken, it takes a long while of kissing and reassurance before their passion calms and they break away.
“Thank you, Rose.” His forehead rests on hers.

“C’mon, let’s sit.”

Rose leads him to the bench, and they sit huddled closely together in the centre of it, his arm around her shoulders, her resting her head on his chest. They’re quiet for a few minutes, basking in the shared sense of peace their closeness brings as they admire the view.

It is indeed spectacular. They can see the whole garden from here. Some of it is familiar: the pagoda and cherry trees by the pond, the Roman staircase and courtyard of lavenders, the archway of roses leading to a red and pink garden. Other parts they have yet to explore. But they’ve got time to see it all. Centuries of it, he hopes.

But after enough time of staring out at the abundance of flowers in the garden, it reminds Rose of something.

“Those flowers Kalei kept givin’ you, what were they?” she asks, lifting her head.

The Doctor lets out a grumbling sigh.

“I told you I’d remember.”

“I know.” He doesn’t bother putting it off. “The Kaelondaians use them as aphrodisiacs,” he admits, bracing himself for whatever her reaction may be.

“Sounds harmless,” she says.

Huh.

“Not necessarily,” he says. If nothing else, trying to validate his hesitance to confess the truth. “There’s no way to be certain, but it’s safe to assume it’s not like the aphrodisiacs one might find on Earth.”

“How d’you mean?”

“Any that exist on Earth are extremely mild. But chemicals in the universe exist that can bring about much more intense symptoms. And since the Kaelondians are neither human nor Gallifreyan, I have no idea how it may affect either of our biology. It might do nothing; or affect one or both of us strongly.”

“What do you mean ‘strongly’?”

“Well, some can affect the nervous system, heightening sensitivity. Others act on the brain, artificially elevating libido to unnatural levels. And it can take a long time to wear off. I’d have to run some tests, determine the active compounds to be certain.”

“D’you want to run tests?” she asks.

What?

“Do you want me to?” he asks, surprised.

She shrugs. “I dunno. ‘S long as it’s not dangerous, could be fun.”

“Well, I don’t think we need flowers to have fun.” He scoffs, a little indignant.
“True. We don’t.” Her tone is strangely playful. Almost flirtatious.

The Doctor gasps as Rose tries to communicate just how much she believes that. He turns to her, heat trickling through his body as desire sneaks up on them both in a rush.

While he’s still trying to catch up to her level, she lifts up to kiss him. After the stressful day they’ve had (especially one he’d intended to be fairly stress-free), it feels so good to be intimate again that it escalates quickly from there. Rose climbs onto his lap, hands wander, hips rock together. Both of them finding the bright sunlight and wooden park bench less than ideal for what they have planned, they ease their way out of the garden and back to the Doctor’s bed. Still, their link remains focused on sensation, all but oblivious to the world that exists outside one another.

Before he knows it, they’re both shirtless and Rose is lying on top of him, nibbling on neck as she grinds gently against him. It doesn’t matter much there’s still two layers of clothes between them, his physiology is screaming with impatience for release in a short matter of minutes. It helps that she knows the sensitive spots on his neck and that he can feel every little zing of friction that she can (this particular activity is undeniably more effective for her than it is for him). But even if she weren’t touching him at all, he thinks it might be just as effective. She’s become something of an expert at knowing how to turn him on from the inside out.

As much as he’d like to continue in the fashion they’re going now and watch Rose on top, his traitorous mind goes back to Rose’s offer from this morning. Curiosity-driven as he is, he can’t stop imagining what it’d be like. His only frame of reference is being inside her, and his knowledge of how her mouth feels when it’s against his. Combining them could be something totally unique. He hasn’t thought much of it before today, but since Rose enjoys it, and she really did influence this incarnation so much…

Thought so, Rose’s voice suddenly cuts through his mind.

She doesn’t waste any time after that, her lips descending down from his neck to his chest as she lifts up onto her knees to move around more easily.

Oh, blimey she’s moving fast.

Fast enough that nerves start to set in.

“Rose, you really don’t have to right –”

He was going to say now, but with her hand firmly on his torso, she sends a very strong, wordless message for him to shut up.

I know I don’t have to, she says more clearly. I want to.

He swallows hard but doesn’t protest any further, trying to prepare himself for this. He’s glad he decided to take a shower, after all.

Rose is so eager to grant his request that when she slides his boxers down off his hips she doesn’t even bother to take them completely off – just bunches them around his thighs.

Rose takes his length lightly in her fist, and he takes a deep breath. It’s fine. It’ll be fine. He’s done it for her; there’s nothing to be nervous about.

Lowering her head, she takes the tip of his length between her lips, running her tongue in a circle as she suckles gently. He breathes out a string of curses in Gallifreyan, the words getting squeakier and less intelligible as he goes. His eyes roll back so far it almost hurts.
He’s hesitant to say anything is better than being inside her properly. But even if it’s not better, it’s just as magnificent. He never thought he’d say it, but even though she’s barely started, he thinks it’s an instant tie.

It’s just different in all the right ways. Still warm, with enough wetness to make the friction all pleasure no pain. But the variety inherent in having Rose controlling every single aspect of it, the contrast of texture between her soft lips and rough tongue, the glorious unpredictability of how far she’ll take him in on each dip of her head...

Even if his eyes were open, he’s fairly certain he wouldn’t be able to see anything. It’s too much.

Rose lets out a moan that sends tiny vibrations through his length. She tries to mute it but it’s high and desperate for more. She can feel this too, and she’s enjoying it. Thoroughly.

He rushes out a few more high-pitched curses on a rough exhale. He’s not normally one for cursing but he doesn’t know what else to do.

“It’s too much Rose, it’s too much,” he pleads, but she knows he’s lying. She can feel everything. It’s only too much because he’s going to finish in about five seconds and embarrass himself.

She lowers her mouth a bit more, just barely grazing her teeth, sucking gently as she goes. He begs her and non-existent deities and every star he can think of that he’ll last a little bit longer. She starts to sink down a bit further, then pulls back, dragging the length of her tongue along his length as she does. Again and again in a slow rhythm that feels so good he never wants it to end, but that’s exactly why it will. And soon.

He might as well enjoy the five seconds he’s got. He wrenches open his eyes and sees her, hair falling around his hips, her eyes closed. Watching himself disappear between her wet pink lips... The coil can’t tighten any more. His fingers and toes curl in tandem as he groans, trying to stave off his own biology to a degree he’s never done before.

She senses he’s tensing up, and slows down even more, intent on dragging this out as long as she can. She moans again, clenching the fist at the base of his length. That’s all it takes, though. He feels every muscle in his body seize up, his eyes screw shut again, his hips thrusting up into her mouth as it cascades over him. He curses his way through it, all the while Rose whimpers with pleasure as she laps at every drop.

All he can do for a while is lie there, limp and in disbelief as he catches his breath. He senses Rose lying down beside him, equally breathless, but he can’t muster the stamina to open his eyes to greet her. You’d think he’d just run twenty miles with the way he’s gasping for breath.

And yet his times senses tell him that only lasted forty-two seconds. And suddenly he is absolutely mortified.

He eventually manages to open his eyes, but for a long minute he just stares up at the ceiling in horror rather than over at her, feeling like an absolute adolescent.

Rose touches a hand to his arm and effortlessly reopens their link.

Don’t be embarrassed, she says. It’s not you, it’s me. I’m just that good.

“Good?” he says sarcastically, turning to her with a smirk. “No, Rose...” He covers his face with one hand, shaking his head. Good doesn’t cover it. He’s never experienced anything like that before.
“I’ll have to make a habit of it, then,” she grins, her tongue poking between her teeth.

The Doctor growls and rolls on top of her, claiming her mouth. He grinds against her out of habit and possessiveness, and he can already feel himself throbbing to life again against her thigh. Just thinking about what she’d just done… how it felt… her mouth, warm and wet and her tongue, coarse and curious…

He groans indecently into her mouth. Oops. Somehow he’s already hard again.

He can feel her pleasant surprise through the link, but she’s not ready to stop kissing him yet. She likes it when he gets a little rough. When their teeth click a little, when she can nibble on his bottom lip, when she can hardly breathe between deep kisses.

“You know… I was serious. We could stay on the TARDIS forever,” he suggests when she finally pulls back for air. “Or at least… for a long time.”

Rose raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah? Where’s this comin’ from?”

“You know… safety. That’s all. You’re right. It’s dangerous out there.” He lowers his lips to her neck, grinding against her a little harder.

“Time for another round?” she asks, grinning as she pulls his head back to look at her.

“Rose, I can’t possibly… ask…”

“None of that.” She shakes her head. “It feels good for me too, remember?” She’s already making her way down his body, nipping at his skin and soothing it with her lips as she goes.

Before he can stop her, she’s taking his length in her gorgeous mouth once more.

He clenches his fists in the sheets, trying to brace himself for another round of this. He doesn’t know what he’s ever done in his ten lives to deserve this.

“Just bein’ you’s enough,” she breathes against his length, glancing up to meet his eyes.

As she cradles his balls in her other hand and lowers her mouth again, he realizes how much power she has over him. She could use this for leverage to get basically anything she wants, and he’s fairly sure she knows it.

But right now he can’t convince himself that’s a bad thing.
By the fourth night of their stay in 2012 London, the Doctor has truly run out of TARDIS maintenance to keep himself busy. Until they’re actively travelling again, there simply aren’t many means of wearing down any of her systems. She’s a bit low on oil, but if her engines aren’t turning over, she won’t run dry anytime soon.

So, on their fifth morning of the games, the Doctor finds himself leaning back against a pillow he’s propped against the headboard of his bed, poring over a thick volume of computer engineering. Since he still has so much time to kill while Rose sleeps every night, he’s considering making a few upgrades to the console room’s user interfaces. In the wee hours of the night, he’d finally decided to start brushing up. But despite this being the most advanced text on the subject that the library has stocked, he hasn’t yet come across anything he’s not familiar with.

He’s just about to close it and trek back to the library to find something more intellectually stimulating when Rose begins to stir next to him.

He looks down at her, smiling when he sees her eyes are finally open.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” he murmurs.

“Mornin’,” she grumbles back, thick with sleep.

He continues scanning through his book, giving her the time he knows she needs to stretch and toss and groan while she wakes properly.

“What new events are today?” she asks after a few minutes.

“Let’s see...” he reaches for the pamphlet on his nightstand, unfolding it over his book. “Canoeing, sailing, water polo, annd... field hockey.”

Rose makes a face.

“Bored of the games already?” he asks, surprised.

“I dunno... how would you feel about just... stayin’ in instead?”

He crosses his arms on his chest, contemplating that for a moment. They’d agreed to stay put for a while, and he still has no intention of trying to talk her out of that, but... if they don’t even leave the TARDIS, he fails to see how boredom won’t set in. He’s already a bit bored right now, and the day has hardly begun.
Still, he doesn’t want Rose to know any of that. After what she’s been through, she deserves to get her way for a while, whatever it may be.

“Sure.” He shrugs. “If that’s what you want.”

“Oh, good,” she breathes, stretching out beneath the covers again.

“What do you want to do, then?”

She glances up at him, letting her eyes linger on his bare chest.

“Don’t move,” she says, sliding out of the covers and running into the loo.

The Doctor sighs.

Well, all right.

Humans always do need a frustrating amount of time in the bathroom. He should expect that by now.

He finally comes to a chapter about touchscreens, and is a bit intrigued. He’s never tried to install one himself before...

Before he can get a chance to read properly into it, Rose emerges from the loo, and climbs up onto the bed with purpose. Without explanation, she lifts the book out of his hands, closes it and sets it down on her side of the bed. He’s about to ask what’s so urgent that she felt the need to do that, when she takes the book’s place on his lap, her legs straddling his waist.

Oh.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she brings her mouth down to his. It is not the lazy morning sort of kiss he might have expected, if he’d been giving any warning as to her intentions. Her lips are gentle as ever but insistent, moving against his almost too fast for him to keep up. Using much of her body weight, she crushes him back into his pillow, subtly rolling her hips against his as she does. Her tongue swipes over his bottom lip as she nibbles it between her teeth, and ohh... that’s minty. So that’s why she’d gone to the loo. Her hands bury themselves in his hair, tugging impatiently, and he realises she is not attempting even a smidge of subtlety this morning. The passion in her kiss, the sensual determination of her whole body... it’s like they haven’t shagged in a month.

It’s true they had skipped their usual late night romp last night, got home too late and spent too long after that binge-watching FRIENDS. It’s one of few sitcoms they both enjoy; the Doctor has always felt it has a sort of universal appeal (no pun intended).

But it seems to have caught up with Rose now. Asking his silent permission, she quietly opens their link on her own. As is usually the case, feeling for himself just how randy she is speeds up his physiological response to an extreme degree. Her intense desire bursts through the dams his mind, flowing hotly through his veins, carrying arousal wherever it’s needed.

Feeling him harden beneath her, her kisses become rougher, to the point that she accidentally knocks his glasses askew as she shifts her hands from his hair to his face.

His hands closing over hers, he gently pulls them away and separates their mouths. She’s immediately frustrated that he’s forced them to part, so he gets right to the point, moving to take the glasses off.
To his surprise, Rose’s hand shoots up to stop him. “Leave ‘em on,” she pleads.

The Doctor’s eyes widen. “Yeah?” he asks.

She barely has time to mumble an affirmative before she crushes her lips to his once more.

They manage to part for long enough for Rose to lift off her shirt, and when she rocks against him again, it’s to slowly rub her chest against his, stimulating herself. Pleasure rockets through their link with every rise and fall of her body, and soon even the Doctor is losing patience.

Sensing he’s finally caught up to her, she briefly dismounts him to wrestle off her knickers, and he does the same, kicking off his blanket and wriggling out of his boxers.

Rose doesn’t waste any more time, climbing back onto his lap and sinking down onto his length in one fluid motion. His fingernails dig into her hips as she slowly settles onto him, and he groans out her name against her shoulder when he’s fully sheathed inside her heat.

Her thrusts are much quicker than his are when he’s on top, but more graceful. There’s a curve and rhythm to every move she makes that his long and angular body can’t emulate. It’s too much for him to watch, so he closes his eyes and tries to focus on what she’s feeling. The desperation, the power, the satisfaction. Her gaze is fixed on him: his face contorting, the condensation on his glasses.

As soon as she’s found the rhythm and angle she likes, she’s gasping with every thrust. Barely thinking of anything but racing to the finish, her mind empty of everything except the way he’s filling her on each quick fall of her hips.

Though he has two sets of nerve endings, it’s beginning to remind him of a time before they fully united mentally. He never wanted to go back to those days, now that they have this connection. What she’s doing feels wonderful, and in all likelihood she’s going to drag him over the edge with her momentarily. But so much sensory overload without enough mental stimulation is beginning to squash his own physiology’s response. Basically all the pleasure saturating their link is now coming from Rose.

Resolved, he tries to focus on what she’s feeling, to spur her to her climax even faster, hoping she’ll let him take the lead next time.

But Rose detects his discomfort immediately.

Her hips completely still.

“Doctor, I’m sorry, I got...” she pants, breathless. “Caught up. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He shakes his head. He rubs his hands on her back as he sends her a rush of reassurance, emphasising his desire to please her however he can. “I want you to finish. I like making you feel good.”

“I like making you feel good,” she counters.

“Trust me, Rose, it feels very good.”

“But you want more, up here.” She lightly strokes his temple.

He doesn’t answer out loud, but knows she’s extracting the affirmative from his mind.
Without warning, she starts moving again, much slower than before, holding on to his shoulders for support.

*Know how many times ... I thought about doing this?*

The Doctor gasps as her memories suddenly flood through him.

He watches himself through Rose’s eyes, sitting on the jump seat fiddling with a small TARDIS part. Tinkering with that king’s watch in the cupboard they were crammed in together. Reading ancient books in that Scottish castle’s library, trying to figure out how to defeat the lupine wavelength haemovariform. In every instance, he had these glasses on while he worked and, lives in danger or not, it never failed to make Rose want to crawl onto his lap and shag him senseless. Each image kindles a potent flare of arousal from a past Rose that sizzles through their link. Understanding her desperation, that it’s fulfilling a longstanding fantasy, makes it so much sweeter, so much more immersive for him. And he is endlessly happy to be able to help her fulfil it.

Suddenly, he’s just as desperate to finish as she is, and it pushes Rose over the edge.

She comes hard and fast, smearing his cheek with a cry of his name. He goes right with her, helping her with the last few weak, shaky thrusts as he releases inside her, groaning low next to her ear.

Even when he opens his eyes, he can hardly see anymore – his glasses are completely fogged up. He takes them off, rubbing sweat from where they were perched on his nose and beneath his eyes.

“That was…” He trails off, unable to locate the right words. He brings his mouth back to hers instead, a messy kiss that they’re both too breathless to make last. “You ought to play out another one of your fantasies sometime.”

“What makes you think I’ve got any more?”

“Easy way to find out.”

She giggles as she rolls off of him.

“So what else is on the agenda today then, Miss Tyler?” he asks when they’ve had a few minutes to clean up and collect themselves.

“I’m up for more telepathy practice,” she suggests.

“Yeah? At this rate it won’t be long before you’ve mastered the basics.”

“Pfft.”

“I’m serious. You’re not picking it up like a normal telepath. You’ve got this… innate knack for it like I’ve never seen. Your defences are stronger every day.”

She tries to hold back a smile. “Still, there must be something we haven’t done?”

“Hmm.”

When he spends too long mulling it over, Rose breaks the silence and volunteers an idea of her own.

“Could you show me something from your past?”
It’s not exactly what he expected to hear. But she has shown him a bit from her past already, and he does have eight other lives she knows nothing about.

“I suppose that’s fair.” He sits up.

His cheek in his hand, he quietly browses through a millennium of memories to try to find something to show her that she’d find remotely interesting.

“What is it?” she asks, sounding worried.

“Just thinking.”

“‘Bout what to show me?”

“Mmm.” He nods.

“I didn’t mean for it to be a stressful thing. Just curious, y’know?”

“I know.”

“Doesn’t even have to be a memory really. A place, a person. An old face.”

He tilts his head to the side, pondering that. After a while, he nods.

“Okay.” A pause. “I could show you my home? If you want.”

“I’d like that!” she exclaims, sitting up next to him. But then her face falls. “As long as it’s not, I mean, if it won’t be too hard for you or anything?”

The Doctor takes a few minutes to consider that possibility. To determine whether he’s prepared to show this to Rose. He doesn’t let himself think about his home planet often, and he’s never voluntarily visited it in his memories since the Time War. To the best of his ability, he’d severed those neural connections in his previous incarnation, trying to protect himself from the pain. But Rose has a knack for making troubling, painful things completely tolerable. He’s certain having her there will brighten his perspective. Perhaps he can even find some degree of closure that he never got.

“You’ll be there. I’ll be all right.”

He decides to take them to one of many secluded homes he’d lived in earlier in his life: a cosy town in the mountains where he’d lived while he was in the Gallifreyan equivalent of university.

Like he’d done for Rose’s garden, he makes sure to clear any existing people from the scene before they arrive. Not just because he can’t bear the thought of running into someone he knows, but because like he’s told Rose, people are distracting.

Much to the Doctor’s relief, the scenery taking shape around them doesn’t fill him with dread, or trigger traumatic memories.

In his waking nightmares, smoke and Daleks filled the sky, lethal lasers and cries of death filled his ears. But the skies here are clear, the only sounds those of nature. It’s the way the planet was before the Time War began, the way it should be: perfectly preserved in serenity deep in his memories.

They’ve arrived on the edge of the little town, dozens of quaint wooden buildings tucked in between a forest of silver trees, the grasses and soil beneath it all a dark rust colour. Looking up,
the higher elevations of the mountain range are blanketed with snow. Based on the flowers pepperling the ground and the trees, it’s the middle of spring, but the Doctor knows the peaks never warm enough in the summer to completely melt the winter frost, so the caps stay white year-round.

A light breeze whispers through his hair, and in the distance, he can just hear the steady trickle of the waterfall he spent so many afternoons studying beside. The scents of schlenk blossoms and sarlains and arid soil fill his nose with every breath. Gazing down the slopes into the valley far below, miles of red desert stretches all the way to the horizon, save for a narrow patch of lush vegetation following the path of the river Lethe.

He’d forgotten how much drier Gallifrey is than Earth, or most life-sustaining planets, for that matter. There’s not a single cloud in the dim orange sky, a clear view of the giant red sun and two small grey moons. As though on cue, a falling star shoots through the sky, a bright white speck barely visible against the rusty backdrop. Though he’s seen a million of them, the Doctor follows it until it’s out of sight, strangely mesmerised by it.

This is how he wants to remember Gallifrey – how it deserves to be remembered – a masterpiece of cosmic creation, its residents peaceful, its ecosystems undisturbed by battle.

“‘S beautiful,” whispers Rose from beside him, squeezing his hand.

It pulls him out of his trance.

“It is, isn’t it?” he replies.

He tugs her hand and leads her into the rows of homes and shops.

“Are all the trees silver like this?” she asks.

“Not all of them. But a lot of them, yeah.”

“And the grass, it’s always red?”

“There are some species of green grasses, but yeah, most are reddish.”

“What about the sky, is it sunset or is it always orange like that?”

“Only at night.”

“It’s night!” she exclaims, turning back to stare at the red sun in the sky. “But the sun’s out.”

“Gallifrey is in a binary star system. At night, the red star makes the sky appear orange, but during the day, the other sun takes its place, and the sky turns blue, a lot like Earth’s.”

“So it never gets dark?”

“Not as dark as it does on Earth, no. But it’s also not all that bright at night, as you can see.”

It is reminiscent of a sunset, the reduced intensity of the red sun. It’s dim enough that he can stare at it without hurting his eyes, and the light it emits is almost soft, like the orange glow of candlelight. Having lived here for centuries before taking off to explore the universe, something deep in his biology is still tuned to this solar system. The colour is starting to make him feel sleepy, even now.

“Here, I’ll show you the daytime,” he suggests to Rose, not wanting to get drowsy when they’ve just arrived.
With a few moments of concentration, he fast forwards time to the stars’ shift change, so they can watch the sky slowly lighten from orange to blue, passing through every hue in between. In only a few seconds, the small yellow sun has replaced the large red one, shining brightly in a blue sky. Birds tweet happy waking songs from the trees.

“Woah,” murmurs Rose, staring up at the sky, then scanning their surroundings again.

Everything around them is illuminated differently in the daylight. The metallic leaves on the trees glisten, their branches resembling white hot flames as they sway in the wind. The dull reds of the landscape have become bright and vivid.

“This is where I lived, when I was in school,” he gestures to a cabin at the edge of the street they’re on. “I was so young back then...”

“It’s so... quaint...” she trails off, stepping closer to admire the structure. “Can’t imagine you bein’ domestic.”

“I wasn’t home a lot.” He shrugs.

A tafelshrew hops past a few feet away, interrupting him.

“There are rabbits!?” Rose says, sounding excited at the prospect.

“Not rabbits, exactly. But there’s definitely a resemblance, isn’t there?”

“It’s even got the fluffy round tail!” She points at it excitedly.

The rodent has stopped at the edge of the forest, rising on its hind legs as it sniffs for predators, its nose twitching up and down much like an Earth rabbit. Aside from the speckled rust-and-salmon colour scheme of its fur and tail, and the triangular shape of its ears, it really does resemble one.

Before they can admire it much longer, it bounds away, disappearing between the trees.

“Aw,” Rose laments.

“C’mon,” the Doctor says, tugging Rose’s hand and leading her in the same path the tafelshrew had taken.

“Is that a waterfall?” Rose asks, when her less acute human ears finally detect the sound they’re heading for.

“One of the only ones on the planet,” he affirms. “The river we saw, down in the valley, is fed by the snowpack from these mountains. So there’s a handful of waterfalls along the slopes, but the one near this village is one of the best.”

“One of the only ones on the whole planet?” Rose asks.

“Mhm. Gallifrey is rather dry. It snows a bit during winter, but there isn’t much precipitation the rest of the year. Most of the planet is a desert wasteland compared to Earth. The Lethe is the only river.”

“The Lethe?” she repeats, a teasing smile on her lips “Like in hell?”

He chuckles. “Gallifrey came before Greece, I’m afraid.”

“You got lucky then, huh? Livin’ next to it.”
“Suppose I did. I used to come out here to study.”

With a couple more careful hops over some rocks and bulging tree roots, they reach the clearing in the forest he’s been waiting for.

“I can see why,” Rose breathes, taking in the sight.

It’s calming; not the roaring white rapids of many tall waterfalls on Earth, but clear streams of water gently trickling down over a steep, jagged staircase of stone. White, pink, and yellow flowers poke boldly out of tall red grasses and dark rocks encroaching on both sides of the river.

After a short, careful hike down to the bottom, they sit down on the very same welcoming boulder next to the stream the Doctor often sat eight-odd centuries ago. They both take off their shoes and let their feet swish in the freshly melted stream, leaning back on their hands as they admire the view. Listening to the trickle and churn of the water, the songs of birds and rustle of animals in the foliage nearby.

“‘M sorry ‘s all gone,” Rose says, breaking a long silence.

The Doctor takes a deep breath.

“I am too,” he admits.

Rose sits up straighter and holds out her hand for his, an invitation he gladly accepts. The vivid nostalgia that their surroundings conjures does make his hearts ache, but with Rose’s mind wrapped around his, and their fingers intertwined, they are protected from breaking completely.

For the first time since the war, the Doctor gazes upon his memories of this place with soft, sombre reminiscence, rather than horror and intense guilt.

And that, he thinks, is progress.

His thoughts are interrupted when Rose’s stomach growls audibly next to him, and they both burst into giggles at the unexpected interruption.

“Think my brain’s tryin’ to tell me something.”

“Breakfast!” he announces, standing up and holding out his hands for hers. “I almost forgot. What are you in the mood for?”

“Could do with some pancakes,” she says, taking his hands and letting him lift her up.

“Pancakes it is.”

Still holding her hands, he slowly eases them out of Gallifrey, then out of their connection completely.

They both put on the bare minimum of clothes – their underwear and one of his t-shirts for each of them, and head straight for the kitchen.

Rose mixes the dry ingredients while he gathers the wet ones. While she finishes the batter, he fetches some blueberries and butter from the fridge and some linschenberry syrup from the pantry.

He volunteers to do the flipping, insisting he has loads of practice. But he tries to do two at once, and ends up flipping one right off the edge of the pan, half of it falling to gooey pieces onto the stove.
“Oops.” He cringes, rubbing the back of his neck.

Rose confiscates the spatula and forcibly trades places with him.

The pancakes fry up pretty quickly, and the Doctor pours them both some orange juice before they sit down to eat.

Rose is fairly quiet once she digs in. She tears through her stack pretty quickly, in fact, and the Doctor wonders if they’ve been accidentally replacing meals with sex too often. Or perhaps her metabolism has just picked up temporarily to heal the injuries she’d sustained last week. Or maybe it’ll be permanent, her cells having to work harder to maintain their newly immortal state.

“Thank you, by the way.” She pauses halfway through her stack of three, making a point of not having her mouth full when she says it. “For sharing your home with me.”

The Doctor nods through a mouthful. “Of course,” he says once he’s swallowed it down.

“What d’you think?” she asks, nodding down to his plate.

He’s thankful she’s not dwelling on the subject. Thinking of Gallifrey in the abstract tends to be quite different: unsavoury images of power-hungry Time Lords and bloodshed tend to dominate his memory when he and Rose aren’t tightly controlling the experience.

“Delicious,” he says through another bite, a bit of syrup spraying out of his mouth.

“Remind me why this syrup’s green?” she asks.

“Interestingly enough, not from chlorophyll,” he explains. “Which is good, because generally, the presence of too much chlorophyll usually indicates a fruit isn’t ripe. But these berries get their colour from pigments involved in photosynthesis, the same as fruits on Earth. It has a unique combination. The berries themselves are actually yellowish-orange, because the skins contain lutein, the same thing that makes bananas yellow. But the flesh inside has just a hint of oenin, which is blue at neutral pH. When they’re all mashed up and blended together, they make a wonderfully green syrup.” He says ‘green’ with pronounced gusto. After his monologue, he’s already a bit more animated than before. Talking chemistry: always a good way to keep his spirits up. Rose knows him too well.

Rose smiles as she pops in yet another bite.

“Fascinatin’.”

“Isn’t it?” he holds up his fork, watching the green stuff pour off the cakes and back onto his plate in a squiggle. “Plant chemistry. Just brilliant.” He grins as he shovels the bite into his mouth. Brilliant. Reminiscent of the earth boysenberry, but a touch sweeter. With just the teeniest hint of spice. Like cardamom. They really should make pancakes more often.

He’s full sooner than she is, and leaves about a third of his stack uneaten in favour of watching Rose finish off her plate with enthusiasm. There’s a tiny bit of green smeared on her nose she doesn’t seem to notice.

“Wha’?” she asks, noticing him staring.

“Nothin’,” he replies, reaching for another bite. “C’mere, and I’ll tell you.” She’s sitting at the chair next to his, and doesn’t seem to understand.

“I am here.”
He scoots his chair away from the table, and pats his thigh.

She smiles, but it’s the kind of smile like he’s done something worthy of rebuking. Still, she stands up and does what he asked, circling her arms around his neck as she swings a leg over his chair and lowers herself onto his lap.

Wrapping his arms around her back, he can’t hold back a hum of contentment. Partly to have her arms around him again, and partly because she purposely sat close enough that she grazed his crotch on the way down.

“Had no idea you’d like this so much,” she murmurs with a sly smile. “Might’ve done it sooner if I’d known.”

“Oh, it’s not that,” he lies. “You just had some syrup on your nose.”

Before she can react, he leans up and closes his lips around the tip of her nose, quickly swiping the sugary stuff off with his tongue.

“Gross!” she says through a giggle, wiping at her nose with the back of her hand.

“Gross?” he asks. He smacks his tongue. “Tastes good to me.”

“You’ve got some on your lip now.”

“Then get it.”

Rose’s lips usually taste fairly good on their own, salt and flavoured lip gloss and oestrogen, but this one takes it to a whole new level. Linschenberry syrup, blueberries, and butter – the key to one delicious snog. It doesn’t take long before they’re both sighing into the kiss, Rose’s hands are buried in his hair, and their link is flaring to life.

I do enjoy it, he says, not wanting to sow any seeds of doubt. A lot.

I know. Rose rocks gently against him, finding him hard as ever.

He breaks the kiss for a moment, letting out a breathy chuckle. She really knows how to turn him to clay in her hands.

Neither of them can manage to stop, for a while, the kiss or the rhythm they’ve built grinding against one another. Rose can’t get enough leverage, with her legs hanging off the chair, and with all her weight on his lap, it’s hard for him to get much, either. Very pleasurable, but not really taking them anywhere. But they both seem content with that, taking their time, given how quickly their first encounter of the day was over. But merely by thinking in unison that they’d like it to last forever, a surge of arousal rushes through them both that ironically whittles down their patience.

“Want to go back to our room?” he gasps out.

“Was thinkin’ about the table,” she says, biting down on his neck.

He gasps, freezing in place. Will she ever stop surprising him?

“’Nother one of my fantasies,” she whispers against his ear.

Without further prodding, he reaches back and shoves his plate out of the way, then hooks his arms beneath her thighs and stands up, taking her with him. He sets her down on the table gently, and helps her wriggle her knickers out from under her. She shoves his pants down and he leans
forward, forcing her to lie back until she’s resting on the table. He doesn’t waste any time finding her entrance, but pushes inside slowly, savouring every inch.

“When?” he asks at her ear. Her heels dig into his back, locking him in place.

“It was…” she starts, but he cuts her off.

“Show me,” he says, slowly starting to move.

It was at the primary school, when she was working as a dinner lady. The entire time he was in the cafeteria for lunch, her eyes wandered over to him every second she had to spare. On more than one occasion, she had fantasised about marching up to him, grabbing him by his tie and snogging that smug smile off his face. Then, too impatient to relocate anywhere more comfortable, slowly divesting him of his many layers of clothes, sprawling on the cafeteria table, and shagging right there in the school. (It is, of course, emptied of children in the fictitious scenario, and for that he’s grateful.)

“Have fancied me a long time,” he huffs out.

“So I’ve been… tryin’ to tell you,” her words are broken up by a moan.

He breathes out her name, overwhelmed by months of tension like it’s their first time again.

There was the alternate universe. He was wearing a tux. *Looked so smart*, Rose thought. Jealous of Lucy and emotionally raw from confronting her weird alt-parents, every time Rose looked at the Doctor, she wanted to drag him out of the thick of the celebration and have her way with him. Most of the fantasies flickering through her head involved the countertop in the kitchen. As it was a staging area of sorts, people were moving in and out of the room constantly, but in Rose’s imagination, there were several minute blocks when it was empty. Just enough time for what she had planned, with how far gone she was.

Suddenly it’s as though they’re back there, her legs hanging off the counter and he’s holding up her black skirt and white apron as he delves deep inside her… Rose whispers in his ear to go faster, because they’re *so close* but there’s someone approaching the door…

With a curse, they both hurtle over the edge. Overwhelmed by the present and the past melding together, the Doctor freezes up as the climax washes over him, gripping onto both Rose and the table to try to tie himself to sanity. Rose rocks her hips back and forth beneath him, eking out every last drop of pleasure she can as they soar together, pulsing and clenching in harmony.

Completely spent, Rose goes slack against the table and the Doctor slumps against her, their skin slick with sweat everywhere it touches.

Without thinking, he breathes out a word in his native tongue.

“It’s one he hasn’t yet taught Rose, and she’s instantly curious.

“‘Magnificent,’” he translates quietly.

“It was,” she grins. She takes a few more deep breaths, then winces. “But this table’s really hurtin’ my back.”

“Oh! Right!” He pulls out of her, taking her hands to help her sit up. “Sorry.”

“‘S all right.” She wraps her arms around his neck again, pulling him in for a kiss.
He walks over to get her a towel from the drawer to clean up, but on the way, he realizes they’d somehow managed to knocked Rose’s plate and cup of orange juice onto the floor. He hands her the towel to clean herself, and Rose gestures down to the mess.

“Really soiled the kitchen now, haven’t we?” she teases.

“Oops,” he agrees, blushing a bit.

They put back on the few items of clothing they had on, and she cleans up the mess on the floor and wipes down the table while he does the dishes.

When he’s finished with those, he dries off his hands and stands in the middle of the now-spotless kitchen, and sighs. “What now?”

She walks up to meet him, puts her arms around his waist.

“You’re antsy already.”

“I haven’t stayed in one place so long in a while,” he admits.

“Well, where to?” she asks, drawing random circles on his chest.

“Still not all that comfortable leaving the TARDIS yet.”

“Trouble tends to find us, no matter where we are. Remember when the TARDIS fell right out of the Vortex into a parallel world?”

“Point taken.” He nods, frowning. “Still, I’m not letting you out of my sight for the foreseeable future.”

“Fair enough. Have anywhere in mind?”

“Well,” he thinks a moment. “The TARDIS’s oil is low.”

“The TARDIS needs oil?”

“Pretty much anything that’s got engines needs oil. Mind you, it’s not nearly the same kind of oil you’d put in a car in the 21st century, but any moving metal parts need lubrication.”

“Hmm.”

“Anyway, I always go the same place to get it. Bazar Almasil. It’s Arabic for ‘market of destiny.’ It’s got basically anything you can think of. And the best part is, it’s on an asteroid belt.”

“Shut up.” She smacks his arm playfully. “How’s that work?”

“Big asteroids.” He shrugs, grinning down at her. “It’s in a beautiful galaxy. You’ll love it.”

“Not a dangerous one though, is it?”

“Not at all.” He shakes his head. “I’ve been there at least a hundred times now without incident. Safest place I can think of, actually.”

“All right then. Market it is.”

“Perfect. Come on.” They break out of their loose embrace, but he holds onto her hand. “Let’s get
some proper clothes on.”

“What, we can’t go like this?” she asks playfully as they head down the hall.

“Well, we could. But probably just the one time. And I’d rather not have to find someplace else to buy oil.”


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Their first couple hours at the market are spent browsing around. Rose finds the occasional item of clothing or jewellery to try on, and he finds the occasional tool or part to add to his inventory. Any time walking in between the numerous shops is spent admiring the scenery.

It’s a beautiful bazaar spread across five different asteroids, oxygenated and gravitated with technology. Designed purely for fun. A giant purple planet looms in the sky, orbited by two moons, and further away there’s an orangey sun, but otherwise the sky is just a giant black canvas flecked with stars. Most of the light around them comes from the vendors and lamps along the pathways, artificially yellow to perpetually emulate daylight.

They make the space travel vendor that sells the special TARDIS oil their last stop.

His usual merchant, Taranbir, is having a promotion: a free weather stone for every customer with a qualifying purchase. And as it happens, the oil qualifies.

“What do you think, dears?” Taranbir asks in his soft, wispy voice. Age has really gotten to him the last decade or so. “Predicts the weather. One hundred percent accurate.” He holds up the circular trinket, but it doesn’t look valuable on the surface.

“Predicts the weather?” the Doctor asks, pulling a face. “What’s it made of?”

“Bazoolium,” Taranbir responds.

“Ah.” He’s heard of it before, a rare alloy from a nearby planet. Only to the extent that it measures humidity, ultraviolet light scattering, and static discharge, it can predict rain. “Erm…” he turns to Rose, lowering his voice. “Don’t think we really need that. We can basically choose the weather we want.”

“Well, he’s so nice,” Rose murmurs. “I don’t want to turn him down.”

Taranbir is a delightfully polite man: barely five feet tall, his short beard grizzled with grey, a tight white turban on his head that makes him look even smaller. His smile is as contagious as any he’s ever seen. At least this once, he understands Rose not wanting to disappoint someone.

“Let’s take it,” says Rose. “I can give it to mum, gotta be something she can use it for.”

“Fair enough.” He turns back to the merchant. “We’ll take it, Taranbir.”

“Yes, excellent.” Taranbir hands the Doctor the device, then turns to Rose. “One of my best customers, your Doctor.” He reaches both hands out and clasps one of Rose’s between them. The Doctor stashes the device in his pocket, and Taranbir takes his hand too. It’s something he does for every customer: not so much a handshake as a way to physically communicate gratitude and respect. It gives a strong impression the salesman cares about his customers’ wellbeing, whether or not it’s true.

“One of the best merchants, if you ask me.” The Doctor smiles, and Taranbir grins ever wider.
“Thank you.” He gives them a shallow bow.

The Doctor scoops up the jug of oil with a couple fingers, and raises his other hand in farewell.

“Thank you.”

“Nice to meet ya,” Rose adds, giving Taranbir a wave, too.

“Hope to see you again.” Taranbir waves back. “Take care, dears.”

Rose takes his free hand in hers as they make their way down the crowded street.

“A quick stop home, then?” he asks. “Deliver your mum’s gift?”

Rose sighs. “I’m a bit knackered. First thing tomorrow, maybe?”

He nods, swinging their linked arms. “Deal.”
Chapter Notes

Another week, another update!

Unfortunately with the holiday I don't think I'll get a new chapter out next week. But I'm hoping to go back to every other week, at least for the very brief time until the fic is finished! :O

This chapter was definitely an exercise in testing my writing limits. Stylistically it's something I've not really done before, AND it's short on top of that. Had to push my creative boundaries in a limited space. But I've been stoked to write and share it ever since I came up with the idea however many moons ago... and I feel like it turned out pretty well!

I do suggest reading carefully. Hope you enjoy. <3

There’s a phenomenon that exists in many species across the universe – ones with cardiovascular systems, at any rate. A temporary enlargement and reduction of function of the heart muscle in response to a severe stress, especially a death or breakup. Untreated, it can result in fatal arrhythmia or heart failure. Its symptoms are similar to those of a myocardial infarction: acute chest pain and shortness of breath.

Some medical professionals designate it takotsubo cardiomyopathy. But, transcending both species and language barriers, it’s known colloquially across much of the universe as broken heart syndrome.

“We haven't got time to argue. The plan works. We're going. You too. All of us.”

“No, I’m not leavin’ him!”

There’s no evidence the condition occurs in Gallifreyans.

But as the Doctor turns his back on the stark white wall and faces an empty room, he wonders if all his time spent around humans hasn’t begun to affect his biology. His chest feels like it could rip apart from an unnatural distension, yet it’s also empty and aching. The only time he can breathe is when the erratic, pounding palpitations of his hearts knock the wind out of him and he gasps for air.

“He does it alone, Mum. But not anymore. ‘Cause now he's got me.”

Why did he do it? Why did he sling the device around Rose’s neck?

He would never. He should never.

His legs, barely functional pegs, slowly carry him out of the room where the rift was created. Broken. Numb. He nearly makes it to the stairwell but falls to his knees before he can reach the door. He buckles over at the waist, barely catching himself with his hands before his head hits the ground. The cold, hard floor is a welcome, if miniscule, reprieve from the agony in his chest.
“I made my choice a long time ago, and I’m never gonna leave you.”

He squeezes his eyes closed, wishing tears would fall. Wishing he could scream. Wishing something would happen to disrupt the deafening silence. The intense emptiness of this room. This entire building. Its previous employees either evacuated or dead.

The Doctor knew. He knew she’d never leave. He promised he’d never leave her, either.

Why did he do it?

But she came back. The storm had nearly passed.

Nearly.

“Hold on!!”

Haunted by the memory of his own guttural scream, he finds his voice.

“NO!” he shouts at no one except the walls and the corpses scattered through the building. Smashes clenched fists on the linoleum.

They had come so close.

And they had hardly two weeks connected. Hardly one actually believing they might be able to live out their days together.

More and more seconds pass without Rose’s mental presence close enough to feel, and his mind begins to throb with the realisation she’s gone. It worsens until it overrides the pain in his chest, the edges of his mind a raw wound that no salve will treat. And yet, futilely, the abandoned tendrils of his mind search for her. They’ll never stop searching for her.

The Doctor was right not to trust. To flee from a possibility of a connection like theirs. He saw this coming. He knew how much it would crush him, but he did it anyway. He’s a fool.

And for his stupidity, Rose will live out her millennia of life in a different dimension, with no one to spend it with. Her very immortality a constant reminder of what she’s lost. He’s thrust the very curse upon her that he can hardly bear the burden of himself.

He can’t let her suffer like this.

He can’t.

He has to find a way to her. He’d rip apart two universes to find a way.

A burst of adrenaline wrenches his eyes open. A second gets him to his feet, supporting himself against a wall.

As he takes in his immediate surroundings, trying to re-orient himself so he can find the TARDIS, the stark surfaces of the white box he’s trapped in begin to warp. The walls bend and buckle. A haze drifts over everything, until it’s suddenly too treacherous to take a single step.

He squeezes his eyes shut and rubs his fingers over them, giving himself a moment to try to breathe. Kick in his respiratory bypass to assist. This must be merely a symptom of his situation, his brain’s sensory processing ability taking a temporary hit from hypoxia or shock. Maybe both.

But when he opens them again, the entire interior of the cursed building flickers in and out of
existence around him. Milliseconds of utter blackness interrupt his shaky perception of the world – like a live video feed cutting out.

Somewhere, Rose is screaming his name.

He screams back, only it’s not her name but a garbled cry of pain, because his head is suddenly pounding like it’s about to explode. Clutching the sides of his head, he crumples to the floor again, and this time he’s unable to break the fall with his hands.

---

The Doctor has tried everything he can think of.

Went back in time to Canary Wharf, risked it all to try to slip through the crack between the universes while it was still open. But the TARDIS wouldn’t allow the risk of crossing his own timeline. He shouted himself hoarse and tried to override her safety precautions but she wouldn’t budge. She wouldn’t let him kill himself trying to get her back.

Normally he’s grateful for her protection, but right now the alternative still seems preferable. He did have that deal with himself, didn’t he?

He tore apart the console trying to recreate the accident that brought them to Pete’s World in the first place. It was an even worse failure that led the TARDIS to confiscate his flying privileges entirely. He was marooned inside the ship, no outlet for his grief for what felt like years.

He’s searching for other gaps between universes now, any crack that might be large enough to squeeze through. It doesn’t even matter if it’s a one-way trip or not. Setting the randomiser over and over, he searches every new destination for signs of the Void seeping through. But with and all of time and space at the TARDIS’s disposal, her search radius a mere pinpoint in comparison, it could take ten billion stops before he finds one.

It’s hopeless.

His mind cries out for Rose, its edges aching, still raw. Frayed. Like the stub of a severed limb.

The monitor still doesn’t have any positive readings.

He crushes the pen in his hand, not caring when the ink bleeds onto the keyboard beneath it. Desperate to feel something besides the hollow ache in his chest, he’s about to punch the glass screen.

But suddenly the Doctor feels… strange. Without warning, a different emotion rapidly displaces his grief and hopelessness: a potent sense of amnesia.

How many times has he done this? How many loci of this universe has he already checked? Two? Two thousand? He can’t remember any of them. But their current voyage doesn’t feel like their first one, either. Mingled with the amnesia is déjà vu, a nagging sense he’s done this before. He’s exhausted like he’s been at it for months without sleep, maybe even years.

He rubs a hand down his cheek, finding it rough with stubble. Looking down at his suit, he finds it stained with grease, dirt, and blood. His own? How long has it been since he washed it?

As he looks around, suddenly nothing he sees feels real. The console, the floor beneath his heavy feet, none of it.
Why are there such large gaps in his memory? Was he dosed with something? He doesn’t feel right.

He must need sleep. He’s been fighting so hard to get back to Rose, he’s been neglecting himself. Severely.

That’s all it is. A kip is all he needs.

Suddenly too exhausted to make the trek to his own bed, he crumples to the console floor, and is unconscious before he can second guess himself.

---

The Doctor carefully pilots the TARDIS around the dying, blazing star, getting the ship into just the right orbit to absorb its power without her shields being depleted by the intense radiation.

The gap he eventually found isn’t large enough to fit through.

Only just enough to send simple communication.

When it’s finally in the right spot, he steps away from the monitor. It’ll take a few minutes to draw enough power to send the projection, and the Doctor needs to freshen up. He’s still determined to find a way through properly, but he’d be an idiot not to consider the possibility this is the last time Rose will ever see him. He doesn’t want to look pathetic and unkempt as he says what might be his final goodbye.

He mechanically changes his suit and shaves his face, styles his hair though he hasn’t in he can’t remember how long. The way she likes it.

They didn’t get to say goodbye.

It’s the very least she deserves.

It will destroy them both, to be able to see one another but not touch. To be tempted with one another’s image even as the pervasive emptiness in their minds persists.

But it’s better than nothing. The Doctor repeats that to himself as he drags his feet back to the console.

But when he re-enters the control room, his head is suddenly killing him again. He pushes his fists into his forehead, clenching his eyes shut and gasping through his teeth to try to will the pain away.

It does begin to fade after a few moments of steady breathing, and he takes one last deep breath, steeling himself for what he’s about to do.

But when he opens his eyes, the TARDIS’s interior has been completely transformed. A console still looms in the centre, the time rotor still breathes heavily as it churns up and down. But a purplish glow has replaced the green hue he’s accustomed to. The control panels have sharp edges, the organic corals supplanted by polygonal pillars. Unfamiliar Gallifreyan inscriptions line the walls and moving parts overhead, and the room is far bigger: multiple tiers of pathways extending in three dimensions beyond the grating of the console.

Dimly, as though a projection itself, a young redhead traipses around on a level of grating above him, and he can just faintly hear a Scottish accent...
And with a blink, it’s all gone. The stranger, the headache, the foreign TARDIS. It’s all back to normal.

The Doctor shakes his head, blinking hard a few more times. But the console room remains just as he left it: small and green and old-fashioned.

But… how… wait...

*How did he get here?*

The last thing he remembers is falling asleep on the grating. When he came to, he had already found this supernova. What did he do in between?

He shakes his head, dispelling the nonsensical train of thought.

It’s the anxiety. It has to be. Messing with his brain. Temporarily distorting his memories. But he can’t back out now. This might be his only chance to say goodbye to her.

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“What long have we got?”

“About two minutes.”

---

“Am I ever gonna see you again?”

“You can’t.”

“What’re you gonna do?”

“Oh, I’ve got the TARDIS. Same old life, last of the Time Lords.”

“On your own?”

The Doctor nods.

“I…”

A sob chokes off whatever Rose is about to say, and she buckles over at the waist, trying to contain it.

*Two minutes.*

They’re running out of time.

When Rose rights herself, meeting his gaze again, her cheeks are still wet with tears, but they’re no longer falling. Terror and desperation have replaced the sorrow on her face.

“Doctor!” she shouts, far too loudly for being right in front of him. It’s frantic and impatient, as though it’s not her first time shouting his name, like she’s been shouting it for ages and he hasn’t heard her. The tangible shift in her emotional state makes this feel so much more real. Her presence here with him is an illusion – she’s not really inside the TARDIS – but it suddenly feels like she is. She feels closer to him than she has for months. His mind agrees she may be within reach, reaching out and calling her more strongly than it ever has.
Which is foolish and naïve. It must be merely his instinct to protect her kicking in, a knee-jerk response to her evident distress affecting his judgment.

“Rose? What’s wrong?”

“You need to regenerate!” She’s still shouting just as forcefully.

The Doctor looks around, searching within the TARDIS for whatever danger she’s detected, but finds none.

“Rose, what are you on about?” Panic bubbles up inside him. This isn’t how he wants their last conversation to be. “I’m fine.”

“Doctor, whatever this is you’re experiencing in here, it’s not real.”

In here?

He’d rather they could touch one another, too, but this projection was the best he could do. He’ll keep trying the rest of his life, but there’s a good chance this is their last chance to speak. As far as Rose knows, it is. He doesn’t want to waste their final seconds together arguing about what’s real.

“Rose, I know I’m not here properly. Not physically, but… I had to say goodbye.” He pleads with her to understand with his mind, though he knows she can’t feel it. Her mind is still too far away, notwithstanding this visual fabrication that’s projecting her image inside the TARDIS.

“No, Doctor! Don’t say goodbye!” Rose lunges forward and grabs onto the lapels of his suit. The strong clutches of her fists successfully capture the fabric, and his eyes bulge out of his skull. He stares down at her hands, the dark blue fabric of her jumper pressing into his chest, the arms attached to them suddenly quite real.

“Rose,” he gasps out, breathing heavily. “How are you doing this?” He reaches his arm up, touching her shoulder and finding it quite solid. His throat closes up with panic. Has sending this projection torn the fabric of reality? Jeopardised the stability of this universe? Hers? Both? As much as he wants to touch her in return, he knows something has gone horribly wrong.

“Look, you’re hurt.” Rose moves her hands up to his cheeks, tilting up his head, forcing him to look her in the eyes. Frantic as they are determined. “You’re hurt really bad. You hit your head. You need to regenerate.”

“What’re you…” the Doctor tries to speak, but a potent spike of pain in his head prevents him from finishing the sentence. “Agh!” Clutching his head, he drops to his knees, but rather than the hard grating, damp sand breaks the fall. Scanning around him, he finds the console, the coral struts of the TARDIS, the ramps and the adjacent hallway are fading out of view. In just a few seconds, his ship has disintegrated completely. There’s only Rose, the ocean, the cold wind and scattered rocks surrounding them.

“Rose, what’s happening?” he grits out through his teeth. The world tilts on its axis as the relentless pain brings nausea and disorientation.

“Doctor, you need to stay with me.” She kneels down with him, fighting desperately for his full attention. But he can’t give it; the pain is already excruciating. “Can you feel the regeneration energy?”

“No!” he spits out, too miserable for politeness.
Amidst the agony is a profound confusion. How did he get here? Why does his head feel like it’s been cracked open?

But he has to say goodbye.

*Two minutes.*

He’s running out of time.

A powerful wave of dizziness crashes over him as he looks up at Rose, making the entire world spin around her until she goes completely out of focus.

“Rose, we don’t have much time. Just... needt’ tell you…” The words are slurred. Like he’s drugged, about to lose consciousness.

“Doctor! Listen! We’re not on this beach, okay? We’re at Canary Wharf. You’re about to leave me forever. You’ve got to trust me. I can feel it. The fire in your veins. You need to surrender to it.”

The Doctor stops trying to fight against what she’s saying. If this will be the last time he sees her anyway, he might as well indulge what she wants.

But how can he regenerate if he’s not dying?

Maybe he is dying. He’d be better off dead than living without Rose, anyway. Either way, regenerating sooner just means his miserably lonely life will be over sooner once she disappears from this mirage.

He searches inward for the familiar flames of change, and to his surprise, he can just detect it down in his toes.

*Is he dying?*

Now that he can feel the fire in his veins, it quickly consumes him. Spreads through his body, burning every cell it touches from the inside as he yells against the wind in protest. The relentless migraine in his head worsens as the fire reaches his head, spreading and swelling with unbearable pressure until his head feels fit to burst. An overinflated balloon about to violently pop, its shrivelled latex remnants raining to the ground.

The agony at least brings a burst of adrenaline that hauls him to his feet, still holding his head. At this point he’s worried if he lets go his skull will fall apart, but he pulls one hand away from his head, needing to see the evidence for himself. He watches as the golden glow emanates from his hand, trickling down to his fingers. Brighter by the second.

He doesn’t want to regenerate. He wants to stay in this body. This is the man Rose fell in love with.

But if she’s gone, what’s the point? If he can’t get her back... oh, he’d do anything to get her back... but it’s too late. The crescendo of energy is moments from reaching its peak. The overwhelming heat is melting his organs, the poorly contained energy tearing his cells apart one by one as it searches desperately for an outlet.

He gasps for air, desperate for the pain to be over. Maybe Rose will still be here when he comes out the other side...

*Rose.*
“Get back!” He barely gets the words out before he explodes.

Rose.

She’s his only conscious thought as his body combusts to a whirlwind of plasma and ashes around him.
Finally got a new chapter up! Sorry it took me a bit. To be /totally/ honest, the main reason is bc I got Arkham Knight and have been spending like 90% of my free time playing it (IT'S AMAZING). And I think subconsciously I was avoiding publishing this chap because it really is such a pivotal one... I won't give any spoilers but I think you'll see why. Hopefully this clears up lingering confusion from last chapter too. I hope you guys enjoy this chapter. Only 2 chapters left of this story, I cannot believe it. I hope it'll be worth the wait, especially for you loyal readers who have been with me since I started posting this story a year and a half ago.

Thanks as always to Amber for the beta!

“We've got two separate worlds,” the Doctor explains, growing increasingly animated. “But in between the two separate worlds, we've got the Void. That's where the Daleks were hiding. And the Cybermen travelled through the Void to get here. And you lot, one world to another, via the Void. Oh, I like that. Via the Void. Look!”

As soon as the Doctor places the flimsy paperboard glasses on Rose’s face, thousands of green and red particles swarm loosely around him. The particles move independently and randomly, yet they’re contained to a certain area around his figure. They follow him through some invisible force of physics as he sways from side to side, lagging only slightly behind.

“I’ve been through it,” he continues. “Do you see?”

“What is it?” Rose asks. She reaches out to try to touch the particles, but they pass right through her hand undetected, further proof of their immaterial existence.

“Void stuff,” the Doctor answers.

“Like, er...” Rose quickly rifles through related terms she’s learned in the past couple years. “Background radiation?”

“That’s it.” He nods, and whirls her around. “Look at the others.”

Mickey, Pete, and Jake are all surrounded by the same speckled cloud of coloured particles, but they are conspicuously absent in the vicinity of her mum.

“And the only one who hasn't been through the Void,” the Doctor continues, pointing his index finger obnoxiously in Jackie’s direction. “Your mother! First time she's looked normal in her life.”

“Oi!” her mum interjects.

“But the Daleks lived inside the Void,” the Doctor continues, unfazed. He runs towards the empty wall on the other side of the room, gesturing wildly with his hands. “They're bristling with it! Cybermen, all of them. I just open the Void and reverse. The Void stuff gets sucked back inside.”

“Pullin’ ‘em all in!”
“Pullin’ ‘em all in!” the Doctor repeats with enthusiasm, tugging down on the air with his fist.

“Sorry,” Mickey interrupts. “What’s the Void?”

“The dead space,” answers the Doctor. “Some people call it hell.”

“So, you’re sending the Daleks and Cybermen to hell.” Mickey smiles appreciatively, and looks over at Jake. “Man, I told you he was good.”

But something suddenly dawns on Rose, bursting the bubble of excitement they’d just created.

“But it’s like you said,” says Rose. “We’ve all got Void stuff. Me too, because we went to that parallel world. We’re all contaminated. We’ll get pulled in.”

“Well,” the Doctor crosses his arms. “I imagine you lot will want to head back to Pete’s world.” He nods his head towards the other four. “Hey, we should call it that! Pete’s world. Anyway, you’ll be safe there. The Void’s only opening from this side.”

“I’m not goin’ anywhere without Rose!” Her mum steps out of line with the others, separating herself from the theoretical return group.

“I know, Jackie, I didn’t mean you.” The Doctor looks to be barely containing an eye roll.

Her mum sidles up next to her.

The Doctor takes a deep breath, obviously contemplating something.

“But you could both go with them,” he suggests softly, shrugging. “To guarantee your safety. Well, yours, Rose,” he amends. “Jackie will be safe either way, as long as she steers clear of the Daleks, but…” he raises his eyebrows, searching both their faces for feedback.

“That’s not gonna happen,” Rose says, chuckling at the ridiculous suggestion.

The Doctor smirks, just a little. He does look instantly more relaxed, but not yet like he’s completely accepted this decision.

“Are you sure?” He asks after a long moment, staring into her eyes, looking very much like he wishes they could hold a private telepathic conversation right now. “The Tyler family, back together again…” he trails off, glancing over at Pete.

Her mum glances over, too.

Pete’s formerly hard glare in the face of their circumstances softens into one of longing as he steps closer to the both of them.

“I really don’t want to lose you again, Jacks.”

Jackie shakes her head. “If Rose is stayin’, then I am, too.” Her tone is resolute.

Pete takes a deep breath, running his hands down his face.

“You’re gonna make this world safe again?” he asks the Doctor.

“Or die trying,” the Doctor assures him.

Rose never appreciates the Doctor’s apparent disregard for his own life, but knows that’s simply
how he is. She knew what she signed up for when she made a commitment to him: he’d put his life on the line for one random stranger any day. The whole planet? There’s no limit to the risks he’ll take.

“’S like you said,” Jackie says. “Your ideas worked in that world. You’ve got money. You go back. I’ve had twenty years without you. I’ve learned how to cope on my own.” She stands a bit straighter and puffs out her chest. It’s not easy to watch, her mum talking to a man who looks and talks exactly like her father with something so close to rejection. But Rose understands: she doesn’t want to put herself in a position of vulnerability. To open herself up to be disappointed again.

“Yeah, I’ve got money,” Pete agrees. “But... I’m not happy. Haven’t been for a while. And, I dunno, this just feels like... a second chance. And it feels stupid to squander it.”

“Whatver you’re doing, you’ve got to decide now.” The Doctor hustles past them to one of the computer systems, hurriedly punching in some numbers on the keyboard. “We’ve got to open the breach before it’s too late. Whether or not the Daleks and Cybermen are distracted from world domination by fighting each other, either way the whole planet’s about to be caught in the crossfire of a mutual genocide.”

“I could stay,” Pete blurts out, alternating his glance between Rose and her mum. “If you want.” He shrugs. “We could give this a go.”

Jackie’s tough façade finally begins to crack again, and her eyes well with tears. “I’d like that,” she admits. “But I’m not askin’ you to. I don’t want you to regret it later. If you do stay, it’s your decision. Only yours.”

“Rose, I know I’m not your dad,” Pete address Rose in a rush, trying to obey the Doctor. “But I could be. Or I could try to be. If you want. I don’t want to stay if you don’t want me, too.”

“I want Mum to be happy,” Rose holds back her intense desire to have a second chance at having a dad, trying not to sway his decision either way. She wants this decision to be between the two of them, not something he does out of misplaced guilt for a daughter he never actually had.

“I want that, too,” Pete agrees. Jackie glances between them both. “That’s it, then. I’m staying.”

“Get to the TARDIS, then,” the Doctor demands. “She’s strong enough to protect the lot of you. Mickey, Jake, get ready to use your dimension jumps for the last time. Now! I’ve got to get this system back online.”

“You two are acting directors now,” Pete says to the two young men, removing the yellow button from around his neck. “The paperwork’s already drawn up. I decided this a long time ago, if anything ever happened to me.”

Both the boys nod, solemn. They exchange gruff handshakes and pats on the back with Pete, and then Rose gets a turn to hug each of them. It happens so fast; none of it feels real.

“Never thought I’d have to say goodbye to you twice,” she murmurs to Mickey, trying to swallow down the lump in her throat as she savours the two seconds she has to hold him tight.

“Me neither,” he mumbles back.

“Thank you both,” The Doctor addresses them, setting a hand on each of their shoulders. “Run that Torchwood better than this one. Please. Take care of Pete’s world.”

Jake addresses him like a military commander. “Yes, sir.”
Mickey nods. “You take care of her.” He nods toward Rose. “Bye, Rose,” he adds only to her, much softer.

With that, they press their buttons and vanish.

Rose doesn’t have time to grieve Mickey’s loss again.

“Rose, take them to the TARDIS,” the Doctor orders. “But then come back here. Turns out I need your help.”

“Doctor, how’re we not gonna get sucked in?”

“I’ve got these.” He walks into the next room and picks up a giant black clamp half the size of his body. “Once we open the breach we’ll just have to hold on tight for a few minutes. The breach itself is soaked in Void stuff, in the end it’ll close itself.”

Rose isn’t convinced those clamps will keep them safe – she’d rather have a pair of full-body harnesses bolted to the wall – but she nods anyway.

“Now go,” he commands, shooing them toward the stairwell.

Rose leads both her parents down several sets of stairs to where she knows the TARDIS is sitting, waiting for them. She commands her to open without even using the key, and once they’re both safely on the other side of the doors, she hugs her mum tightly and tells them both she’ll be right back.

“Don’t you dare go gettin’ yourself killed, Rose,” she commands, thrusting a finger at her.

“I won’t, Mum. The Doctor knows what he’s doin’. He’ll keep us safe.”

Rose is back in the white control room with the Doctor in only a short minute. The giant clamps have been installed on the walls, each next to a lever.

“All right!” the Doctor shouts, running into position beside the farther of the two levers. “You take that one.” He nods to the other lever. “We’ve got to push them both at the same time for the breach to open. As soon as they’re engaged, grab onto your clamp. And hold on tight or it’ll suck you right in! Ready!”

“Ready!” she says, getting into position.

“Push!” the Doctor commands.

It’s no ordinary lever: its heavy, old-school interior mechanisms provide a level of resistance to movement she has to use her whole body weight to counteract. After a few seconds of straining themselves, both their levers lock into position with a click and a hiss of air.

“Online,” an artificially generated female voice echoes from the computer.

In that moment, a bright, gaping hole tears itself into the empty opposite wall, and suddenly the Earth’s gravity is no longer the only force acting on Rose. The breach now has its own gravity, tugging her back towards it with a gust of wind. She dashes straight to the clamp on the wall, clinging onto it with both arms as the force pulling her towards the breach increases with each passing second. Glancing towards the Doctor, she sees him glancing her way, too, ensuring she’s safely holding on.
A cluster of three Daleks smashes through the building window, their robotic squeals hurtling through the air with their metal hulls until both are sucked clear into the breach.

“The breach is open!” the Doctor yells. She can barely hear over the whirring of the equipment and the fierce wind being sucked into the Void, but he does sound rather chuffed. “Into the Void, hah!”

The force gets stronger and stronger as more and more Daleks and Cybermen pour through the broken glass and whip through the room en route to the Void. Eventually, it outweighs gravity in its potency, and ROse has to plant her feet on the base of the lever to take some of the strain off her arms.

The Daleks and Cybermen continue to shout as they plunge horizontally to their eternal prison, passing by in blurs of silver and gold, thicker and thicker... there must be hundreds passing them by every second now.

A long minute passes them by in this manner, her muscles and ligaments and bones aching from the effort of holding onto her clamp and maintaining her balance on the base of the lever. The blaring noise of the torrent of wind, machinery, and the cyborg screams feels like it’s gone on for so long she might have permanent hearing damage.

Until one moment, when one word is evident amongst the incoherent squeals, a familiar and harrowing word: exterminate.

A bolt of blue laser emanates from somewhere in the tornado of doomed Daleks and Cybermen, aiming straight for the Doctor.

But it doesn’t strike him.

The blast instead strikes the lever next to him, and bluish electricity surges down the length of the lever before disappearing in a flash. There’s a hiss and a heavy click and then...

“Offline...”

The current of the blast disengaged the lever. It’s slowly retreating to its default position, inching its way towards the floor ever so slowly.

Rose glances up at the Doctor, terror in her gaze. The determined look in his eyes confirms her worst fear.

He has to re-engage the lever. It’s like she had just thought to herself: with the entire planet in danger, there’s no limit to the risks he’ll take. Mere seconds have passed with the system offline, and the pull into the breach has already lessened significantly. Rose barely has to hold on to resist being pulled in. Any less, and the wind tunnel carrying the evil into the Void will cease and they’ll all clatter to the ground in this very room. For attempting to thwart their plans, she and the Doctor may well be the first victims of their renewed killing spree, but the rest of the world would quickly follow suit.

The Doctor lets go of his clamp, ducking behind the base of the lever for what support it can offer as he reaches his hand out for the descending lever. His fingers just wrap around it, and he plants his feet at the base of the lever and reaches back to grab onto his clamp with his other hand. He can barely reach across the distance, his long limbs being stretched with the effort to hold onto the lever. With a groan that’s audible even over the continued ruckus of the sentient metal husks flying around them, the Doctor pulls back on the lever. And slowly, an inch at a time, it moves back into position.
With a few seconds of intense exertion, and it clicks and hisses back in a vertical position.

He’s done it. He’s got it.

“Online...”

The Doctor reaches back, trying to twist around enough to grab onto his clamp with his other hand and regain a firmer grip on it, but the blast of strengthened wind and renewed gravity of the breach as the system kicks back into high gear doesn’t allow him to. He struggles to maintain his foothold on the base of the lever, holding onto the clamp for his life with merely one hand. It’s hard enough for Rose to hold on at this point, as the torrent rushing into the breach feels stronger than ever, and she still has both her arms around her clamp.

One of the Doctor’s Chucks slips on the gold surface of the base of the lever. As he tries to fix it, the hand on the clamp slips just slightly. He’s barely holding on by his fingers now.

“Doctor!” Rose yells.

She expects him to offer some small reassurance, some faith that he’s got this, that they’ve got this. He always does. He’s always got some clever trick up his sleeve to narrowly escape death while saving the world. But when he turns his head to her, his eyes are wide with dread, and terror drops like an anvil into her gut.

“Hold on!” she screams, all her sense of calm lost in an instant. The force required to hear her own voice over the wind tears the lining of her throat.

The stream of villains seems to be thinning out. Turning back to the building windows, there’s only an intermittent Dalek passing through it. The Doctor only has to hold on a few seconds longer, and she’s sure that once there’s nothing left to devour, the breach will close itself, like he said. He’ll be safe.

One last Dalek tumbles through the air towards the wall, and there’s nothing but air being sucked into the breach for a second... two... it’s got to close now, right?

Rose glances over to the Doctor again. He’s still looking over at her, his face twisted up with his struggle to keep his grip. He’s barely holding on now, and his eyes are almost resigned. Like he’s... no.

*Rose.* His voice is suddenly in her head, clear as day.

They’d discovered they could do this from a distance several days ago, but he’s never taken advantage of it. There hasn’t been anything pressing enough to require it.

*Doctor, whatever you’re thinking, don’t,* she answers him, the words slurring together even in her head. *Don’t, y’hear me! Just hold on!*

His fingertips slip from the clamp.

“NO!” Rose screams louder than she’s ever screamed, reaching out her arm as though she can catch him. One of his feet is still vaguely balanced on the base of the lever, but the pull of the void is too strong for that to hold him: his ankle gives way.

It all happens in slow motion from there: his arms flail for a grip on the lever, but he can’t get a hold on it. Instead, he merely hits his shoulder on it as he falls past it. The impact happens to twist him around such that she can see his face as he falls away from her. Falls toward the wall just like
the Daleks have been since it opened, falls straight toward hell. Meeting her eyes, he finishes the sentence he’d started in her mind.

*I love you.*

In his fleeting moment of emotional distress, the sentiment is carried across the growing distance between them, exploding in her mind in a soft, warm red. The eternal promise embraces her heart in a way so reminiscent of how he holds her, so gentle but so secure. He’s always loved her and always will. But instead of filling her with joy as she often dreamed they would, the words course through her veins like ice, because he’s waited until his final seconds of life to finally confess them to her.

Her only response is the continued scream ripping from her throat.

But just behind the Doctor, the giant shining hole into the Void begins to shrink. Quickly. Before the Doctor has fallen the length of the room, it’s swallowed itself up entirely with a sickening slurp. In a fraction of a second, the breach is gone, and the Void isn’t looming anymore. But it’s already too late for the Doctor. The momentum has already been built, and there’s no stopping it.

The white wall ripples violently as it solidifies back into the solid concrete and drywall and paint it was before the breach was opened. As soon as it does, the Doctor collides with it, one loud thud of his body and one heart-stopping crack of his head.

He crumples to the floor, completely lifeless.

As soon as Rose’s feet hit the ground, she’s running to him, screaming incoherent pleas to the universe as tears stream down her face.

She skids to her knees on the floor next to him, pressing her fingers into his neck to feel for a pulse.

She breathes out a sigh of relief that it’s there. Weak, and slow, but there. She places her hand under his nose, next, and there’s a soft, steady stream of air hitting her fingers.

Okay. She nods to herself. He’s alive. He’s breathing. His hearts are still beating.

“Doctor, can you hear me?” she says loudly, but receives no response.

He’s good at healing, isn’t he? He probably just needs time to recover from this. But how long should she give it?

She pulls back one of his eyelids to look at his eye, even though she has no idea what she’s looking for. She does notice that his pupil is blown wider than it usually is, and, pulling back the other one, this eye is looking in a different direction than the other one was. But she has no idea what either of those things means.

A thin stream of blood drips out of his right ear and onto his suit.

Oh, God. This is bad. The Doctor hasn’t been unconscious like this before. Not from a head injury. He’s going to wake up, right? He has to.

Rose takes off her jacket, and gently places it under his head as she carefully rolls him on his side so she can get a look at the back of his head.

She can’t see anything except for his hair and some blood, so she gently rests her hand on the back
of his head, trying to feel for anything unusual. There’s not a detectable crack in his skull or any brains oozing out or anything, so she thinks blood isn’t so bad. But when she pulls her hand away, and his blood is dripping down her fingers, she starts to panic anyway.

Oh, god.

“Help!” Rose shouts, unthinkingly, turning to face an empty room. But everyone that once worked in this building is either dead or evacuated. Her mum and Pete are back in the TARDIS, completely out of earshot. But even if they were here, what could they do? Neither of them is a doctor.

She’s got to call someone.

She reaches into her pocket for her phone, but just as she pulls it out, the Doctor starts convulsing.

Rose curses, her phone clattering to the ground as she reaches for him, trying to hold him steady. He’s on his side, already, at least; she’d read somewhere that’s the best position for someone to be in when they’re having a seizure. But this is bad. From what few medical TV shows she’s seen, head trauma followed by a seizure means that without immediate medical intervention, the patient faces death.

He should regenerate. He should be regenerating right now. But he’s not conscious – does he have to be for it to work?

She could drag him down the stairs back to the TARDIS, hope the ship can tell her what to do. Heal him somehow. But by the time they got there, he might already be dead.

Rose sobs merely thinking that to herself.

*Does* she call 999? Risk him being found out as an alien and locked in a cell, or worse, taken away for experiments? That is *if* they can find a way to save him?

Once she’s certain he’s stopped seizing for the moment, she checks his pulse and breathing again. His hearts are still beating, but he’s stopped breathing now.

There’s no time left. His biology is equipped with respiratory bypass, but from what he’s told her, that will only last him a few minutes. There must be a way to get through to him, force him to regenerate.

Slowly, carefully, she rests her fingertips on his temple, closing her eyes and trying to communicate with him the only other way she knows how.

He’s in here, she can tell that much. His mind is still very much alive, even if his brain is struggling to function. But none of it feels right. Where normally she’d need to obtain his permission to reach beyond his automatic mental barriers before connecting with him, this time she slips right inside his mind. Where normally he’d greet her instantly and warmly, inviting her in closer, in this moment he’s not consciously here to welcome her. In fact, he doesn’t acknowledge her in any way.

He doesn’t know she’s here at all.

The surface of his mind is completely empty, devoid of thought and feeling and speech, and yet she can feel him, somehow, somewhere...

She concentrates on following that feeling. Delving deeper inside his mind.
In a few moments, she finally reaches a place where the Doctor’s cognitive faculties seem to be still operating. Visions are racing through his head so fast she can hardly focus on them. They’re all short scenes of the Doctor: here in the Torchwood building, back in the TARDIS... alone.

Rose quickly realises these aren’t memories. These things haven’t ever happened. This incarnation has never been on his own like this – she’s been beside him the whole time.

Is he having visions of the future? A future, rather?

Concentrating harder, it does feel jarringly similar to the other night, when the Doctor showed her the ominous vision of the ‘storm’ his time sense had conjured up beneath the fireworks. The progression of events is hauntingly realistic, threatening him with its feasibility, but not set in stone.

Rose would say it doesn’t matter what he’s seeing in here, and all that matters is getting through to him, because he may have mere seconds of life left. But it does matter, because from her vantage point, it seems like the Doctor doesn’t know these are mere mirages of an alternate timeline. She can sense the permeating fear and grief dominating this corner of his mind as it clings to life, as though he really believes he’s living out these choppy visions. And given the fact he still doesn’t recognise her presence, Rose fears the damage to his brain is even worse than she thought. His time sense has gone haywire, he can’t tell reality from these comatose visions, and many of his neurological faculties have shut down completely. Most gravely, it seems, his respiratory system and his connection with her.

She’s got to get through to him.

**DOCTOR!** She yells from inside his head.

Suddenly, she’s standing opposite him on a cold, unfamiliar grey beach.

“Rose? What’s wrong?” he asks. He looks distressed, but more out of confusion than his own impending death. He doesn’t look injured, or to be in any pain. His suit and hair are perfectly intact.

“You need to regenerate!” she commands, convinced she doesn’t have time to start from the beginning.

He looks around, clearly scanning the otherwise empty coastline for some evidence of danger to his life.

“Rose, what are you on about?” he asks, his brow furrowing. “I’m fine.”

“Doctor, whatever this is you’re experiencing in here, it’s not real,” Rose insists.

This seems to properly upset him. His face distorts into a sad frown as though she’s rejected him.

“Rose, I know I’m not here properly. Not physically, but... I had to say goodbye.”

His injured brain is so lost in this delusion. She has to snap him out of it.

“No, Doctor! Don’t say goodbye!” She lunges forward and grabs onto the lapels of his suit, shaking him just slightly, trying to break the illusion. The Doctor’s eyes widen in some sort of fear, staring down at her hands in shock.

“Rose,” he gasps out, breathing heavily. “How are you doing this?” He hesitantly reaches his arm
up, touching her shoulder like she’s a ghost, like he expects his hand to pass right through it.

“Look, you’re hurt.” Rose gently puts her hands on either side of his face, forcing him to look at her. If she can’t break him out of this spell, maybe she can at least rely on the fact that he trusts her. Or, he once did. “You’re hurt really bad. You hit your head. You need to regenerate.”

“What’re you… agh!” Before he can finish whatever the sentence was going to be, his legs give out under him and he drops to his knees, replacing her hands on his head with his own.

“Rose,” he grits out through clenched teeth. “What’s happening?”

“Doctor, you need to stay with me.” She kneels down with him, fighting desperately for his full attention. “Can you feel the regeneration energy?”

“No,” he blurts out, frustrated.

He looks up at her, his eyes slowly going out of focus until they more closely resemble his lifeless eyes in the real world. “Rose, we don’t have much time. Just… needt’ tell you…”

“Doctor!” she shouts, bending down to his level. She can’t give up. “Listen! We’re not on this beach, okay? We’re at Canary Wharf. You’re about to leave me forever. You’ve got to trust me. I can feel it. The fire in your veins. You need to surrender to it.”

The Doctor’s eyes go blank as he suddenly directs his attention inward, trying to search, to focus, trying to follow her guidance.

The end result of this search, it seems, is more agony. The reality of his injuries catching up with him? The regeneration energy? Both? Whichever it is, he groans loudly as he hauls himself to his feet. She looks down at his hand at the same moment he does, watching the golden glow slowly saturate his fingers, radiating light onto his suit.

He gasps for air, and Rose knows she has to get out of here. Fast. Given the violence of his previous regeneration, she thinks holding onto him while this happens is likely to get her killed, instead. She recedes from his mind and jumps to her feet as soon as she’s back to the real world, scrambling away from him as the light bathing his still-unconscious figure burns ever brighter. She turns around and sprints for the other end of the room, sliding onto the floor behind one of the computer desks just as the explosion hits her ears.

A few seconds later she hears him, yelling in protest of the brutal process. It carries on for what feels like forever, and her heart aches for him. She doesn’t remember him being in this much agony the first time around. And that’s when it finally begins to hit her: the first time around. When he changed everything about himself and became the man he is now. Or was. He’s going to be a completely different man when she stands up to face him. And she had no time to prepare herself for that.

Still, it’s far better than no Doctor at all. They’ll get through it.

At long last, the pulsing and yelling ceases and the only sound is the Doctor gasping for air.

She stands up cautiously, peering over the desk to get a glimpse of him.

He’s still lying on the floor next to the wall in his tight brown suit, limbs sprawled out, panting, staring at the ceiling. But more than that: he’s still him. Perfectly styled and touchable brown hair, sideburns, gangly limbs.
“Doctor,” she calls softly, and he whips his head in the direction of the sound instantly, his eyes wide.

“Rose!” He bolts upright and leaps up onto his feet. But after he takes only two steps towards her, he loses his balance and belly flops flat on the floor with an ‘oof!’ With a groan, he gives up trying to move any further, content to wait for her to approach him.

She helps him sit up, and joins him on the floor, wrapping her arms around him tightly despite the awkward positioning.

“Rose, I’m... it’s me,” he says, clearly trying to reassure her. “I regenerated, but... it’s me.” He doesn’t realise it yet.

“Doctor, look.” She grins, making an effort not to outright giggle. She runs a hand through his hair, and grabs his hands and holds them up. He stares at one hand for a long moment, turning it around to view both sides, then runs his hand through his hair like she had. He shifts in his clothes, wriggles his feet inside his shoes. And, for good measure, he twists his arm behind him and reaches his hand up the back of his shirt. The moment he feels the mole between his shoulder blades is evident. Ecstatic, his jaw drops and his eyebrows shoot up on his forehead.

“It worked!” he exclaims.

“What worked?” she asks, genuinely puzzled by how this is possible.

“Rose, you did! You were there, when I was about to regenerate. You didn’t want me to change. I didn’t want to change. It was all I could think about.” He pauses, shaking his head. “Still, I think Bad Wolf is up to something again. This has never happened before.”

“But you said it could?” she counters.

“Honestly, I was just trying to make you feel better,” he admits. “It may have been technically possible, but I didn’t think it ever would.”

Ordinarily, she might slap him in the head for pulling a stunt like that, but it doesn’t seem appropriate at the moment.

Instead, she hugs him again, so glad that her previous hug with him several days before hadn’t been her last. She came so close to losing him.

“I know I said you might end up burning through your regenerations quickly, but this is a bit too fast,” she says, wiping tears of joy from her eyes. “We might be evening the odds too much.”

The Doctor chuckles despite himself, running a hand over his cheek, seeming as thankful it’s unchanged as she is.

“Only got one left now,” he says, his tone oddly light given the subject matter. “Maybe it’s time to retire, then.”

“Nah,” says Rose, laughing along with him this time.

“What was goin’ on in your head, Doctor?” she asks after a moment.

He takes a deep breath, blowing it out through his mouth exaggeratedly.

“I was having visions, premonitions, maybe.” He certainly seems more cogent now; she’s glad
brain damage was healed just as well as bodily damage during the regeneration. “Possible
timelines. Or maybe just one timeline. With the trauma to my brain, it seems like the tissue itself
was having a tough time handling a Time Lord consciousness crammed inside. My time sense was
going mad, and for whatever reason, that’s where it decided to send me in my final moments. I
couldn’t remember what happened though. Acute amnesia, or perhaps delirium from the
intracranial pressure, or some combination was making it impossible for me to tell it wasn’t real.
But it did feel... off. I could tell something was wrong, I just couldn’t pinpoint what it was. It was
like I was trapped in the Matrix, but couldn’t get out.”

“God.” She’d been so focused on saving him, she hasn’t paused for long to consider how terrifying
it must have been for him. How long did it feel like he was trapped in there, before she got to him?
Time is such a subjective thing.

“Until you showed up,” he adds with a crooked grin, nudging her with his elbow.

Rose chuckles, content to go along with his attempt to lighten the mood. “I was your red pill.”

“You were. Thank you for saving me.”

“Anytime. Anyway, it was only a few days ago you saved my life.”

“Quite right, too.” The Doctor grimaces, like he instantly regrets saying it.

“What?” she asks. The words seem innocuous enough.

“Something about that phrase is putting me off.” He frowns, trying to figure out why with more
effort than it seems he should. “Hmm.”

“All right, let’s go,” Rose says, getting to her feet and holding out a hand for his. “You need some
rest. You’re gonna get loopy on me again like last time.”

“I am not.” But he almost falls when he stands up, and Rose has to wrap her arm around his waist
and support half his weight on her shoulders in order for him to stay upright. “All right, maybe a
little dizzy, then,” he admits. “You try regenerating, see how you feel afterwards.”

“Would if I could,” she teases.

They slowly make their way across the length of the room, Rose taking care to avoid the broken
glass and other debris littering the room so the Doctor doesn’t stumble again.

When Rose opens the door to the stairwell, both their shuffling feet stop dead in their tracks.

There’s a man waiting for them at the top of the stairs.

A tall, handsome man in a blue trench coat.
Chapter 36

Holy crap guys. I can't believe this is it. The last proper chapter. It's been such a long time coming - I'm so sorry you had to wait three months for this update. I really hope you guys enjoy how I've wrapped up this story. I tried to make it as rewarding as possible for all the waiting and tension and angst I put us all through. In other words I hope it's all worth it! <3

There is an epilogue to follow! (Which is in the very rough draft stage, but I am clutching onto it so tightly I'm not sure if I will ever actually let it go... I can hardly bear the thought of saying goodbye!) So this isn't the /very/ end, not quite yet. But still a major milestone.

Thank you to Amber for the beta and neverending support.

All my love to everyone who's stuck with me on this story since the beginning. Way back in May of 2016, if you can believe it. <3

“Rose!” the man exclaims, smiling from ear to ear. “And... Doctor?” he says, shock distorting his features as he takes in the figure of the man she’s supporting.

Rose gasps. “Jack!”

“Jack?” the Doctor asks at the same time, his tone coloured far more with disgust than excitement.

“That is you, right?” asks Jack.

He stares at the Doctor’s face with bemusement. When the Doctor doesn’t answer straight away, Jack turns his attention briefly to Rose. “Unless you’ve taken to traveling space with some other... guy...” he trails off, eyeing the Doctor with sudden suspicion.

“What?” the Doctor asks, unable to make sense of Jack’s question in his state of disbelief.

“I mean, the...” he points to his own face, circling his finger awkwardly.

“Oh.” Of course. He’s not used to doing this anymore: explaining the regeneration process to old friends he encounters after a change. “Right.” He sighs. “Yes, it’s me. Same man, new face. Long story.” He waves a hand dismissively, not wanting to delve into it further.

Jack turns to Rose again, looking for confirmation he can trust the bloke she’s currently half-supporting.

Squinting her eyes, Rose gives him a nod (not as surreptitious as she thinks), and Jack seems to relax a bit. He sizes the Doctor up from head to toe, nodding appreciatively.

“And here I thought you couldn’t get any more attractive.”

“Your’re tellin’ me,” Rose agrees with a giggle.
“What are you doing here?” the Doctor asks, shutting down that train of thought before it can travel any further.

“Well, it’s great to see you, too.” Jack crosses his arms over his chest. “Jeez. This new Doctor is kinda cheeky, huh?” He directs this question to Rose.

Rose turns to glare at the Doctor before responding in her own way.

“Yes,” she agrees through her teeth. “It is great to see you, Jack,” she adds with a disarming smile. “God, I’ve missed you! What are you doing here, though?” she asks, with excitement rather than the displeasure he’d inquired with.

“My team has been local since this all started,” Jack explains, gesturing around the building they’re in. “But we haven’t had any luck putting a stop to it. After the cyclone or whatever it was that got rid of the Cybermen and Daleks just now, I figured you were behind it. And this was the eye of the storm. I left as soon as I could.”

“Left where?” the Doctor asks.

“Up until a few minutes ago, my team and I were trying to keep at least one block of London safe. Got shot by a Dalek laser a couple times; not the greatest day I’ve ever had.”

“Oh!? Are you hurt?” Rose asks frantically, letting go of the Doctor entirely in favour of approaching Jack.

Thankfully, the alarms going off in his head in response to the anomaly in time and space that is Jack Harkness are enough to keep him alert and balanced enough to stand on his own for a few minutes.

“I’m fine. Just flesh wounds,” Jack insists, brushing off Rose’s attempts to check him for injury.

“Team?” the Doctor asks, fixating on a different part of Jack’s story.

“Long story,” Jack uses the Doctor’s choice of words from earlier. “How did you get rid of them?”

“Well,” the Doctor explains. “Opened up the Void to –” he makes a dramatic slurping noise and gestures with his hand – “suck the Daleks and Cybermen back into it.”

Jack furrows his brow in confusion, but he nods along anyway, seeming to decide it doesn’t matter. “Sounds about right.”

“So, what’s this ‘long story’ then?” The Doctor is simply too curious how Jack ended up here and (and now) to let his non-explanation of his ‘team’ drop.

Jack sighs, glancing reluctantly between him and Rose for a long moment.

“I’m the director of Torchwood.”

The Doctor’s fists clench at his sides, his vision tunnelling in hues of red.

No. Not Jack. It can’t be.

“It’s not what you think,” Jack rushes out, holding out his hands in an attempt to ward off the Doctor’s anger. “My team is not affiliated with these criminals,” he spits out the word. “This whole establishment is a sham. We’ve been trying to take these guys down for months, but we’re too new in our operations. We didn’t have the resources or the manpower. But we’re running the real deal.
An organization trying to assess and handle alien threats when you’re not around. I started it for you. In your honour,” he pleads emphatically, earnestly, for the Doctor to approve.

“Jack, that’s amazing,” Rose congratulates him without pause. “I’ve been so worried about you, hoped you were doin’ all right. Of course you’ve been off savin’ the world in your own way.”

The Doctor’s scowl slowly recedes. He doesn’t like the idea of it; Pete’s Torchwood team don’t exactly have a reputation for being stellar role models, either. The word ‘Torchwood’ is leaving an awfully bad taste in his mouth. But if Jack and his team were fighting adamantly against this operation, and Rose approves, they can’t be so bad, can they?

“Since when?” the Doctor asks.

“Six months, maybe. Not long. We normally operate out of Cardiff.”

The Doctor makes a small noise of disgust in the back of his throat. “Not surprising...” Jack just rolls his eyes, already accustomed to the rude comments. “How did you make it back to Rose’s time?”

Jack opens his mouth to answer, but something stops the words in his throat. Confusion and the first traces of anger flit across his face.

“Wait a minute.” He holds his index finger up in the air as he thinks his question through. “Shouldn’t you be asking how I’m alive?” he asks, turning his finger on them like they may be hiding something.

The Doctor and Rose are silent. She glances over at him guiltily, and they both adamantly avoid Jack’s gaze.

“You mean you didn’t think I was dead!?” Jack shouts. “You just abandoned me out there!?”

Rose jabs the Doctor in the ribs with her elbow.

“Abandoned?” she repeats through her teeth.

“Oi!” he yelps, shrinking away from her as much as he can without losing his balance.

“Would’ve hit you in the head, but it seemed too soon,” Rose says, just about as angry as she can get.

He grumbles to himself.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jack asks, still frustrated.

“Long story,” the Doctor offers their new avoidance phrase again.

“I’m so sorry, Jack.” Rose cuts in, and the Doctor’s stomach sinks. He does not want this conversation to happen right now. Rose is going to be livid with him, and he’s only just gotten her all to himself. “I didn’t know you had no way back. I had no part in that,” she assures him. “The Doctor – I assumed he talked to you back on the Satellite. I thought... well, I didn’t find out that you were... until...”

The Doctor sighs.

“Wait a minute... find out?” Jack works through Rose’s choice of words slowly. “You knew!?” He turns to the Doctor with fresh anger.
The Doctor sighs again, his hearts heavy. He delays answering as long as he can, but there’s no way Jack will let this go.

“I knew,” he admits. “I sensed it as soon as it happened. But I only told Rose what had happened a few days ago.”

“You know what happened, then?” Jack asks, curiosity piqued. “Because I don’t. I was staring down death, finally made my peace with it, actually, and the next thing I knew I woke up. Died a few hundred more times after that, always woke up. Always gasping, like I’d just had a nightmare. Never understood why or how this happened. I just knew it all started on that godforsaken Satellite.”

“Well...” the Doctor stalls again, scratching the back of his head. “Rose, actually.”

“Rose?” Jack asks incredulously, glancing at her. “How could she possibly have done this?”

“Not her, per se,” he hedges. “Rose joined with the heart of the TARDIS and absorbed the power of the Time Vortex to rescue me. For a few minutes, she became nearly omnipotent. And when she discovered Jack Harkness had perished, she brought him back to life. But the resurrection came at a cost.”

“I’m sorry, Jack. I’m so sorry.” Rose covers her mouth with her hand, ashamed of herself.

“I removed the Vortex, and with it all memories of her time as the Bad Wolf. But I couldn’t undo what she’d done.”

Jack takes a long moment to process what he’s just heard, taking a deep breath.

“Don’t blame yourself, Rose,” he says in a soothing tone. “You were trying to save me. Plus, It’s not so bad. I’m honestly used to it.” He shrugs, taking his tremendous curse in stride.

“Well, hey, look, I’m immortal now, too,” Rose offers, trying to cheer him up. “Sort of.”

“Come again?” Jack asks, eyes going wide.

“Yeah, another long story,” she grins just a little as she uses their phrase herself. “We’ll have to swap all of ‘em later,” she suggests. The Doctor is glad to see that this unexpected visit hasn’t completely destroyed her mood. But suddenly, she remembers what they were discussing up until this point. Turns back to the Doctor.

“But you! Just bloody abandoned him?” Her voice jumps two octaves in her anger, and this time, she does smack him on the side of the head.

“Ow!” he whinges, rubbing the spot.

“What you said before... well, I at least thought you’d talked about it, came to some sort of agreement! If you had said that’s what you were doin’, I never would’ve let you get away with it!”

All right, she’s still upset about that. He deserves that. At the time she’d found out, she was too distracted trying to learn about her own immortality to get caught up in thoughts of Jack, but now that he’s here with them and she’s had time to process it, it seems to be hitting her full force.

“I do everything I can to stay away from fixed points in time, Rose,” he tries to explain. “You know that.”
What she doesn’t know is how intensely unsettling and wrong it feels to be in the presence of one, how uncomfortable he is even now, being around something so unnatural. Encountering a fixed point in time is stressful enough, walking on eggshells trying to not disturb the way history is destined to proceed. But a fixed person? It shouldn’t even be possible. It’s ingrained deep in his psyche that it’s wrong on every level. Maybe it’s something he can show her the next time they’re connected. Maybe then she’d understand.

“Well, that shouldn’t include people!” she insists, still frustrated. “He’s our friend!”

“I appreciate it, Rose,” Jack interrupts. If she weren’t here, he thinks Jack might have punched him in the jaw by now.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” the Doctor offers quietly, moved to action by Rose’s ire. “I panicked. I had just regenerated; I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Regenerated?”


“Doesn’t that make you a hypocrite?” Jack accuses.

He sucks in a breath and exhales with a sigh. “Probably,” he admits. “I’m sorry,” he repeats. It’ll never be enough, but it’s a start.

“Well,” Jack takes a deep breath and seems to loosen up. “I suppose it all turned out. In fact, it might’ve been for the best. I’m happy, getting to run my own team here from Earth. And I think... I might’ve found someone.”

“Found someone?” Rose asks. “Like... a girl?”

“A boy.” He gives Rose the Harkness smirk.

“Ooohh!” Rose sings, intrigued.

“Didn’t think a bloke existed that could make playboy of the universe settle down,” the Doctor quips.


After months spent travelling with him, the Doctor knows Jack pretty well: his behaviour, his habits, his sexuality. But he still doesn’t understand it. Any of it.

But whether the Doctor likes it or not, Jack looks well. Confident, and proud of what he does. The man standing before them is a far cry from the pompous con artist they met in war-torn 1940’s London. The Doctor can’t help but be just a little proud. If they’d never met, Jack might’ve stayed the fraudulent coward he was back then for the rest of his very short life. But now he has a chance to properly make a difference.

A swell of dizziness washes over him suddenly; his knees buckle and he grabs onto Rose again for support.

Not expecting it, Rose nearly falls over, and Jack has to come to her aid to keep the Doctor upright.
“Not feeling well?” Jack asks.

“Tend to feel a bit woozy after regenerating,” the Doctor explains.

“Woozy’ doesn’t quite cover it,” Rose adds. “C’mon, let’s get him back to the TARDIS.”

The Doctor has no choice but to cling onto both of them for support as the walls and floor around them become indistinguishable. The shock of seeing Jack had kept him somewhat functional, but now that it’s worn off, lethargy sets in again, bringing disorientation with it.

He gets himself talking again, hoping it’ll help.

“Not working on dimension hopping technology, are you?” he asks, hoping Jack’s organisation doesn’t become as reckless as Pete’s team, tearing holes in the fabric of reality.

“No, why?”

“No reason...” the Doctor trails off.

“Good thing, though,” Rose adds to him. “Jack would’ve been sucked in, too.”

“Mhm,” the Doctor agrees, nodding.

“What do you mean?” asks Jack.

“The Cybermen and Daleks were pulled into the Void because they were soaked in Voidstuff. Anything that’s travelled between dimensions has it.”

“Huh. You two have never done that?”

“No, we have, actually,” says Rose. “That’s how this happened,” she gestures to the Doctor’s somewhat helpless state. “He’s lucky he made it at all.”

Being reminded of his near-death encounter seems to help her overcome her recent anger, because she reaches over and kisses his cheek.

“Aw,” Jack croons. “Aren’t you two the cutest.”

The Doctor blushes fiercely. And that does wake him up a little bit.

When they arrive back at the TARDIS, they’re instantly greeted by a very worried Jackie and Pete. The couple explodes with questions about whether the Daleks are gone, the identity of the stranger in the blue trench coat, why the Doctor can barely walk. Jack and Rose thankfully address most of the inquiries, and the Doctor collapses on the jump seat and tries to stay engaged as best as he can. But the console room is spinning, and it feels like he’s been drugged with a general anaesthetic that hasn’t fully kicked in yet. He swears before his tenth incarnation, there wasn’t always this much drowsiness.

“Why don’t the four of you catch up,” he says, standing up. “I think I’m going to have a kip...”

“You sure it’s not against the rules for me to stick around?” asks Jack, acerbic.

The Doctor is tempted to play along and tell him it is against the rules (because really, it’s hardly ideal having an impossible thing like him around the TARDIS for an extended period of time), but he plays nice. “Stay as long as you want.”
“Huh. Rose here has really softened you up, hasn’t she?” Jack smiles, pleased with the notion. The Doctor can’t find it in himself to contest it.

She really has.

“Here, let me at least walk you to bed,” says Rose, hurrying across the room to catch up with him before he can reach the hall. He’s glad for it, because his legs are still wobbly and he doesn’t quite trust his balance to get him to bed safely.

Rose puts her arm around his waist as they make their way down the hall. Jack whistles loudly behind them.

“Oh, shut up!” Rose shouts back, but there’s a smile in her voice. “He’s just going to sleep.”

“Uh-huh!” Jack chuckles behind them.

The Doctor rolls his eyes.

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Waking up alone in a bed he’s become so used to sharing is a jarring feeling. Since Kaelondaia, he’s never even been in this bed by himself (Rose never wakes up and leaves the room before he does), and it’s unsettling now. Reminds him of the hell his subconscious created out of twisted timelines while he was dying.

He desperately reaches out to Rose with his mind, telling her in a dazed and lonely jumble that he’s awake and misses her and could she please come back?

To his hearts’ delight, the bedroom door cracks open within a minute. Rose peers through it curiously, and a brilliant smile lights up her face (and the entire room) when she confirms he’s really conscious.

“Hey, stranger.”

He pulls back the covers and pats the empty side of the bed, more eager than he thinks he’s ever been to see her.

She climbs under the blanket and snuggles up next to him, her lips finding his automatically. It feels like it’s been months since he’s kissed her. She means for it to be a modest, good morning peck, but he cups her chin in his hand before she can pull away, savouring it. Committing everything about her to his new cells’ memory. Often, things he’s experienced a thousand times can feel different when he emerges from the other side of a regeneration. His perceptions can subtly change. And when he’s in a brand new body, his senses are heightened: pristine nerve endings all over his body more sensitive.

Supposedly, one day he’ll tire of things like kissing. It’s a caveat passed down through generations – that eventually kissing the same person for the millionth time loses all appeal. But the Doctor is sceptical that’s possible when it comes to Rose. A kiss from her is such a pure form of bliss. Her lips soft and gentle and, even when passionate, never demanding. The softest touch from her instils a sense of calm in him; even in the worst of circumstances she can make the world stop spinning and help him to breathe again with one small kiss. As long as she’s in his arms, everything will always be all right.
Veiled behind but a thin membrane separating their minds, the soft tenderness and adoration she has for him simmer impatiently, waiting to flood through their connection as soon as they open it.

She tastes just vaguely of tea and sugar this morning, and it gets him wondering how long he’s been out.

Waking up his time sense to get an estimate, he pulls away gently, but keeps Rose close.

Twenty hours... ugh.

“I’ve been out almost a day,” he laments.

“You have.” She nods with a pout.

“Jack still here?” he asks.

“No, he left with Pete before I went to bed.”

“You slept and woke up already?”

“I think you know me well enough by now to know I don’t go thirty hours without sleep.”

“True.”

“Life or death circumstances notwithstanding.”

“Of course.”

“You were out like a bloody light.”

He grumbles, disappointed he missed out on so much time. “Sorry I couldn’t celebrate with you properly.”

“’S okay. You didn’t need to be conscious for me to cuddle with you anyway.”

He grins, chuffed at the thought that he was still close to her while he was out.

“Wait, where’d Jack take Pete?” he asks.

“Torchwood,” she says, as though it had come as surprise when she first heard, too. “He’s offerin’ him a job.”

“Is he?” the Doctor’s jaw drops. But, realising what this will mean, he soon sighs in defeat. The legacy of Torchwood is clearly not meant to wither away in any universe. “Well, I suppose that’s to be expected. Is Pete interested?”

“Sounds like a great opportunity,” she shrugs, not seeming to care much either way, which he finds odd. Though, she really hasn’t gotten to know this alternate version of her dad very well yet. “He could basically continue the kind of work he was doing back on his world.”

“Hmm.” He decides not to ask any more questions about her family, figuring she needs time to process it all. “Did Jack tell you any more about what he and his team are up to?”

“Yeah. And I really do think you’d approve.” She pokes him lightly in the chest. “He’s a good man.”
“I know,” he admits grudgingly. “Risked his life for you, that’d make anyone a hero in my book.”

“You could ease up on him, you know.” She strokes the finger on his chest, staring at him with that irresistible Rose gaze.

“Ohhhh, I know.” He sighs in defeat, caving immediately. “I’ll try.”

“Well, he and Ianto are coming ’round for supper tonight, so, try then.” She grins a bit too wide, nervous of his reaction to this news.

“Roooose,” he groans.

“C’mon, just play nice. He really wants to impress you. And I want to meet this bloke.”

He grumbles one more time, just for effect. He knows he’s already lost.

“It’s a good thing I love you,” he blurts out.

Oh.

That’s not exactly how he intended to say that out loud for the first time.

It is not lost on Rose, either, by the sudden intake of breath and the way her jaw drops open. Her eyes glisten with something, for once, unreadable, but she’s strangely quiet, like she’s waiting for him to take it back or correct himself.

Well, not this time. Instead of flinching away from it, one side of his mouth lifts up in a nervous smile.

“So...” Rose starts, smiling back in disbelief. “I thought you just... said it before, because you were, well, you know...”

The Doctor reaches for her hand, taking it firmly in his until their connection flares to life. He reinforces the sentiment as strongly as he can, saying it again as clearly as day in his mind. Unlike the previous time, when he screamed it across the distance of a room as his swan song, this time he intertwines it delicately with all the feelings he associates with Rose, matching them with the English word that he still thinks doesn’t do justice to it all. The complex patchwork of esteem, trust, and attraction he has for the woman who saved him from himself.

Rose takes in a ragged breath as her eyes fill with tears, and he lets go of her hand. It’s so easy for him to forget to titrate his emotions with her. Though she’s a natural at telepathy, and has made much improvement, his mind is still far stronger than hers. The intensity of emotional currents from him can still easily overwhelm her.

“I love you so much, Rose. I’m sorry it took me so long to say it.”

Even as she wipes moisture from her eyes with the back of her hand, a wide grin spreads across her face.

“You know I love you, too, right?”

Hearing the phrase out loud, in her beautiful voice no less, pierces both his hearts straight through with Cupid’s bloody arrows. But, still out of practice with such sentimental discussions, he can’t help but tease her.

“You were really never that subtle, darling.”
She shoves him playfully in the shoulder. “I’m bein’ serious.”

“Sorry.” He bows his head, thinking back to all the times he knew she loved him without her having to say the words. It’s most obvious when she’s inside his mind, but even without that, even when he wasn’t capable of admitting it to himself, it was obvious. “I do.”

“Is it just for my body?” he teases her again, pulling up the covers and staring down at himself. “I probably should’ve properly changed just to see if...”

“Oh, all right.” She shuts him up with another kiss.

Though they both know he was only teasing, as they sink effortlessly into the kiss and one another’s minds, they reassure each other that they’re both utterly serious about their proclamations of affection. It’s not much different than any other time they’ve been connected; it’s impossible to hide their true feelings for each other when connected so deeply. Only now, there’s three little words suffused through the whirlwind of passion.

_I love you._

For so long they bit their tongues, restrained by insecurity, and finally giving truth a voice feels very much like freedom. Doubts neither of them realized they were still carrying suddenly float away, leaving behind a calm the Doctor didn’t realize was possible. Not the kind of calm before a storm, but the kind that comes after: when the storm has passed, and you realize you and your home are safe as the sun emerges from behind the clouds with a rainbow.

Words, the Doctor realises, are more important than he’d given them credit for.

It’s not until the Doctor just barely hears the bedroom door closing of its own accord several minutes later (the TARDIS giving them privacy) that he realizes how quickly the has kiss escalated into much more.

Rose has climbed on top of him; her fingers tangle in his hair while his gently stroke the skin beneath her shirt. Her deep, patient kisses have gradually dosed him with oxytocin and so much desire that he’s hardened beneath her. She, of course, becomes aware of this the exact moment he does, and shifts her position, straddling him with her thighs so she can comfortably take advantage of the new knowledge.

They both gasp when the friction is far more pleasurable than either of them expected. She rolls her hips again, and suddenly they aren’t so much kissing as breathing praise against one another’s lips.

_Rose, I’m..._ he captures her attention. _More sensitive right now... new body... new nerve endings..._ the sentence drags on, interrupted by fresh waves and sighs of pleasure as she aligns herself _just right._

“Can tell,” Rose whispers against his jaw, speeding up.

He can already feel their joint control slipping, tension searching for release.

_This’ll be over so soon..._ he laments, even as he wordlessly pleads for her to continue.

_Don’t think,_ she switches to his preferred form of communication to soothe away his pesky instinct to time everything. _Just relax. We’ve got all the time in the world to do it again._ She languidly brushes her lips just beneath his jawline, to emphasize how little she’s concerned about their methods at the moment. Tells him again that she loves him and that they ought to be celebrating that he’s _alive,_ that she saved him as much as he saved her. It suddenly it hits him anew that he can
spend the rest of his life with her: travelling the universe, saving planets... lying in their bed doing this, if they want.

This word choice unintentionally invokes a memory.

You can spend the rest of your life with me, a younger version of himself had promised on a dark street.

Rose clings onto him ever tighter as sorrow cuts through her.

But I can’t spend the rest of mine with you.

The disinterred pain and longing of their past lingers between them for only a moment before it’s tempered by their present. Their future. Because he can now. He can.

It doesn’t matter they’ve still got some clothes on, or that this isn’t quite how they wanted their first time reunited to go. The sensitivity of this new body is so acute, neither of them is sure anymore they could handle going at it a more traditional way: it might be over even faster, then. Nothing matters except they’re still together, that in the end nothing could keep them apart: not even mortality. Their intertwined timelines stretch out into the distance, woven with bright gold fibres and bathed in a soft red glow of passion and devotion.

Rose’s pleasure mingles with his own, intoxicating them both, as the perfect rhythm of her hips against his carries on. It’s never quite enough contact or friction, but it somehow continues to lift them both higher until they’re desperate to finish together. Their thoughts slowly empty of everything but sensation. Rose clutches onto fistfuls of his shirt, his hands splay on the small of her back to steady her movements. They savour the slow waves of heightened pleasure as they finally crash between them.

Rose sounds so beautiful when she comes, his name sharing a breath with a moan, sultry against his cheek.

Their lips find each other again as they float back down to reality together.

“Oops.” Rose says softly when they part. She bites her lip.

“That's not even the first time that's happened to us, is it?” he recalls sheepishly, shaking his head.

“S okay. We're just too good. Sometimes we've got to keep it simple.” She combs her fingers through his hair idly, preening a bit.

“First in this body, though,” he fuels her ego even more. “Took my virginity again, Rose Tyler.”

“I’m trouble,” she teases, tongue just barely poking between her teeth.

“Certainly are.”

He just lies there for a while, enjoying the way she’s playing with his hair. Frankly, she still doesn’t do it enough.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she says, reading his thoughts.

“I’d almost forgotten about that,” he says after a moment, changing the subject. “Heightened sensitivity. One of the perks of being a Time Lord, I suppose.”

“Yes,” she agrees emphatically.
She leans down for another kiss, and he confesses yet another truth: that it’s been centuries since he’s remotely considered being with someone in this way. Since he’s even felt this kind of attraction. He certainly does get sentimental when Rose has just had her way with him.

*I wouldn’t have it any other way,* she assures him.

Just by reflecting on how rare and precious this opportunity is, they both begin to get carried away again. What began as a sweet, innocent kiss has become so deep and urgent it’s hard to find time to breathe. The Doctor’s hand slips beneath Rose’s pants and Rose fumbles with the buttons on his shirt. Vivid fantasies pulse through their connection: all the ways they’d like to have a second go of it with fewer clothes and much more skin contact.

But before any of their clothes actually leave their bodies, Rose suddenly stops them.

“I forgot,” she rushes out, prying her mouth away from his. “My mum’s waitin’ for us to have breakfast.”

Well. That’s one way to kill a mood.

“Rose,” he sighs heavily, dropping one hand gracelessly to the mattress and covering over his eyes with the other. “Why would you bring up your mother at a time like this?”

“I feel bad! She’s out there all by herself. She doesn’t know where anythin’ is. C’mon, we should go.”

She tries to climb off him, but he holds her fast by her waist, whining like a child.

“I wasn’t finished with you yet.”

“I promise,” she enunciates clearly, like she’s trying to get a hold of herself. “We’ll continue this later.” The way she’s gazing at him like he’s all she really wants for breakfast, he thinks she may be easily swayed.

“Rose, please,” he begs in his lowest, most seductive voice he can manage. “She can wait five more minutes.”

“Five minutes, hmm?” She chuckles despite herself. “That’s ambitious.”

Her body betrays her words; he can already feel her relaxing against him once more.

“Ten,” he amends, brushing their noses together and reuniting their lips. His hand glides beneath her shirt, finding her breast and grazing his thumb over her nipple.

She gasps into his mouth, pressing into his hand.

Okay, she surrenders eagerly. *You win.*

His only answer is a low hum of victory.

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When they finally stroll into the kitchen precisely twelve minutes later, Jackie is at the table reading a book with some tea.

She glances to the doorway when she hears their footsteps approaching.
“Well, *that* took a long time,” she says, raising an eyebrow disapprovingly like she already knows why.

“Er...” the Doctor reddens instantly. “Yea, we had to, um...” Oh, dear. His stuttering is not helping. He and Rose should have pre-fabricated an explanation for their tardiness.

She holds up her palm to stop his half-formed explanation.

“I don’t want to know.” She turns back to her book, shaking her head.

The Doctor cringes, wiping a hand down his face. Rose turns to him with an utterly indiscreet ‘I told you so’ look that doesn’t help.

Despite this mortifying embarrassment, he thinks it was worth it. That second time was even better than the first.

They go for a full English breakfast this morning, Rose starved from exertion and the Doctor even more starved from the taxing physiological demands of regeneration. Shortly after sitting down to his plate, the Doctor discovers he’s not very fond of meat anymore. Huh. May be the first vegetarian incarnation. Interesting.

“Damned taste buds change every time,” he laments, pushing a piece of sausage off his fork with his finger and letting it drop back onto his plate.

“Still like the linschenberry syrup, though?” Rose asks.

“Oh, yes,” he says, mopping up some of the green stuff with a bite of fried bread.

“Then we’ll make it work,” Rose assures him with a smile.

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It’s a socially exhausting day of catching up with Jackie (Rose still hasn’t told her about the whole immortality thing – and the Doctor doesn’t know how to bring it up, or whether he even should), dinner with Jack and Ianto, and setting Pete and Jackie back up in their flat (at least until they can find a better place). But finally, at just after ten local time, he and Rose are finally alone again, the entire TARDIS to themselves.

Rose slumps onto the jump seat, looking about as exhausted from all the socializing as he feels, as he guides them back to the privacy of the Vortex. He approaches her as soon as they’re safely tucked away, taking both her hands and interlocking their fingers. As soon as they have sufficient contact, they both silently agree all they want to do is head back to their room. Take a long, hot bath together then get back under the covers and make love until they fall asleep.

Rose, however, is too tired to move.

Notwithstanding her exhaustion, she is still stirred by the enticing plans they’ve made for the evening. She lets go of his hand in favour of latching onto his tie so she can tug his mouth down to hers.

It’s a *good* kiss. So good that it takes him a solid minute to remember how non-ideal this location is for amorous activities. There’s no way they’ll both fit on the chair, and the Doctor doesn’t quite feel up to standing. They tried that once and it’s awfully strenuous on his part.

He’s about to offer to carry her back to their room so they can continue this in comfort, when a
woman’s voice sounds behind them.

“Oh!”

The Doctor and Rose both gasp as they’re startled apart, and he whirls around to locate and assess the threat. Seeing no one, he takes a step to the side and leans over to glance around the time rotor, holding out an arm behind him to indicate Rose stay put.

A redhead in a wedding dress stands just across the console, looking utterly out of place and lost.

Despite his admonishment, Rose gets to her feet, too, peering over the Doctor’s protective outstretched arm to get a glance at the intruder for herself.

The woman turns to them both, her face twisting up with disgust.

“Who the hell are you?” she spits out.

He and Rose respond to her in unison, the same utter confusion in their voice.

“What!”
I put this off as long as I possibly could. I left the draft sitting on my computer for weeks. Couldn’t even touch it. I just needed the reassurance it was still there, waiting for me. When I finally mustered the courage to edit, I found myself going through it over and over again, restarting at the beginning and finding new things to nitpick each time. Just so I could hold on for a little bit longer.

I’m sorta just sitting here crying now that I’m really posting this. I can’t believe it’s time to let this story go. If it’s possible, this story means even more to me than CS did. It’s gotten me through two of the hardest years of my life (almost exactly - I started working on it May 4, 2016). It’s my happy place. I can’t even describe how much I’m going to miss it. How much I’m going to miss the Doctor and Rose. Please send me lots of love on this one, guys. I am a complete wreck.

I suppose the only thing left I can say is I hope I’ve given these two a forever they deserve. And I hope it was worth the long journey for you, the readers.

Infinite thanks to Amber for the betas, brainstorming help, and moral support she’s provided for this fic over the last two years. Couldn’t have done it without you. <3

P.S. - (contains spoilers, sort of) There’s no Tentoo. Also, no Master, and Donna never loses her memories. Because I said so.

“Oh!” a voice rings out from somewhere across the room. The single syllable conveys more exasperation than would be possible for anyone except Donna Noble.

Rose shoves the Doctor away, and their mouths break apart with a sound that’s not nearly as discreet as she’d hoped. She swipes her arm down her side to dislodge his hand from her arse, too.

“Honestly, you two, it’s, like, every morning these days!”

Heat flooding into her face, Rose turns reluctantly to face their accuser.

“I mean, can you not get all this out of your systems at night? By yourselves? Not in common areas?” Donna gestures around the kitchen, palm open wide to heighten the drama of the motion. Her hair is a right mess, the baggy t-shirt she wore to bed hanging off one shoulder. Rose normally isn’t in the best mood right when she wakes up, either, so to some extent she understands Donna’s current frustration.

“Sorry,” says Rose.

“Oh,” the Doctor counters at the same time, drawing out the word. “Come on. We were just kissing.”

“That,” Donna raises her index finger pointedly in the air, “was not kissing. That was snogging. If I’d walked in a minute later you’d have been taking each other’s bloody clothes off.”
The Doctor rolls his eyes with a barely audible grumble, but doesn’t argue further.

“I mean, we eat in here!” Donna continues her tirade just as Martha walks into the kitchen.

“What’s all the fussing about?” she asks. She’s still in her slippers and pyjamas, but looks refreshed from a decent night’s sleep. After the trip they’d just had, they all needed one (well, save for the Doctor, perhaps, who never seems to need more than a few hours no matter what). And, unlike Donna and Rose, Martha doesn’t need long at all to become quite agreeable in the mornings.

“Oh, nothing,” Donna responds before anyone else can. “Just came in to make my tea and caught these two goin’ at it against the counter again.”

Clearly unsatisfied with Donna’s description, the Doctor’s responding sigh is almost a growl.

Martha grimaces, looking away from the lot of them and taking a seat at the table by herself. “Oh.” She chances a glance over at Rose and, finding her undoubtedly pink in the face, offers her a forgiving smile.

“Tell you what, look,” says Donna. “Here’s what we ought to do. Martha, Rose, how about a girls’ day out today? Give us a bit of a break from being the third and fourth wheels on your honeymoon.”

This is a suggestion Rose did not expect to hear. For lack of an appropriate response, she merely asks, “What?”

“The three of us.” Donna points to herself, Martha, and Rose. “Go back to Earth. Get our nails done, have some massages, gossip. Skinny boy can go pick up Jack, have a boy’s day someplace else.”

Rose’s first instinct is to glance over to the Doctor, and she can’t help but think he looks saddened by the idea: his forehead creased, his soft, brown eyes glistening like a puppy’s.

“Err...” the Doctor mumbles, still staring at Rose.

“What d’you think?” asks Donna.

“Sounds good to me,” Martha offers with a shrug.

“Rose?” Donna asks again, more insistent.

“Er...” She and the Doctor haven’t been too far apart to telepathically communicate since Canary Wharf. Almost three months. The risk of the TARDIS malfunctioning somehow – returning the Doctor to pick them up from such an excursion too late – seems too great to bear.

She turns back to Donna, poised to respond, but words simply don’t come out. How can she articulate her reluctance without drawing even more attention the very issue that has inspired Donna to suggest this trip?

“Yeah, that might not be a bad idea,” the Doctor interjects on Rose’s behalf. Rose whips around to look at him again, and finds he’s completely changed his expression to seem more amenable to the idea. “I’ve got some maintenance work to catch up on. And I do owe Jack and Ianto a visit.”

Rose is quiet for a moment, not quite sold on the idea. In the moment of empty silence that fills the room while they wait for her answer, she searches him out with her mind, hoping she can glean an explanation from him that the other two won’t be able to hear.
They’ve become so attuned to one another it usually only takes a second to tap into his mind, pick up on his thoughts and get a sense for what he’s feeling. But though she tunes into his mental wavelength easily, his thoughts are garbled and unclear, like she’s hearing them from underwater. If he’s having any sort of emotional reaction to this proposition, she can’t detect it.

Frustrated, but feeling outnumbered, she hesitantly agrees. “Erm, okay.”

“Okay, great!” Donna says, enthusiastic. “Where should we go?”

“Rose, why don’t you take them to Tarohanda?” suggests the Doctor.

Rose’s face falls. “What, really?”

She can’t help but feel a sense of betrayal. Meeting his eyes, she finishes her thought purely in her mind, focusing hard on sending the words to him, hoping it can overcome whatever quasi-barrier he’s put in place. But that’s our place.

His response comes immediately, and clear as a bell. It’s still our place. While she’s caught in his tender gaze, he layers his words with sincerity and promises, and it almost isn’t fair. He can sway her so easily when he wants to. We can go anytime we want.

“It’ll be great,” he adds aloud. “Kalei would love to see you. Martha and Donna would love it. Lay on the beach, drink smoothies, talk about boys, all that.”

“Sounds nice,” says Donna.

“The sand there is purple,” the Doctor adds to the other two, trying to sell the trip even harder.

“Ooh!” Martha claps a little with excitement.

“All right. Settled, then,” says Donna, equally excited.

It still doesn’t feel right to Rose, bringing anyone besides to the Doctor to a place that holds such significance in their relationship now. But she supposes anywhere can be theirs now. Maybe one day soon they can drop these two off somewhere and go find a new spot that’s only theirs.

Actually, no one except Rose is allowed in the Doctor’s bedroom (it’s still hard for her to remember to call it theirs when there were so many years it was off-limits, and even thinking about going in there was intimidating). She doesn’t imagine anything will ever change that. No matter what happens during an adventurous day, she and the Doctor will get to cuddle up in bed by themselves at the end of it. That certainly counts for something. Not such a long time ago, she didn’t believe the Doctor would ever consider such an intimate routine.

Donna and Martha keep Rose busy every second until they’re about to leave the TARDIS – getting ready, dressed, and packed with everything they could potentially need during a trip on their own – so she doesn’t get a chance to talk privately with the Doctor about this spur-of-the-moment daycation.

The Doctor writes down the precise time in which he drops them off, rather than simply committing it to memory. He sticks the post-it note with scribbled Gallifreyan circles on the console so he won’t lose it, and vows to double check the coordinates before stepping outside the TARDIS to give them both peace of mind.

When Donna and Martha both rush out of the TARDIS to get their first glimpse of the sights of Kaelondaia, Rose finally gets her window.
“You sure you’re okay with this?” she says quietly, tugging lightly on his tie to pull him close.

“Yeah,” he nods. “It’ll be good. We’ve both become a bit paranoid when it comes to one another, I think.”

“Can you blame us, though?”

“No,” he admits. “But I’ll be back before you know it,” he promises. “Have some fun with them.” He nods back to the doors.

“Kay.”

Confident she’ll see him by the end of the day, she gives him a kiss goodbye Donna likely would not approve of. Good thing, too, because the Doctor uses the time their lips are pressed together to send her a potent dose of soft and calming encouragement. They’ll see one another again soon.

Floating on the high of his reassurance, Rose is actually excited by the time she steps out the doors. This place is something she wasn’t quite able to accurately commit to memory. The crisp breeze carries the salty taste of the ocean in tiny droplets. The sun glistens off the pastel hues of the sea and sand. Birds chirp and gulls caw and the tide ebbs and flows behind it all, an effortless constant.

Maybe tonight, when he comes back to pick them up, she can ask the Doctor if he wants to stay the night. It sure would bring back wonderful memories to make love beneath a thatched grass roof to the gentle sound of the waves again.

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They spend the first part of the day catching up: Kalei and Dakota are officially a couple and about the cutest one she’s ever seen in her life. Kairi got the highest grade in the class on her assignment, and proudly announces that (in collaboration with some of the island’s more experienced engineers) the waterslide has become a reality. In fact, it just opened to the public a few days prior. They had really good timing, showing up when they did, Kairi had said. Rose can’t help but wonder if the Doctor had somehow planned it that way. Though he royally messes up the landings now and then, generally speaking his timing is impeccable.

After a brief tour of the town for Martha and Donna’s benefit, they all take a test run down the slide, then get a round of drinks from Nani’s (as promised) and head down to the beach to enjoy the view.

They spend the rest of their day sunbathing, snorkelling by those coral reefs she never got to see on her first trip, and enjoying several more trips down the slide (really, it’s got to be the best waterslide Rose has ever been on). Members of Kalei’s family do their best to rotate their company throughout the day, and all four of them (plus Dakota) make a memorable impression on Martha and Donna. But even when it’s just the three of them, being able to lounge and chat with other women, without a male presence, is admittedly something that Rose doesn’t get very often. And she thinks it’s something every girl needs once in a while. Perhaps the best part, though: they haven’t had to run for their lives once. All in all, it’s a wonderful, relaxing day, and Rose is glad they had talked her into it.

But after nearly eight hours since the Doctor’s departure, Rose is utterly restless to get back to him. She’s been trying not to think about the aching loneliness in her mind, the empty feeling between her fingers, not wanting to spoil a perfectly good outing for the other two. Perhaps if it had been longer since they had a disaster that threatened to permanently separate the two of them, she’d not have such intense separation anxiety. But it’s only been three months since the Doctor nearly died.
Hardly more than that since she almost did.

But the TARDIS is still gone – she can see the spot where he’d parked from their camp of chairs and umbrellas and coolers.

“Rose?” Martha asks, worried, as though Rose had failed to respond something she’d said

“Hmm?” asks Rose, turning back to her friends and snapping herself out of it. He’ll be here.

“What are you daydreaming about?” Donna asks, but her tone implies she already knows.

“What else but the Doctor?” Martha chimes in.

“Shut up.” Rose says, trying to force a laugh. She knows they’re only teasing, but she still gets flustered when they do. Rose knows she and the Doctor don’t have a conventional relationship; and there’s no way two ordinary humans could understand the loneliness of being disconnected from a telepathic partner. “We’re not apart very often.”

“Tell you what,” Martha says. “Let’s go back to the room. I brought my laptop loaded up with sappy films. We can watch something and get your mind off it ‘til he comes back.”

Though Rose had insisted they didn’t intend to stay the night, Kenai had insisted they take a room, just in case they needed a kip or a shower at any point during the day. There’s no way Rose would stay overnight anywhere without the Doctor unless it were absolutely necessary, but relaxing for a bit in a proper bed does sound nice. It’s nearing nightfall, too; the sun has just begun to dip beneath the horizon.

On their way across the boardwalk to their accommodations, Donna and Martha stop just short of one of the huts.

“Oh, no,” Donna exclaims, throwing her beach bag to the wood in exasperation. “I left my mobile back on the sand.”

Since when does Donna carry around her mobile?

“I’ll be right back,” Donna adds, already turning around.

“I’ll go with you,” Martha offers automatically.

“Well, suppose I will too,” says Rose, not really wanting to be alone with her already lonely thoughts.

“No, you go ahead in,” Donna says. “We’ll be right back.” The way she says it, and the way she gestures roughly to the door like she won’t take no for an answer, makes Rose stop in her tracks.

“’Kay,” Rose agrees reluctantly.

They don’t even really register Rose’s response, though: they’re already rushing away. Rose is a bit bewildered by the sudden abandonment. Maybe they really are getting tired of her clinginess over the Doctor, and plan to discuss what to do about it in her brief absence. Determined to beat them to the punch, she decides to just head inside, and set aside a few minutes to perk herself up before they return.

But when she returns her attention to the hut, she sees it’s number nineteen: the same one she and the Doctor had stayed in before. Suddenly, she finds herself feeling weird about this whole
situation all over again. She shouldn’t have caved so easily and agreed to take them here; this is her and the Doctor’s place.

She heavily considers running off to find Kenai or a member of his family to request a change of rooms. But what sort of field day would Donna and Martha have then?

Taking a deep breath, she tells herself it’s just a room, that she’ll see the Doctor soon, and turns the handle.

The room, however, looks nothing like she remembers it.

The white linens on the bed have been replaced with sheets, pillows, and a duvet in shades of crimson and violet. Candles flicker on every flat surface available – the nightstand, the small desk, the windowsill. The bright orange hues of the sunset filter through the window, blending with the yellowish candlelight.

She might think this is a very strange sort of humour from Martha or Donna, if not for the details most capturing her attention.

Pink and red rose petals are scattered all over the bed and the floor. The close air is thick with the seductive floral aroma, tempered by the warm vanilla scent wafting from the candles. A white card is perched on the edge of the bed, propped open as if it’s meant to be read.

This is far too romantic and elaborate to have been a prank. And really, though they jest when it comes to the Doctor, neither of them is that cruel.

Rose starts to panic, instead, that she’s actually entered the wrong room. Is she crashing some other couple’s honeymoon suite?

She decides to peer at the card, just so she can correctly report back to Kenai about the hospitality mix-up.

The front of the card is empty, but inside, across the centrefold is an inscription that makes her heart stop.

The language is unreadable, but she would recognize it in her sleep.

Intricate clocklike symbols are etched onto the paper in black ink. It’s so common around the TARDIS that for the most part, she’s stopped being in awe every time she sees it. But as the realization slowly dawns on Rose that the Doctor must have arranged this – that he’s the only one who could have – the markings become as beautifully and terrifyingly alien as they were the first time she encountered them. This is not the messy shorthand she finds in notebooks and on post-it notes, either; the calligraphy here boasts near-perfect circular geometry. It was inscribed with care. Patience.

She turns around, resolved to go and look for him immediately, and nearly jumps out of her skin. The Doctor is standing just inside the back entrance, the shell curtains swishing and clinking lightly as though he’d just let them go.

He’s wearing a different outfit from the one she’d left him in – a black suit with a white shirt that looks freshly pressed. The jet black, silk tie is not pulled into his characteristic half-knot, but secured smoothly and elegantly beneath his collar. And while most of his suits cling to his skin and are just slightly too short for his long limbs (not that she minds), each piece of this suit is tailored properly to his form. His hair is nothing short of immaculate – one of those times he must have spent double the time fussing with it.
“D... Doc...” she can’t even get his name out, frozen in shock and dumbstruck by how utterly handsome he looks.

He takes a few deliberate steps into the centre of the room.

“What are you doing here?” she manages.

His only response is a gentle, nervous smile.

Suddenly, her heart is pounding.

Compared to the Doctor she is horribly underdressed, in only the sleeveless top and sarong she’d thrown on over her swimsuit. She smells of sunscreen and salt, and her hair must be a disaster, done up in a bun while it was still wet with seawater.

“Should’ve told me you were dressin’ up,” she says with a strangled laugh, not knowing what else to say. "I must look ridiculous."

“You look lovely,” he says, and the utter sincerity of it makes her stomach swoop. It’s then she notices the Doctor is holding his hands behind his back, something that is certainly not a habit for him.

“What...” She means to repeat her earlier question, but this time, she can’t even finish her sentence.

It can’t be what she thinks it is... can it?

She looks down at the card she’s still holding, just so she has something to look at besides his perfect face, staring at her like that. Like whatever he’s about to say will change her life.

“What does it say?” she asks, weakly raising the card a few inches. In her mind, she scrambles to run through possibilities besides the one her hopeless heart is wishing for, trying to prepare herself for something stupid. It’s so often something stupid and alien, with him. In the years she spent with him before they were connected, he set quite a precedent for avoiding romance.

“I’ve explained before that not everything has a direct translation from Gallifreyan,” he explains. Soft, but ever so slightly pedantic.

Oh, boy, here it comes. Some obscure Time Lord thing, after all.

“But this one actually translates word for word,” he finishes.

Before she can process it, the Doctor takes one half step closer to her, letting one knee sink slowly to the wood floor. He takes a deep breath.

“Oh!” She covers her face in her hands for a moment, trying to hold back tears with the brief pressure.

When she lowers her hands, the entire room around him blurs out of focus until he’s the only thing she can see.

His eyes never leaving hers, his hands emerge from behind his back with a small blue velvet box.

“Rose Tyler.”

He opens the box to reveal a brilliantly silver ring capped with a small, clear gem, the light flickering off of it in a kaleidoscope of orange hues.
Staring between the ring and his anxious brown eyes, time stands still.

She never anticipated this. He’s an alien from an advanced society, and they’ve already committed to one another on the deepest level possible for him. She never expected him to cater to the lowly traditions of planet Earth. But that’s not to say she hasn’t still thought about marriage. Wanted it. Dreamt about it.

He must have sensed that, all along.

“Will you marry me?”

She nods immediately. “Of course I will. Yes, yes. A million times yes.”

He leaps up from the floor and pulls her in for a kiss. It’s chaste, and almost delicate, but he lingers for a long moment, wiping a few tears from Rose’s cheek with his thumb. The explosion of emotion instantly tears down the superficial barriers remaining between them, and Rose’s joy overflows through the link, along with the Doctor’s relief that he finally got the words out. He finally did it.

He gently pulls away, placing the ring ceremonially on her finger before stashing the box in his jacket.

“You’ve had your walls up all day, haven’t you?” she accuses. If he hadn’t just orchestrated the most romantic gesture she’s ever seen, she might be cross with him. She spent all day missing him like mad and he was right here the whole time, blocking himself off from her access while he planned all this.

“I wanted it to be a surprise.”

She wants to tell him she missed him so badly he should be in trouble, but the way he says it so innocently, she can’t be angry.

“How did you do all this?” she asks, inspecting the details again, still incredulous.

“Martha and Donna helped. And Kalei, a great deal.”

“How long have you been planning this?”

“A few days. Not too long.”

“How’d you keep it from me?” she asks. Here she thought they couldn’t keep secrets anymore.

“Tucked it in a little lockbox in the back of my mind. Only opened the box when I was certain you couldn’t hear. Honestly, though, it wasn’t easy.”

“Hmm...” Rose hadn’t really spent much time considering this. In theory, yes, she knows she cannot see or hear something inside the Doctor’s mind that he doesn’t want her to, and vice versa. But aside from that one time while they were still training, she’s never tried to test the limitations of that rule. Perhaps she should plan a surprise for the Doctor soon. According to him, she’s sharpened her skills enough to do pretty much anything he can.

Thinking back on the last few days, though, she realises there have been a few anomalies that she should’ve picked up on.

“You have been talking to yourself a bit more lately.” Song lyrics, quotes from poems and novels,
calculus equations...

“It helped keep my thoughts from wandering while you were around.”

“S also been a few days since we shagged,” she says, raising an eyebrow.

He shakes his head, pursing his lips. “Oh, we couldn’t. I would’ve told you everything, whether I wanted to or not.”

Surprised by his overt honesty, Rose laughs. That explains why she was so ready to jump his bones this morning, if he’s been secretly avoiding intimacy.

“Another couple of days, though, and I would’ve slipped up anyway,” he admits. “It’s not something I can do long-term, a thousand years of practice or not.”

It does make her feel better that it wasn’t easy for him. And in all honesty, she’s glad he succeeded in kept it under wraps. This is the best surprise she could ever have imagined.

“Can we come in yet!?” Kalei shouts from outside the hut.

Oh! Who’s we?

“Come in!” she calls back.

Kalei, Dakota, Martha, and Donna all come bursting through the door at once.

They were all in on this. The realisation makes her almost giddy.

“You all knew about this?” She asks in disbelief, trying not to cry again as she throws her arms around Kalei.

They all confess.

“Blimey, you’re good.”

After hugs from everyone and their fair share of congratulations, Martha suggests they all head out, and Dakota quickly agrees.

“I hope you two aren’t going back to the TARDIS?” Rose asks, suddenly disappointed at the prospect.

“Nah, they have their own room,” Kalei reassures her.

“Far from this one, I made sure,” Donna adds, wrinkling her nose. But then she smiles, and Rose realises all her negative commentary throughout the day was a part of the ruse, a trick to ensure Rose didn’t suspect the truth. Rose smiles back, feeling luckier than ever that the universe found a way to bring her aboard the TARDIS.

“All right, let’s let these two get down to business,” Kalei teases.

Dakota rolls his eyes, smacking Kalei in the arm for good measure.

The Doctor merely turns pinker than he already was, and tugs awkwardly on the knot of his tie.

“Thank you all,” Rose adds, unable to resist leaving off on a polite note.
“See you in the morning,” Martha says as she closes the door behind them.

“I still can’t believe you kept this from me.” Rose wraps her arms around his neck, while his circle around her waist.

“Has to be a little mystery left in romance, doesn’t there?”

“Suppose so.”

He kisses her softly.

“Do you really want this, though?” she asks. They haven’t ever explicitly talked about marriage. Once, it was brought up because of a dream she’d had that he’d inadvertently witnessed, and he didn’t exactly seem keen on it. The second time, when they’d glimpsed a potential future with the Doctor holding what looked like wedding bands, he did seem more amenable to the idea, but she also assumed if they did ever get married, it would be at her suggestion. She never imagined him proactively planning it without her input.

“We did have marriage on Gallifrey,” he explains, somewhat defensively. “Just, for some, it felt superfluous. Telepathic connections like ours were enough of a symbol, for many.”

“And for you?”

“I have always been fond of the tradition. And I like the idea of making it official the human way. Plus, it’d be nice to wear a ring. ‘Property of Rose Tyler.’” He holds up his left hand, imitating the way he’d evidently brandish his wedding band.

“Pretty sure everyone can already see that.” If Martha and Donna’s teasing is anything to go by, it’s obvious.

“Well, with two rings, and the official titles of husband and wife, there’ll be no question.” Rose giggles, beaming at him. “Besides, how could we say no to a party with cake, wine, and dancing?”

“Mmm. Good point. We’ll have to work on your footwork, though,” she teases.

“Rose Tyler. We’ve established this. I can dance. Or do you not remember the Inauguration?”

“Hmm... Think you may have to remind me.”

“Oh,” he chuckles. “I will, Rose!”

He breaks them briefly out of their embrace so he can pull the sonic screwdriver out of his jacket. Just moments after it whizzes to life, the first few notes of Etta James’ ‘At last’ fill the small room. Glancing around, she cannot find the source of the music.

He just shrugs. “In case I needed to set the mood.”

The Doctor holds out a hand, emulating a gentleman from the 50’s again. When she places her hand in his, he lets the other come to rest on the small of her back.

They sway side to side with the slow music for a bit, and as their barriers dissolve once more, they savour the renewed closeness: relieved their time apart is over, thrilled that they’re engaged. The Doctor is properly happy – his mind practically bursting with confetti and balloons. It’s such a beautiful thing to behold, coming from someone she knows has suffered more than she can ever comprehend. He’s proud, too, maybe even a little possessive. Eager to seal the deal and show the
world – no, the universe – that he’s lucky enough to have stolen Rose Tyler’s heart.

Her doubts about his intentions quelled, she lifts up onto her toes to press her lips to his.

Overwhelmed by the evening’s events, and intoxicated by the floral perfume saturating the air and the romantic melody, it isn’t long before they aren’t moving to the music anymore, focused only on the kiss.

When the song ends, Rose steps back toward the bed, tugging him lightly by the hand.

“Can’t let all this beautiful work go to waste.”

He shakes his head in agreement, breaking into a radiant smile. He really should wear black more often; the contrast against his fair skin is nothing short of breathtaking.

She sits down on the edge of the bed just as a soft, familiar tune fades in on the invisible speakers.

She has to pause for a moment as Elvis croons the opening lyrics, because it couldn’t be more perfect for this moment.

Wise men say only fools rush in

She lies back and he climbs onto the bed, carefully lowering his weight onto hers.

But I can’t help falling in love with you

“I have to admit I’m impressed with your playlist-making skills,” she says, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Well.” He cocks his head to the side. “That’s not my only skill.”

Giggling, she pulls his mouth down against hers. He’s only ever jokingly conceited like this when he’s really, truly content.

Take my hand

Take my whole life, too

For I can’t help falling in love with you

As she buries her hands in his hair, the cool, thin band of metal on her left hand suddenly becomes prominent to them both. They both grin so widely it disrupts their kiss, but neither of them seems to mind. Their link glows with excitement at this new, tangible symbol of something that, within the boundaries of their minds, they’ve known for a long time: they belong to one another.

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Several hours later, the Doctor and Rose lie facing each other on a bed of springy grass in Rose’s garden, a plush faux wool blanket beneath them. The sun has set over the fringe of the trees, the sky fading from pink to purple in the twilight. Scattered lamps and lanterns bathe the plant life and Rose’s features in a soft orange glow. Her eyes are closed, her face close enough that he can feel her calm, slow breaths on his chin. Holding her left hand in his, he strokes her ring with his thumb, acclimating to the new texture.

They’re in a section of the garden they’ve never visited until tonight: a large, open grassy area sprinkled with trees, their pink petals decorating the green canvas. At the other end of the gently
sloped lawn stands a small gazebo. Its brilliantly white construction reflects the colours of the lights posted nearby. Slate grey tiles slope down its intricate, three-tiered roof. It’s an open design, with columns rather than walls maintaining its structure, and three small steps leading up to its interior.

It looks perfect for two, and it gets the Doctor thinking.

“You said this place really exists, right?” he asks softly.

Rose stirs. Her eyes just barely peek open.

This place is so idyllic, it can often feel a bit like they’re dreaming when they’re in here, but Rose was definitely on the precipice of slumber. Oops. Perhaps he should have waited ‘til morning.

“Yeah,” she nods. She takes a deep breath through her nose, trying to get some oxygen to her tired brain.

“I was thinking,” he says.

He doesn’t have to finish the sentence, because she lifts the nascent idea from his mind before he gets the chance.

She gasps into alertness, propping herself up on her elbow.

He mirrors her movements, squeezing her ring-bearing hand.

Though they had both stared at the scenery for a long time before she began to nod off, she looks around again as though seeing it for the first time. A swell of chaotic emotion washes over him, excitement and surprise tempered by uncertainty.

He slowly sits up, turning to face the gazebo, and coaxes her to follow his lead.

“Picture this. Sunset. White flowers lining those stairs and columns.” He waves his hand in a circle toward the gazebo. As the vision takes hold in Rose’s mind, light builds from the horizon as time rolls in reverse, bringing back the bright pink and orange hues of sunset. A sprawling vine of white flowers grows out of thin air, wrapping around the arches and columns of the gazebo. Bundles of flowers appear on the edges of the steps, too, a subtle invitation to make the modest ascent.

“A white carpet running down the centre of the grass, here,” the Doctor continues. “Lined with lanterns. White picnic chairs on either side of the aisle.” As he speaks, each of the details he describes slowly appears, Rose’s imagination bringing them to life before their eyes. “The pink flower petals fall over everything.” He spreads his arm in a grand gesture, and a fresh wave of petals floats down from the trees to decorate the aisle and chairs and gazebo. “There’s an intergalactic judge to officiate, so it’ll be recognized no matter where we go.”

“Oh, it’s so lovely,” says Rose, her voice breaking on the last word. She wipes at her cheek with the back of her hand, sniffling.

“You think?” Butterflies flutter in his stomach as hints of her excitement whisper through his mind.

“Yes.”

“I just thought, you know, that way every time we’re in here we can remember when we got married.”
“We can do that anyway,” she says, a crooked smile turning up her lips. “Can share memories, right?”

“True.” His hearts sink just a little. It’s new for him, coming up with romantic things for them to do, and he doesn’t feel completely confident in his ability to do it right yet. “Do you not like it?”

“I love it,” she stops his train of thought. “It’s perfect.”

Shifting up onto her knees, Rose swivels around, throws her arms around him, and seals her mouth over his. In her urgency, she inadvertently knocks him onto his back, and all her weight crashes on top of him. But it doesn’t hurt; it can’t while they’re in this place. They’re light as feathers, the ground beneath them soft as clouds when it needs to be.

“Will you be Dr. Tyler,” Rose asks when they gently part. “Or will I be Rose… Doctor?”

They both chuckle at the silliness of the latter.

“I’m perfectly all right being Dr. Tyler,” he says. “Doctor isn’t much of a surname, anyway.”

“Settled, then.”

“Settled,” he agrees.

“I can’t believe we’re engaged,” she says, preening as she holds up her hand to stare at the ring again. “Fiancé,” she adds, gazing back down at him.

“Fiancée.” He gently enunciates each syllable, enjoying the way they feel on his tongue. “It has a nice ring to it.”

Rose rolls off of him, tugging him along with her until they’re lying side-by-side again. Using his arm for a pillow, she snuggles into his chest.

“I love you.”

The Doctor hums softly with pleasure. He’s lost count of how many times she’s said those words to him now, but it still makes his hearts flutter every time.

“Love you, too.”

Comfortable and at peace in his arms, Rose fades from consciousness quickly.

But just before she drifts off to sleep, she mumbles quietly: “Can’t wait for you to be mine forever.”

“Oh, Rose,” he murmurs, touching his lips to her temple. “I’m already yours forever.”

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