

HARMONY

by
TBITT

(inspired by the BBCtv Series Doctor Who)

*The past is but the beginning of a beginning, and all that is and has been is but the
twilight of the dawn. - H.G. Wells, "The Discovery of the Future," 1901*

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Chapter One

Starlight filled his eyes, the radiance of a billion, billion suns performing their intricate, cosmic dance just for him. He floated free, turning gently, straying further and further into the shimmering reaches of Space and Time, engulfed at last in the splendour of the Medusa Cascade...

Someone spoke his name.

He blinked. The vast expanse of space was gone, replaced by the rotating blur of ceiling fan blades churning a gentle breeze against his skin. Moonlight played at the open window, the towering walnut tree outside casting long shadows across the far wall of the bedroom.

His bedroom. The room he and Rose had shared when this was their home. How long ago that now seemed.

The storm had dissipated, leaving behind the tangy scent of autumn. Gutter tea, he'd heard it called. He rather liked that. Human beings. They still amazed him. Who else in all the galaxy could put a poetic spin on rotting foliage? He had enjoyed more than his share of that aroma, having walked miles in a downpour. It was that or call for help and calling for help still wasn't in his nature.

He'd misplaced the Jeep. Again. And he'd disengaged the GPS. Again. Special

Op's at Torchwood's main branch in London claimed it was a security measure, but he couldn't abide being tracked that way, like a tagged animal in the wild. The mutant Time Lord, stalking aliens across what he still fondly referred to as Pete's World. Or simply off on a lark. Granted, the missing GPS complicated things when it was time to close up shop. The Jeep didn't beckon like the *Tardis*, his Time Ship, and apparently a reliable Chameleon Circuit was standard issue because it blended into its surroundings so well that he never seemed to be able to locate it when he needed it. Surely it would turn up. It always did. Almost always. But Pete Tyler—boss, benefactor, and father-in-law all rolled into one—had seemed decidedly unamused to see him walking through the side gate earlier instead of driving. He was quick to produce the key from his pocket as a sort of peace offering, but Pete only planted his face in both hands and strode away, muttering some of the more colourful expletives in the English language.

Compared to saving the Earth from the threat of the Yugglorrh Transperion, another lost Jeep was of little consequence, but he admitted it was having a negative impact on insurance premiums. Not good. Especially now with the economy being in the dustbin. Besides, they still hadn't forgiven him for that unfortunate incident with the zeppelin.

At least this time he hadn't phoned from the Embassy in Czechoslovenia, requesting transport (and diplomatic immunity), though, as he was wont to do, he *had* wandered off yesterday with scarcely enough money for chips, let alone cab fare from Scotland. Yesterday? No, no, no. That wasn't right at all. It was longer than that. A week, then. Three at most. The seasons had yet to change and no matter how distracted he became he had never missed Christmas.

Could it be helped that he was as drawn to Trouble as Trouble was to him?

Raising a ruckus, Jackie Tyler called it. Pete was less delicate than his wife on that matter, but dutifully did any damage control necessitated by his latest exploits. Not that it was intentional. Well, not usually. Well... all right, he admitted to himself, sometimes it was quite deliberate but not without provocation. Mostly. Still, it had been a long hike from Aberdeenshire, even after hitching a lift here and there. Maybe he talked too much. The last lorry driver hadn't even waited for the next lay-by.

Blimey, he was tired. Still. He had arrived at the Tylors' home bone weary. Weary enough, even, to bypass a proper sit down (aside from pinching a few slices of Sunday roast and four ginger snaps) and go straight to sleep. But not too weary to dream. And in his dreams he was always coming home. The first *home* he had had in, oh, too many years to count. All walls and floors and carpets. Where else could he go, really? Not Pete Tyler's posh penthouse flat at Torchwood Towers where his celebrity status had long since evaporated but he was nonetheless at the mercy of those wanting too much of his time. Time he no longer had in unlimited—or almost unlimited—quantities. Nor did he feel he could go to the big old house in Scotland where he had spent the better part of his years on this world. Rose was there, patiently awaiting his eventual return. He had made it nearly to the doorstep this time. He just couldn't find it in himself to stay.

Still trying to outdistance your nightmares, old son? Old habits and all that.

He could no longer move on—or back—or anywhere else in time except for here. *Here. Now.* With yesterday past and tomorrow yet to come and all of it proceeding in the dreadful, ordinary, *dull*, way that the people around him found comfortable and acceptable and... normal. On the Slow Path, hours dragged like a rake in the sands of

time and where once he had made grand patterns, spiralling and tilting to the music of the spheres, the lines in the sand were now arrow straight, preserved until the inevitable tide washed them away forever.

He sat up in bed, scrubbing his face with his hands. His beard needed trimming and, judging by the tangled waves he had to work his fingers through, so did his hair.

Shadows advanced and retreated with the rapidly moving clouds, flashes of moonlight illuminating the large, dusty telescope crouching in a far corner of the room. A well intentioned gift from one of the Tylers' connections in the new Euro government shortly after his arrival, he had inadvertently insulted the giver by assuming the costly item was a toy intended for Jackie and Pete's wee boy, Tony, and not for him, the mysterious Spaceman. That mistake nearly sparked an international incident. His very first. At least on this world. Thankfully, Rose had been at his side to rein him in and dispense more diplomacy than he was capable of mustering without escalating things further. How was he to know that the ambassador from New Germany lacked a sense of humour? He had later tinkered with the device in a vain attempt to increase its functionality, scattering pieces like a brilliant, restless child until Pete suggested that nothing short of a full scale observatory was going to satisfy him and even that was doubtful. As of late he had simply stopped looking at the stars. There weren't enough in the English night sky and they were too far away.

The blanket he had wrapped himself in fell to the wet floor as he swung his feet over the edge of the bed. His sodden clothing still lay in the heap he'd dropped it, but a cup of tea had been placed on the bedside table, a pile of sticky sugar cubes sitting beside the saucer. He stuck a finger into the cup and put it in his mouth. Cold. Tea leaves floated

on the surface like micro lily pads in a dark pond. He wondered who had brought it in and when. Seeing as he had been unable to find any pyjamas whoever it was may have gotten an eyeful. He glanced behind him, but, no, Rose was not there. Of course not.

In the midst of her exasperated scolding earlier Rose's mum, Jackie, had said something about flocks of sheep gone missing around Cairngorm and how the young Duke of Edinburgh, quite the student of paranormal activity himself, had rung up Torchwood, adamant about it being a bona fide Rift. That and the weather was worse than normal. It only made sense they would dispatch Rose to investigate the anomaly, seeing as she was just miles away from Balmoral Castle. He knew he should have answered his mobile when he saw her Torchwood exchange. But honestly, thunderstorms and sheep swallowing holes in Space and Time? How the mighty had fallen. Jackie admonished him further for not ringing them up even once while he was gone this time (he had memorized most of that tirade) and suggested that if he persisted in being a rover, dragging in without so much as a by your leave, he could flop in the orangery with what she called his "coral monstrosity."

Since his last modifications to the dimensional stabilizer the *Tardis* was indeed growing at an alarming rate and he admitted the Time Ship had entered an awkward stage of development, but there was no need to insult a growing trans-dimensional entity. Jackie would have torn into him even deeper had it not been for her older son, Tony. Something in his tired face had registered on the boy. He had seen it mirrored in the lad's eyes and was grateful for the interference as Tony steered his mum away, sparing them all from her tirade. Or his own foolish response. That left wee Rusty Tyler standing midway down the stately manor's entrance hall, watching him with eyes so

much like Rose's that it made him hurt inside just to look at the boy. He stood, dripping in silence at the bottom of the grand staircase, until the housekeeper's annoyed *tut-tuts* broke into his reverie and he'd dragged himself off in search of a towel.

The Tylers were awake now. His senses had been retooled to something more akin to normal *human* senses, but they were often abnormally keen. Jackie and Pete were quarrelling in groggy voices over whose turn it was to put little Rusty back in his cot. Ah. That explained the cold, leafy tea—though how the lad had managed to enter the room without him knowing, he could only guess. He was relatively sure human children possessed unique super powers governing stealth.

A narrow band of light shown beneath the door, followed by a giggle and the patter of small feet down the hall. By the heavy footfalls and weary groan, he knew it was Pete's turn to chase the boy down and, with Tony's help (and the lure of bickies), coax Rusty back to bed. Not long after came the murmurs of a now-familiar bedtime story and promises of taking the ponies out for a picnic in the nature preserve. Pete, he reflected, had become the very dad Rose had dreamed of, here in this world of second chances. He smiled. *Good on you, mate. Good on you.*

A noise below his side window caught his attention. Snapping brittle twigs betrayed some unseen night visitor. He rose stiffly to investigate but it was too dark to see anything. A badger, perhaps. Or weasels. He had seen a pair of the slinking devils not a month past, darting along the hedgerow, beating a fast retreat from Jackie's yapping little Westie, Petunia. They reminded him a little of the *tafelshrews* back on Gallifrey—so did the little dog for that matter—and he wondered if they tasted as bad. Probably not half as bad as the *trufflemorphs* From Zelioridon. Oh, now that was a planet to behold.

Beautiful rainforests under half a dozen moons circling a now ancient star. He'd intended to take his good mate, Donna Noble, there on holiday until it became clear that Donna's idea of a break did not include invigorating hikes through dense jungles filled with eight foot long millipedes—milli-milli-*bazzili*-pedes—, dark purple winged sloth bats that would eat bananas right from your hand, and the most intoxicating blooming carnivorous plants that smelled like mocha latte. For some reason no one he had ever taken there had been all that enamoured of the place. Maybe that was because they always seemed to run out of bananas before they found the sloth bats. Or was it the millipedes?

He should have taken Donna to Felspoon to see the swaying mountains. Now he'd never get the chance. For all she was a part of him—that very strange, *human* part of him—Donna Noble was no longer part of his world. Nor was she part of his adopted world. This not-Earth-gingerbread-house he had been placed in and left to do what exactly? Grow old?

Someone spoke his name.

Why don't you hear me?

He breathed deeply and closed his weary eyes, focusing on the steady drip, drip, drip of water in the down pipes. The Time Lord's legacy to himself. Echoes back across Space and Time. He always heard them. Dreamt them. But his name? It wasn't even *his* name. Not really. Not anymore. Not since he had had been splintered off the man he used to be. It wasn't his life. But it was still his past and he had a very good memory. A lot of good it did him.

Felspoon, Zelioridon, Kastopheria, Spiridon. They might as well be notations in John Smith's Journal of Impossible Things. Visions from another life. Only this time he

had not consciously altered his genetic code to disguise himself among humans. This time every cell had been overwritten without his consent. But that didn't change his memories. Didn't erase the dreams of another lifetime. Not his lifetime. His single, short human lifetime. All right, perhaps a very long lifetime by human standards given the genetic cocktail that had spit him into existence. Instantaneous biological meta crisis indeed. As if. All the intellect of the Time Lord he had been with none of the perks. Yes, the chunk of *Tardis* coral he had been given possessed the heart of a Time Ship, but it was as much a complex space-time event as he was and they were both out of their element in this universe. As he aged and died a little more each day, the ship aged and lived. It would fly again. Oh, yes. But the question remained whether it could be properly primed after his first aborted attempt to operate it had ended so disastrously, destroying the only briode nebuliser he had, to date, been able to assemble from scratch. Not for the first time he considered that his altered Time Lord genes were insufficient to imprint. Without Rassilon's Imprimeur the fledgling *Tardis* would never withstand the stresses of entering the Time Vortex. It would be disintegrated, he and Rose with it. Assuming Rose would go with him this time. Without a *Tardis* he was stranded. Exiled. Again. Without even the likes of Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart to wage words with. Even the fastest airship this world currently offered couldn't travel fast enough to get him far enough.

Someone spoke his name.

No longer a hushed whisper but spoken with an urgency that made his single heart beat hard against his chest, growing in intensity

Help me.

*

Someone had left the kettle on.

“Amy...” Rory Williams muttered, not wanting to move. “Amy, the kettle...”

“murrmph...”

“*Amy*, the *kettle*,” he tried again, forcibly keeping his eyes shut to keep from waking up completely. But it was no use. She was even more deeply asleep than usual. Or ignoring him. He couldn’t always tell.

With a yawn, Rory rolled over to get out of bed and startled fully awake. They were not in their bedroom. They were... not in England at all. He glanced around. He was drifting on what appeared to be a cloud. In the *Tardis*. In space. Probably.

“*Amy!*”

She bolted awake then, nearly falling through the cradle of mist onto the floor.

“Whoa! What the—“

“Oh great. Now he doesn’t just show up for special occasions and on holidays with enticements of adventure through Space and Time, he sneaks in in the middle of the night and kidnaps us from our bed. I’m too old for this.”

“Is that the kettle?”

Amy was clamouring to get up now, a perilous proposition from a bed with no distinct edges. Rory wasn’t sure if this sleeping arrangement was a result of the Doctor’s sense of humour or the *Tardis* herself. The Doctor had promised to order up the king-sized, canopied bed Amy had pointed out in an exclusive home furnishings catalogue, but

that was *ages* ago when the Time Lord last departed from their home to pop off to Cwmbran to stock up on Jammie Dodgers. Apparently they were introducing a new flavour.

The kettle whistled on, the sound echoing down the long corridor.

Rory rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked for something to wear. He settled for a pair of denims and a shirt he'd left behind. They hadn't been laundered, and he hadn't worn that size in over two years, but he had learned the hard way not to wander the *Tardis* in his pyjamas or dressing gown or less. They never knew what head of state—or planet—the Doctor might be entertaining in the middle of what they thought was the night. The Doctor kept curious hours, but he and Amy needed to sleep—much to the Time Lord's chagrin. Not that the man was above waking them if he got too bored. Or lonely. He didn't admit the lonely part, but Amy maintained that was what it was and over time Rory had come to agree. For all he had friends and companions scattered through the galaxies, the Doctor remained the loneliest man Rory knew.

Tugging on the cowboy boots he had gotten on what he thought was still their first trip to America—honestly, it was all rather jumbled now—Rory stumbled out the door. Amy shuffled along behind him in her nightie and the oversized bunny slippers the Doctor had given her some Christmas past. No doubt the Doctor was already in the *Tardis* control room, headphones or some other nonsense obscuring the *screeee* of the kettle. The sound was defiantly coming from there and not one of the kitchens.

“Nice trick, Doctor,” Amy complained, pushing strands of ginger hair away from her face as she yawned. “Ha ha, very funny, now put us *back!*”

But the Doctor was not there.

Hastily, Rory wrapped his shirt sleeve around his hand and wrestled the sputtering kettle from the hob before that entire section of the Time Ship's flight control panel was doused in scalding water. At times he could not help but think the ship's instrument panels had been designed by monkeys for all they made sense.

"Ow ow ow ow *ow!*"

Even through heavy cotton flannel the kettle was, well, boiling hot.

"Good one, Doctor," Amy told the empty room, pausing to kiss the tips of her husband's fingers and switch off the cooker top. "Leave the kettle and go for a walk. Typical."

After a moment of impatient waiting, Rory poured the steaming water into the teapot, managing not to burn his fingers again. Amy leaned in close beside him to inhale the scent. Whatever the Doctor had in the infuser smelled gorgeous. Cinnamon and nutmeg and another scent he could not identify. It reminded him of Christmas and Christmas reminded him of the English countryside which, in turn, reminded him that he wanted to be home. In bed. With his wife.

A large green cup sat next to a plate of Toffee Dodgers as if the Doctor had planned to return for a midnight snack. Or a 3am snack. Who really knew out here in space. And that was another thing, Rory thought. Why were there no windows on the flight deck? Just row upon row of rounded portal-looking-things with equipment and lights and bizarre wiring behind them.

Amy popped one of the biscuits into her mouth then picked up the mug. She showed it to Rory and he shrugged. $\Theta\Sigma$. Right. Whatever. He toggled a few switches, wondering where they were. When they were. He found no answers.

The *Tardis* was running ever so quietly, the Time Rotor rising and falling gracefully amid the turning gears in the towering central column. Nary a warning alarm sounded; nary a warning light blinked. Why wasn't that state of affairs more reassuring?

After a moment Rory realized he could hear something else. A faint mechanical ticking. But from where? Wandering the *Tardis* was not something he relished in the middle of, oh, whatever time it was. The Doctor so rarely abandoned his post. Not during flight. Too many knobs to turn, gears to wiggle, gizmos to adjust. Even it was just to show-off. The Time Lord barely sat still long enough to eat, or, Rory mused, drink the tea he'd obviously put the kettle on for. While Amy poured out a cup, Rory dragged himself up the stairs, around the upper deck and back again. He repeated his search below, ducking loops of connective cable, but the ticking could only be heard at the main level. Thinking it a stroke of genius, he checked the pocket of the green jacket hanging over a jump seat, but it was not the Doctor's sonic screwdriver. He thought better of reaching in any deeper than that.

Amy shook back her long red hair then stood with hands on her hips, watching the Time Rotor rise and fall. The rhythmic pulse was almost hypnotic. The pace had quickened.

"Rory, a little help here."

"With what?"

"Talk to her."

"Talk to who?" he asked, wondering what he had missed while briefly pondering the contents of the Doctor's jacket pockets.

"To the *Tardis*."

“Me? What makes you think she’ll talk to me?”

“She liked you, remember?”

“Oh. That,” he said, recalling how the *Tardis* had once communicated telepathically with him, directing them to a secondary control room during their terrifying flight with the sentient asteroid creature, House. “All right. But, what should I say?”

“How should I know.”

Not very helpful, that. But Amy was tired and when Amy was tired, Amy was cross. And when Amy was cross it was best to simply do what she said.

“Hello,” Rory said awkwardly, directing his words toward the pulsing lights that twisted around the Time Rotor. He smiled, then wondered if the *Tardis* could see him at all. “It’s me. The Pretty One. We’re looking for the Doctor.”

Amy raised her eyebrows at him.

“Please,” he added swiftly.

As if on cue a door behind them slid open. A door he was quite sure he’d never noticed before.

“Okay. That’s new.”

“Oh, Doctor,” Amy said, hazel eyes flashing. “Still keeping secrets are we?”

tick, tick tick...

The sound drew them on until Rory thought they would be forced to abandon the steaming cup of tea they had been passing back and forth between them. As it was, half of the snacks were now missing.

They had traversed the butterfly garden, checked the water slide, and passed a

rather sizable badger wandering down a hall when, round the next bend, they came up short before a door. Not an automatic Star Trek kind of proper spaceship door, but a wooden blue door that resembled the outer door of a police box but with an elaborate brass handle and an old fashioned key hole. That was the *Tardis* though. An amalgamation of old and new, of curious lost-in-time artefacts and alien gadgetry, some of which he suspected even the Doctor was unsure about. Ancient and new and the bluest of blue. The *Tardis*. And the Doctor himself.

The door stood slightly ajar, the mysterious sound coming from within, ticking away like some great clock keeping track of all of Time and Space.

Or not.

The door creaked open at a nudge and Rory saw instantly what was making the noise. A rickety vintage reel to reel movie projector stood in the middle of a cluttered, darkened room and there, on a makeshift screen fashioned of what was apparently easels and a parachute, wandered Charlie Chaplin's familiar Tramp.

Rory placed the biscuits and tea on a bureau beside the door, pushing aside an assortment of film canisters and splicing tape to do so. As his eyes adjusted to the light from the old black and white film he could see that the room was larger by far than he'd first realized, made smaller by the sheer quantity of *stuff* that crowded the space like some misfit museum or an antique emporium gone very wrong. Clocks of every variety kept time. Or dozens of different times by the look of the ones nearest them. Antique mantel clocks; a towering grandfather clock; a tail wagging Kit Kat clock, boggling eyes popping back and forth. Hourglasses poured sand silently. Water dripped from a gravity defying cylinder. A beam of light erupted from the tip of a miniature pyramid. Gently

swinging glowing globes orbited one another in a far corner and every flat surface of furniture displayed things he had imagined could only be coughed up out of Amy's great grandmother's attic in Scotland.

"Whoa..." Amy breathed at last.

Rory had to agree. Whoa, indeed. Or, was that *woe*?

Remnants of civilisations he could only guess at mingled with the familiar. A misshapen glass orb that might once have been a delicate carafe. A pristine American newspaper dated 27 February 1967. Was that a crude oil lamp affixed to a battered miner's hat? And there, in the far corner, was that the panel of a lifeboat emblazoned *R.M.S. Titanic*?

Rory ran his fingers lightly over the splintered remains of the lifeboat. Beyond, just visible through a partially closed second door and the dim light, crouched a set of bunk beds, rough hewed like something he had seen on the telly about American ski lodges. The bottom bunk was a tangle of mismatched socks and what appeared to be the parts of a motorbike. The top bunk appeared empty, an indigo quilt sewn with gold intertwining circular designs trailing off of it. He averted his eyes from so private a domain, his gaze passing over dozens of interesting—and less intimate—objects. In the centre of the room, in front of the projector and beside a claw-footed table, crouched a Louis XV chair that looked like it belonged in a BBC historical drama series. In the chair, long legs stretched out in front of him, sat the Doctor.

Before Rory could stop her, Amy stepped closer. The Doctor's head was bowed, a cascade of unruly brown hair spilling over closed eyes. Amy's fingers flew to her lips and she motioned *shhhh*. He was asleep. In the midst of all the jumble and flickering

light, with Charlie Chaplin scampering away from a flaming Zeppelin, the Doctor was asleep. An open book lay propped on the Time Lord's left knee, barely held in place by the two fingers resting against the open pages. As Rory watched, afraid that their mere presence would be enough to wake him, the Doctor's hand dropped aside and the book slipped free, rustling to the floor. Rory held his breath. They were done for. The Doctor was going to wake up, discover their intrusion, and, and... and he really didn't know what would happen after that but couldn't imagine that it would be anything good. Then again, the Doctor might just thank them for the tea, ask them if they liked their cool, new cloud bed, and then tell them they were going on a perilous journey that involved poisonous frogs and a wombat. When none of those things happened, Amy bent to retrieve the book. She handed it to Rory. H.G. Wells. *The Time Machine*. Of course. The vintage edition was well thumbed and dog eared, as if it had been read a thousand times. The last dozen or so pages, though, were still crisp.

While they had stood frozen in silence the reel to reel had run out, the tape end slapping round and round until Rory switched the machine off. Only the faint glow of the floating orbs in the corner and the blinking red LED lights on a 1970's era digital clock radio provided any illumination.

"Amy," he whispered, "come on. Leave him be."

"But he looks so sweet," she whispered back, no longer cross and obviously entranced. "Like my old granddad on a Sunday afternoon back in Scotland. Look. Even his little bowtie is undone..."

"Amy, don't..."

But it was too late. Amy couldn't help herself and had reached out to touch the

Doctor's shoulder fondly. At once, the Time Lord was in motion, lunging forward, tripping over his own feet, then reeling backwards, flipping the chair on top of himself.

"What are you doing here? You can't *be* here!" the Doctor cried, scrambling up and stumbling past them into the brightly lit hallway.

"Doctor, I'm sorry!"

"No, no, no, no, *no!*"

"Doctor, I'm—"

"Amy, I don't think he's talking to us."

Indeed, the Doctor wasn't looking at them at all. Instead, the poor man was turning in drunken circles, eyes wild, hands pressed to either side of a frantically wagging head.

"I can't! I can't help you. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry... please stop. Please..."

For a moment the Doctor seemed to look at them, surprise registering on the long, narrow face. As quickly it was gone, as was the Time Lord, running down the passageway, Amy and Rory in pursuit.

Chapter Two

Someone spoke his name.

Help me. Won't you help me? Don't you hear me?

He swallowed hard. This was getting entirely too strange. Half of UNIT and much of Torchwood already thought him to be bonkers. Pete Tyler's pet alien. Just stand back everyone, prepare to be amazed and get ready to run. No one dared try to keep him on leash. Better to exploit his madness. That's what he'd always done. He worked best under pressure. In fact, the worse things got, the more he liked it. He had always been one to dance in a thunderstorm—or fly a kite. But storms carried an unfathomable energy as of late. He did not understand it, despite the uneasy feeling that he should. That he would, if only he still possessed the heightened sensitivity of a *true* Time Lord and not this increasingly muddled up part-human cognition. Something was wrong. He could not identify it, but seemed also unable to escape it. Bad dreams. Nightmares bleeding over from a life that had long since flown away in the *Tardis*. As if he didn't already struggle to get the sleep his half alien physiology now required.

One heart. It still made him queasy.

He caught sight of his reflection as he dressed. His now familiar aspect appeared the same, but the mirror only told half of the story. If it were true that what mattered was

inside a man...he didn't want to think about it. This body, this vessel into which so many lifetimes had been poured, no longer kept pace with his feverish intentions. A second heart no longer beat to the rhythm of Time itself. Miss more than a few days' sleep and he was exhausted. More than that and they were secretly delivering his unconscious body to old Doc Sullivan who would, in turn, be ringing up UNIT's extraterrestrial specialist, Dr. Martha Jones. But sleeping meant dreaming, and dreaming meant remembering, and remembering often meant nightmares. At times his whole existence disgusted him. It just figured that he'd inherited both a whopping load of human self loathing and millennia of Time Lord guilt along with all his favourite recipes for bananas. *Thanks a heap for that, mates!*

The Tyler household was once again quiet and he slipped from the bedroom, making his way down two flights of stairs to the kitchen. He lifted the biscuit tin down from the only shelf they had found so far that Rusty couldn't get to. He twisted off the lid and inhaled. The Tyler's new chef baked the most gorgeous ginger snaps.

Half Three. He wondered what Rose was doing right now. Wondered if she was out on the moors tracking aliens, verifying Rifts, or snuggled warm in bed, missing him as much as he was missing her. Was it still raining there? More importantly, did she feel this new rising storm, as if something were racing toward them on the winds of Time and Space? She had before, a long time ago. She had shared his dreams. Dreams dark enough to wake her from her slumber, reaching for him, beseeching him for answers he could not provide. No matter how terrible her dreams had been, his were worse. All he could do was hold her close, waiting for the foreboding to fade with the dawn. Not that it did.

I'm so sorry.

He shook his head to clear it, exhaling deeply.

Rose had taken it in stride, like so much else, chalking it up to being a parting gift, courtesy of the Time Vortex. One did not look into the Heart of the *Tardis* and come away unchanged. He had only to look into the mirror to remind himself of that.

What an effort it had been the following night to act like nothing was wrong though. Rose advised him to ignore what remained of his Time Lord senses just this once, embrace his Inner Englishman, and soldier on. So he had donned a dinner jacket for the Tyler's posh New Year's Eve gala and had even made a go at styling his hair into a semblance of order. Surely he could feign dignity for a few hours, and if not, was reasonably sure he could concoct a rapid escape with the aid of one small boy, a few bangers, and a West Highland Terrier.

He remembered the night well. How Rose had laughed at his grooming efforts, took away the styling mousse, and ruffled his hair into unruly spikes that she said were cute. Who was he to argue? Then she set about straightening his festive red bowtie, assuring him that their dreams were only that. Dreams. Echoes back through microscopic fissures that the overuse of the temporal cannon and dimension hoppers had caused. She shared his dreams because they shared a bond. How else could she have found him after years of searching across parallel worlds? A satisfying if not entirely plausible explanation. What followed was a litany of "don'ts" to keep in mind once her parents' boring, pampered guests arrived so they might avoid awkward situations like the brief declarations of war against The Peaceable Kingdom the year before. Torchwood Disney had been shut down for months, right in the middle of their first entanglement

with the off-world Transperion menace. He'd rolled his eyes but promised to behave. As long as no one did anything stupid. All bets were off after that.

Another ginger snap. Another memory.

Rose always took great pleasure in presenting him as Jon Noble. Doctor Jon Noble. It was all he could do not to burst out laughing each time she said it. *Doc-tor Jon Noble*. That night had been no different, but after the third over-dressed, over-titled, overbearing Head of State's Significant Other examined him with a vintage eyepiece (all the rage that season) and made polite but disparaging remakes about his foot attire, he and Rose could no longer contain themselves and skived off like truant school children, bursting through the patio doors, unable to stifle their giggling.

"And what's wrong with my shoes? Did I spill cranberry sauce on them?"

"I shoulda told her you were Sir Doctor of *Tardis*," Rose said, slipping her hand into his. "A knighthood's a knighthood, after all. They don't have to know it was Queen Victoria who did it."

"And then promptly banished me, *Dame* Rose. Besides, titles have become rather passé here, what with a British President. Britain's Golden Age. A bit lacklustre, without the Queen at Buckingham Palace though, isn't it? Still," he sniffed, "could be worse. The country could still belong to Canada, eh?"

"You've picked up on the alternate history better than I have."

"Well, that's what I do, Rose Tyler. Pick up history. Put it back the way it should be—"

"Interfere when it suits you—"

"You can't blame any of this on me. This world's evolved along a unique time

line. No doubt Queen Victoria's not-so-mysterious death in 1879 had something to do with it," he told her, scratching absently at the back of his neck. "Shame we weren't here, but we were a little busy that day, you wee timorous beastie."

"*Naked* timorous beastie," she reminded him with raised eyebrows.

He wrinkled his nose, feeling a bit of heat on his face. He looked back over his shoulder at the noisy throng of guests, despairing that they would have to go back in.

"We should move to Scotland," Rose said suddenly. "Buy a house, yeah?"

"In Scotland?" he asked, adopting the accent as he spoke. It always made her smile when he did that. He might just make it permanent. "Where would you—aww, you mean the Torchwood estate? That dreary old place? It's practically falling in on top of itself and probably still smells like werewolf. But, yeah, why not." *Anything for you, Rose.*

As they held hands in the moonlight the clouds rolled in again and it began to rain. Rose pressed closer. He remembered how warm her body felt next to his, how their breath hung in the cold night air. Far off, voices carried on the night wind, a sad song for the darkest time of the year. He would have gone on standing there, listening, if she hadn't pulled him inside.

He grazed his way through party trays of nibbles as he was all but paraded past every realm of Society, all the while eyeing the tall windows and scanning the rooms full of guests, expecting at any moment for legions of marching Cybermen to crash the party. Or Daleks to levitate up the dumbwaiter. The band played *A Long, Long Time Ago*, but it was another melody he heard, far and away. Beautiful and sad like Ood Song. Around him glasses clinked and inane voices gabbled on about all manner of pish posh. Gold and

diamonds gleamed and sparkled under the grand old house's chandeliers. The rich were the rich no matter what Universe you were in. Tony, Rose's young brother, ran through the house, powered by the excitement of the late hour and too many sweets. He always envied the boy that freedom. When he did it people looked at him funny. Rose looped her arm around his to steer him away from the bustling crowd—and the nibbles—commenting on how well connected her father remained with the current government and UNIT and what that meant to the continued funding for research and development at this world's version of Torchwood, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

Growing ever more distracted as the night wore on, he eventually left British President Harriet Jones, (then in her second term of office), in mid-sentence, catching Rose's eye as he mounted the stairs two at a time. They had yet to even dance a single dance and she looked stunning in her elegant Christian Dior cocktail dress that matched the star sapphire ring on her left hand. The ring he had given her in keeping with one of the many quaint human customs he had observed over the years. Her long blonde hair—oh, it had been ages now since she'd worn it that way—was swept up off her neck, twisted and adorned with the gold clasp he had designed after something he remembered from his home planet, Gallifrey. All for his precious girl. He so loved being with her at Christmastime and felt a pang of regret leaving her standing there, obviously concerned about him but also disappointed. More and more, it seemed, that was what he was doing. Disappointing her. She had made him better before. Why did he still hurt so much? Was that what it meant to be part human?

He wanted to ask her if she could hear what he heard, that far and away hymn that was growing ever closer, riding the Time Winds. But he feared her answer. Why ruin

her night entirely, subjecting her to his miserable company? He made his worst mistakes at moments like that. Worse than eating marmalade from a jar with his fingers. He thought he was doing her a favour, but by the expression on Jackie Tyler's face as she led her daughter back toward the festivities his gesture was not meeting with appreciation. He might have been a green, odoriferous, googly-eyed Raxacoricofallapatorian for all she looked at him with disdain.

Oh, that night. That terrible, terrible night.

As the clock ticked away the final hours of the year, rain turned to snow, cloaking the English countryside under a chill mantle. The haunting melody played on, a distant, irrefutable death knell. He paced the bedroom, tossing jacket and tie aside, loosening his collar. Listening. Listening. The song grew in intensity until it was all he could hear. Sorrow all he could feel. His already diminished composure shattered and he fled the house to take refuge in the vaulted orangery Pete Tyler had agreed to give him use of to conceal his workshop—and where he had hidden the rapidly growing *Tardis*. Had it been possible, he would have entered the fledging Time Ship itself that night, but it was too soon. Too soon and too dangerous. Even for a Time Lord.

The terraced flagstones leading up the hillside to the greenhouse might have been a snow-capped mountain for all the effort it took to ascend. Inside at last, he bolted shut the door before falling to his knees amid flowering bougainvillea and fuchsia, head pressed between his hands, waiting for a death that wasn't even his own.

As if they didn't already think he was barmy.

When he failed to answer Rose's repeated entreaties, Pete broke the door down with a fire axe, the blow shattering several panels of glass in the ceiling. Cold air rushed

in, but not before Jackie Tyler, who breezed in like a tropical storm, fists on her hips, demanding an explanation and calling him a lunatic. And other things. He wouldn't have argued the point even if he could have.

Even now, years later, he could feel that terrible pain and recall what a struggle it had been just to focus on them. Pete still in his dinner jacket, Jackie and Rose in their designer gowns, and Tony, dressed in his jim-jams at such a late hour, pushing in behind them, his dark eyes shimmering pools. Everyone was talking at once (humans really were a gabby species), but Jackie loudest and fastest of all, like a replay of his torturous last Regeneration a forgotten number of Christmases before when she asked him what he needed in a rapid fire succession of words, never stopping long enough to listen to his answer.

"Oh, not *this* again," she said at long last, bending down to look at him more closely. "He hasn't changed, has he?"

"What do you mean, Mum? Of course he hasn't changed," Rose told her, rushing to his side. Her fingers felt wonderfully cool on his hot skin. "He can't Regenerate. Not anymore."

"Well, I don't know," Jackie told her daughter, bending to touch his forehead with a finely manicured hand. "Have a look at him. He's just the same as before. Burning a fever. And look at his eyes. What do you need this time sweetheart? Wait, don't tell me. I remember. Tea. Pete, put the kettle on. Tony, get mummy a blanket, there's a good boy."

English mums. Ever so practical in a crises. Even when they were cross.

Rose sat beside him on the floor, wrapping him in Tony's Secret Squirrel blanket,

holding him against her now crumpled gown. For the first time in days he felt like he was reconnecting to reality. At least this reality. By the look on Pete's face it was clear the man thought more was required but soon enough a hot cuppa was pressed between his fingers and Rose dropped two sugar cubes in. *Just the way you like it.* He inhaled deeply, unable to focus on anything besides the steam, the warmth, the scent of Rose's hair, until, quite suddenly, he asked for an apple. Tony was quick to fetch one from the house. For some reason it tasted like rubbish.

"It's him, isn't it?" Rose asked him softly, searching his eyes for answers he feared he did not have. "He's gone, isn't he? He's... changed again?"

"I expect so."

Not for the first time he had to turn away from the tears coursing down Rose Tyler's face, resigning himself to the fact that no matter how much she wanted to love him, she would always, *always*, love the Doctor.

When synapses were again firing he went for one of his now infamous drives where he drove very fast for a very long time. Often until all the petrol was spent. Rose tracked him down not far from Balmoral Castle in Scotland where he had made arrangements to buy the now decrepit Torchwood Estate for her with little more than charm and, he was told, good looks. He told her *Merry Christmas!* She told him to put on his coat before he caught his death in the cold.

Why was it that even when he did the right thing, it was the wrong thing?

He peered into the empty biscuit tin sadly.

Someone spoke his name.

He wondered if Pete would mind if he borrowed the other Jeep.

*

“Rory, what’s wrong with him? He’s all clammy.”

“He probably has a fever.”

“Yes, but *why* does he has a fever?” Amy Pond asked, fixing her husband with an exasperated gaze. “He never gets sick. Is it some sort of Space Flu? Maybe he went back to that awful jungle planet he just *had* to drag us to to see those sloth bat thingies? I told him not to eat those green bananas.”

Rory looked down to where Amy stood in the space below the *Tardis* control console. She had changed her clothes, trading bunny slippers and a nightie for jeans and a plaid shirt. Above her, the crystalline Time Rotor continued to rise and fall with graceful precision. Lights on the control panels flickered. Instruments spun and weird, looping Gallifreyan script flickered in waves over the monitors. Music now trickled from unseen speakers in the ceiling. The Proclaimers’ *A Long, Long Time ago*. It seemed to be stuck in a loop.

.Show me things I don't want to see

(Wanna see, wanna see, wanne see)

Remind me of who I thought I was gonna be

(Ganna be, gonna be, gonna be)

Take me places I used to go

(Used to go, used to go)

A long long time ago.

The last time they had travelled with the Doctor it had been Ian Dury, Elvis Costello and Wreckless Eric. Tomorrow it would probably be Dirty Blues. As long as it wasn't more Judoon love ballads. For all intents and purposes all seemed well in the *Tardis*. Except for the Doctor himself who, Rory had to admit, was anything but well.

That and it seemed to him like they were going faster than normal through the Space Time Vortex.

He clattered back down the steps, stethoscope in hand. He debated telling Amy that hiding in the den of looping cables and shimmering wires beneath the main flight deck wasn't really all that unusual, but the Doctor wasn't swinging lazily in the repair harness, whispering sweet nothings to the *Tardis* itself. Herself. To the contrary, he was huddled like a frightened child in a thunderstorm not far from the storage closet under the stairs that they had pulled him out of kicking and screaming earlier. He had been uncharacteristically quiet and still since Amy had slapped him hard across the face in a desperate attempt to snap him out of whatever delirium had wound him into a writhing mass of flailing limbs. Stunned, the Doctor ceased his convulsions, his soulful grey-green eyes wide at the sight of the blood dripping from Rory's nose and down the front of his plaid shirt. His square jaw worked side to side, the words "I'm sorry" barely whispering from his lips. Then he was as pale as he had been before the tirade, scrambling as far away from his companions as the low edges of the compartment would allow. If Amy hadn't blocked his escape, he'd have been back down his rabbit hole.

Rory extended the stethoscope toward his wife, but she grabbed his arm instead

and pulled him closer.

“You’re the nurse. Do some nursing.”

“Yes, and he’s an Eleven Hundred year old alien with two hearts and I think I may have a deviated septum.” Rory touched his nose carefully. “He’s a lot stronger than he looks.”

“Oooh, poor baby,” Amy crooned at him. She kissed his nose as gently as she had kissed his burnt fingers, then bent down near the Doctor. “Doctor it’s me, yeah? So, Rory’s back. Try not to hit him again okay? Be a good Alien and we’ll get you a whole case of Jammie Dodgers.”

The Doctor made no reply, only pulled further into the shadows. He wouldn’t look at them, but he whispered something. They leaned in close. He whispered again.

“What did he say?” Rory asked. “Did he ask for River?”

“No. I don’t think... no. It was something else. Doctor? Say again. What? I think he’s delirious. Or maybe that’s Gallifreyan.”

“She’s probably already with him, you know. In another time line. Even if we can contact her, what’s she going to do? Slap him harder than you already did?”

“Oy!” Amy snapped at him. “I was improvising. It worked didn’t it?”

“Yes, well if you’d left him alone before maybe he’d still be sleeping.”

“Oh, so it’s my fault?”

“Well... no... yes.. Maybe.” Rory looked back at the Doctor, then at his wife. Such a life they lead. If defied logic.

“We need help,” Amy told him, squeezing his hand. “*He* needs help. Go on, Pretty. Talk to the *Tardis* again. I don’t think he came and got us. Not this time. She

did. She brought him to us. Remember what he told us? That she said she always took him where he needed to go even if it wasn't where he wanted to go? Well now's the time to find out if that's true."

Rory wiped his nose on the back of his sleeve, wishing once more that they were back home. Travelling with the Doctor rarely ended well. This time hadn't even started out well.

Chapter Three

Rain drenched grass soaked the cuffs of his trousers. He was barefoot in the garden, sonic screwdriver in his hand, wondering where that old biddy of a housekeeper had put his shoes. Last time he'd come in muddy and soaked, she'd thrown them out here and turned the garden hose on them. Aha. He picked up a sodden trainer and tipped it over. A cloudy stream trickled between his fingers. He emptied the other one, then set them to dry, wondering when the sun would be coming up.

Behind him, the stately brick manor house loomed silent and large in the fog, the centuries old country estate Pete Tyler had restored in the aftermath of the John Lumic Cybermen affair. He closed the door securely. It wouldn't do to have wee Rusty Tyler trailing after him in the dark, following him like he was some sort of sonic Pied Piper.

A boom echoed dully, like a far off thunderclap. He whirled, startled by the sound but unsure why. The night sky, dark and clouded, blazed to light for just a moment, shimmering lights crackling in the mist, roiling in an unearthly display of colour above the tree line at the far end the pasture. Almost too late he saw the yawning maw open in the haze and spotted a projectile hurtling toward him. He watched, bewildered, as the object skimmed a line of cedars, tore into the greenhouse on the hill, exiting one side after apparently making contact with the *Tardis* within. It careened wildly, knocking the roof off the brand new, freshly painted garden shed before coming to rest on the lawn just

feet away from him. He blinked.

“*What?*”

A cannon ball. He stepped forward, squinting at the deadly sphere, then back into the sky from which it had come. A rush of adrenaline made him forget, momentarily, why he was even standing in the garden at 4am, barefoot. Aside from deflecting the Yugglorrh Transperion’s latest feeble attack on the planet, this was the most excitement he had had in months and the realization came as something of a depressing shock. Cannonballs hardly compared to Cybermen, Carrionites or even Agatha Christie. Then again, cannonballs hurling out of mysterious lights in the sky were better than nothing and a lot better than disappearing sheep. A proper right mystery this was. Why, maybe even enough for Agatha Christie to have penned a book about it. *The Case of the Careening Cannonball.*

Against the dark ground the compact ball of iron was darker still. And quite harmless now that it was no longer in flight. He picked it up, rolling it over and over in his hands, then held it close to his nose. It smelled of sulphur and burned grease. A well-lubed cannon had launched this little beauty. He touched a forefinger to his tongue then wished he hadn’t. Iron, silicon, and, if he wasn’t mistaken, a dash of Nathaniel Nye’s proprietary gunpowder blend. He rolled the unpleasant flavours around in his mouth before spitting them out. Blasted human physiology again. A curious flavour lingered. Strange. Trace amounts of non terrestrial iron ore. No. It couldn’t be. *Zeiton-7*? But that was ludicrous. The only *Zeiton-7* mines he knew of were on Varos and even when he considered that the planet shared the Mutter Spiral with Earth it was far beyond his reach in the constellation of Cetes. With a fully functioning *Tardis* he could reach it. Without

it, the *Tardis* might never even achieve proper functionality. His attempts to substitute several rare earth elements for *Zeiton-7* had produced mixed results, not to mention noxious fumes. To date only Gadolinium-153 and Dysprosium had proved marginally palatable to the finicky Time Ship.

He trained his sonic screwdriver on the cannon ball to confirm his suspicions, but it provided little information beyond what he already knew before it whistled, sparked, then sputtered out. It hadn't been resonating frequencies correctly since he dropped it in the peat bog.

Lights flicked on in the house as those within seemed to have realized something was amiss on the lawn. Tony was jumping up and down at his bedroom window, calling for his dad to come quickly. A moment later it was Pete's voice he heard, "...not the shed *again*." As if on cue, the precariously leaning structure disintegrated into a pile of lumber, potting soil, and garden implements. It was probably a good time to make his exit. It was that or try to explain why what appeared to be a 17th Century cannonball was sitting in the Tyler's award-winning, manicured garden.

Someone spoke his name.

He stood quickly, sweeping the night with his gaze.

You aren't listening. Why aren't you listening?

With more questions than answers, and no time to retrieve his soggy trainers before he was discovered at the heart of chaos, he pocketed his malfunctioning screwdriver, fished a torch from the wreckage of the garden shed, and ran.

As he plucked a mud encrusted acorn from between his toes, he had to admit that

stopping for his wet shoes might have been worth both the discomfort *and* the momentary inconvenience of the interrogation that he knew would be waiting for him upon his return. Rose would be laughing at him by now, pelting him with slimy acorns and anything else she could scoop up from the forest floor. He'd have reciprocated, putting wet leaves down the back of her jumper. Mysterious voices and rain aside, it was entirely too much fun. Lights in the sky, cannonball smashing her father's new garden shed to smithereens, him mincing along muttering vulgarities he'd learned while playing truant with the Shobogans in Low Town during his years at the Academy on Gallifrey. Oh, he'd missed this kind of adventure. Missed being with her, running like mad through the unknown for sheer pleasure rather than out of a sense of duty to whoever paid his expenses. No one to answer to and no paperwork to fill out later. He did so detest paperwork. It was enough to make him forget just how tired he still was. Jackie would have rung up her daughter for a second time tonight, no matter the late hour, beckoning her back if the fate of the planet (or at least Scotland's sheep) wasn't at stake. Which it obviously wasn't because, well, they'd have told him. And expected him to do something about it.

This time he would have to face her. No more excuses. Much longer and, well, much longer and he might never go back. That was the danger of always running away. The day came when you took one step too far and the way back might be lost forever. He had imposed this little exile on himself. Time. He needed time. And answers to those age old questions about The Meaning of Life. Questions he had long made a profession of ignoring. How he expected to find those answers now while running pell mell all over Britain he wasn't sure. He hadn't meant to be gone so long. Hadn't meant to drop his

mobile in a sink hole while triangulating a signal back to an orbiting alien warship and overloading their guidance systems. He needed her more than ever. The reality of that hit him like a blow to the chest. Oh, he needed her. Needed her in the worst way. Needed to know she didn't blame him for the empty cradle in the nursery. Needed... her. He trusted she knew that, but supposed saying it now and again might help matters.

With any luck she'd have boarded the zeppelin moored at Balmoral and would soon be here, notice he'd left his trainers behind and bring them. With matching socks.

He trudged onward. Judging by the trajectory of the cannonball—and the tang of temporal energy in the night air—he was heading in the right direction. Unless of course it had bounced, though that was some bounce if it had originated in the English Civil War. A real temporal Rift? Right here, under Pete Tyler's nose. Worse, under *his* nose. Had he really become so thick? Thick and dull and stupid? And old.

Since any place that *he* was was considered a high risk zone, the area surrounding the Tyler's sprawling estate used to be monitored closely for everything from Zygons to space portals. Before the budget cuts multiple teams of temporal engineers had trekked these forests and hills, sweeping acre after acre with the finest equipment available and consistently turned up nothing, nada, zilch, zero, zed. Neither here nor in the city where at one time had existed a Rift between worlds high above Canary Warf. A Rift that allowed a Void Ship entrance to Torchwood Towers. The *other* Torchwood, he reminded himself. From Rose's world. The parallel world she and Jackie had come from.

The longer he had lived in this skin, separated from the universe in which he had originated, the less he trusted his biologically-altered Time Lord senses; but his intriguing new human intuition had always told him something was out here. Or would be. Or had

been. Funny thing, Time. Perhaps that's what drew him back. That and the awakening *Tardis*. And rightly so.

A dim light shown in the forest on the far side of the motorway. He'd come to the edge of the Tyler's land. Beyond was protected woodland where, on Other Earth, lay city sprawl. There was little traffic this time of night and he hastened across cold tarmac and down the far embankment, pushing aside branches, sweeping the ground with his torch, all the while stepping gingerly on walnuts and jagged rocks. The air was ripe with temporally-charged particles here and his sonic screwdriver indicated further traces of Zeiton-7. If he could pinpoint the source and secure a pure enough ore sample he would have no trouble aligning the trans-power system in his *Tardis*. His spine tingled with anticipation. If only he had a pair of handy dandy 3-D glasses he was sure the whole of the woods would be awash with *void stuff*. This was it. The real thing. Finally!

As the last twig snapped beneath his bare feet and the last leaves brushed his arms he stepped into a small clearing and stopped. The torch slipped from his fingers and went out. There in the mist, like the glowing lamp post that marked the north west boundary of Narnia, stood a blue police box.

"You are kidding me," he breathed softly.

He ran the rest of the way, fingers tracing a smooth line down the wooden door. It was solid and smooth, warm to the touch. Impossible! But he had learned long ago, in another life, to believe in impossible things, and was more than willing to take this leap of faith. Whatever had transpired to bring the *Tardis* across from one universe to another, it was important.

He pressed his cheek against the door, closing his eyes. Not even the cold rain

could spoil this moment.

“Hello, Old Girl.”

He had no key.

He realized quite suddenly that he had no key. Rose did. The key he had entrusted to her on the eve of World War III. It hung amid the stars and moons above the cot he had built, and Rose had stained blue, and together they had placed in a warm, snug little nursery room on the south side of that rambling old house in Scotland.

He shook the memories away, focusing once more on the closed door. A simple knock would have to suffice. Unless... He looked down at his right hand, thumb and middle finger rubbing together. It couldn't work. Not for him. Not the Halfling. Could it? Determined, he stepped back slightly and raised his hand.

The door opened before he even had time to snap his fingers, golden light spilling out of the gloriously Regenerated interior of the *Tardis* herself. It was all he could do not to push past the young man standing in the doorway to survey the interior, all copper and brass and gleaming with beauty that was breathtaking, even for him.

“Aw, this is brilliant!” he cried, craning his neck to see the vaulted ceiling and the towering chamber that held the delicate Time Rotor. “Very, well, Maritime. Quite the Edwardian nautical theme you have going on here. Love the malachite finish. Mind you, I liked the coral, too. Had that warm home grown organic feel that... oh. Sorry. Getting ahead of myself aren't I? Happens. But, blimey! This is brilliant!”

“Uhm. Thank you?” the brown-haired stranger said awkwardly, green eyes wide with surprise.

A familiar stethoscope hung around the man's neck, partly obscuring a blood-

splattered plaid shirt. One look at the poor fellow's nose explained the blood. He followed the man's glance left, then right (expecting someone else?) then met the questioning gaze once again.

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

That was his cue and he beamed his cheeriest smile.

"Hello! I'm the..."

"*Doc-tor!*" a woman's voice bellowed from inside the *Tardis*, the name followed quickly by: "Rory! Is that River? Rory, get back down here! *Ror-y!*"

"Sorry, I have to—"

"I should say so if the misses is using that tone with you, mate. Rory, is it?"

He breezed in, making straight for the flight controls. His hands passed lovingly over the vintage sextant and compass before he gazed up at the central column once more.

"Blimey," he said again. "She really outdid herself this time..."

His words of admiration were cut short when the woman's voice called out again, more urgently. He looked side to side then down at the shadowy figure below him. The grated floor panels he remembered had been replaced with a transparent deck through which he could glimpse the intricate undercarriage.

"This way," Rory told him, motioning for him to follow, but he was already two steps ahead, clattering down the steps to the lower deck, Rory trailing behind him, asking him who he was exactly.

"That's always the question," he said, turning in circles, taking in the wonders of the cave like space below the flight deck. "Oh, this is great. Really, really great. Really,

really, *really* great. I haven't seen it like this in years!"

He absently connected loose electrical couplings, igniting a shower of sparks.

"It always does that," Rory offered.

"Oh, I know."

"You know? How can you know? Who are you? And where are your shoes?"

A tall, young woman in skin-tight jeans and a red plaid shirt emerged from the shadows under the steps. Ginger hair spilled all about her pretty face. Her accent was Scottish and she looked cross. She was glaring at Rory.

"I thought the *Tardis* was taking us to River."

"River?" he asked, surprised. "Professor River Song?"

Rory and the young woman exchanged a glance.

"You know about *Tardises* and you know about River?"

"I know a lot more about *Tardises* than I know about River. At least this one. I know all about her, don't I Old Girl? We go back a long way. The *Tardis* I mean. Not... River, uhm..."

She was looking down at his bare feet. He wiggled his muddy toes and rocked back and forth. "I was in a hurry. And they were wet..."

"Right," she said crisply.

"Amy," Rory said suddenly, ending the awkward pause that had fallen between them. "Where's the Doctor?"

Now he really grinned, but she'd already turned away, pointing under the stairs.

"That's why I was yelling, Stupid Face. He's gone and locked himself in the cupboard again."

No amount of physical force made any difference. The door had been locked from within. And probably soniced. At least that's what he would have done, if he didn't want anyone else to get in. Or didn't want something to get out.

"Let me have a go," he told them, hunkering down by the door. He drew his screwdriver from his back pocket and fiddled with the switch. It hummed to life then sputtered. He whacked it against his palm. Twice. When that didn't work he flipped it end for end and began to back the screws out of the door hinges manually. Less elegant, but still effective under the circumstances.

"Is that *sonic*?" Rory asked, exchanging glances with Amy. They'd been doing that for several minutes. He supposed explanations were in order, but not until they'd gotten this door opened. He couldn't wait to see his face when he saw himself.

"Yup," he answered the question, leaning hard against the tight screws, passing each in turn to Rory.

"It's totally rubbish!" Amy accused. "You have a rubbish sonic. Who *are* you?"

The last of the over-sized screws twisted out, saving him from the immediate question. With a grunt, he moved the heavy door aside and peered in. Amy was on her hands and knees beside him, shining a torch into the cramped storeroom. They crawled past 900 years of souvenirs crammed into beat up trunks, odds and ends spilling out like vintage movie props in a forgotten back lot. It looked worse than a teenager's bedroom. The Doctor had wedged into an impossibly small space between an open suitcase full of shoes and a biplane propeller, knees drawn up, face buried in hands like one of the Weeping Angels of old. The Time Lord's shirtsleeves were rolled to the elbow and one

of the buckles on a pair of black braces had come unclasped. A red bowtie had slipped its central knot, and hung unevenly against the collar of a handsome hounds tooth patterned shirt. An unruly mop of brown hair spilled over long fingers.

“Oh now, what’s happened to you?” he said, surprised by the sight in spite of himself and keenly sensing the other man’s pain. This was a well read page out of his own life. “How long has he been like this?”

“A day. Maybe longer. He’s been strange since he picked us up this time,” Amy told him.

“Stranger than normal,” Rory corrected.

“May I?” He gestured at the stethoscope still hanging around Rory’s neck.

“Yeah, sure. But...”

He held one finger to his lips to silence them, moving the stethoscope around on the Doctor’s chest with some difficulty given their cramped quarters.

“Hearts sound fine. Pulse a little rapid. Let’s get him out of here, shall we?” he glanced around and sniffed. “Reminds me of being in a ventilation shaft. In a shoe factory.”

A pair of black and white Converse trainers in the open suitcase caught his eye. He fished them out, looked them over, took a cursory whiff, then tied the laces together and slung them around his neck. He preferred the red, but any port in a storm. Besides, his feet were getting cold.

“Wait,” Amy said suddenly, laying a hand on his arm and meeting his gaze. This close to her he could see her freckles in the wavering torch light. And, he supposed, she could see his. “You knew the Doctor had two hearts. Are you some sort of alien doctor

or something?”

“I... have been,” he told her, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Lucky for you I still make house calls.”

Slowly, but firmly, they half dragged the Doctor from the darkness of the storage locker into the softly lit compartment below the main deck. Once there, they wrapped a blanket around the Time Lord’s narrow shoulders. He doubted it was necessary, but the gesture seemed to make Amy feel better. A good thing seeing as what was next to come probably wasn’t going to reassure her at all.

“Right then,” he said, taking a deep breath as he drew the Doctor’s hands away from such unfamiliar features. He brushed back a shock of hair to examine deeply set green eyes. The Doctor looked at him, recognition slowly registering on the Time Lord’s narrow, young face.

“Hello, look at you. And River thought *I* was pretty. Still not ginger, are we?” he gave a sidelong glance at Amy. “I don’t know that even the *Tardis* would be big enough for more than one.”

A twitch of the Doctor’s upper lip might have betrayed a smile.

“Oh, you are in there, aren’t you? Good. Locked yourself in a cupboard? Haven’t done that in—ooh—long time. At least not on purpose. So what were you hiding from? And,” he said thoughtfully, “what could possibly be strong enough to have taken your measure?”

The Doctor swallowed deeply. They both knew what was coming.

“If you can’t trust yourself,” he said simply as he placed his fingertips gently on both sides of the youthful-looking face. He closed his eyes, concentrating, hoping he still

had the capacity to do what needed to be done. He never knew where being human ended and being a Time Lord began.

“Wait... Rory, what’s he doing—?”

He whistled softly. “Oh, there are Cowboys in here, aren’t there? Shh-shh-shhh... don’t pull away. You came a long way for help. Let me help you if I can.”

Well, he reasoned later. He had asked for it. Wave after shattering wave of emotion crashed over him, showering him in memories. The Winds of Time rushed past, filling him with the thrill of adventure. He danced among the stars, witnessing the birth and the death of entire galaxies. Then fear, panic as he was ensnared in a Dalek time corridor that threatened to empty out into The Nothing. Fleets of Time Ships amassed across the horizon of space, obliterated in an instant by eye searing bolts of energy. Regret. So much regret. Space and Time collided, exploded, cracks rippling back through the Time Vortex, erupting into too many realities to count. Time lines that once presented themselves as fixed points splintered, shock waves branching in every direction. The known universe collapsed, taking everything and everyone with it. Loneliness replaced it. Loneliness like he had felt first in his dreams, then as he lay awake, unable to reconcile dream to reality. Which reality? His? Or his?

A rush of sorrow assailed him then, an intense longing, searching for recognition. Blue-white light ebbed toward him, over him, tumbling him into darkness, sweeping him back, back, back, until he could scarcely breath. Like waves upon the shores of time he felt himself grow stretched and thin until the inevitable pull of the sea swallowed him back then swept him forward on a crimson tide of blazing energy. He swam for his life, surrounded by feelings of such insatiable hunger he could barely fathom it all. So very

hungry for life, for freedom. A voice called his name. Cried his name back and forth across all of Space and Time. *I hear you. I hear you. We hear you.* His voice united with the voice already giving answer. He wondered how far back in time a plea that powerful might ricochet. What could possibly call that loudly? Who could possibly need him that much? He squeezed his eyes closed, fighting the nausea, struggling to maintain contact until at last the gnawing hunger released them both and the Doctor collapsed against him with an anguished gasp, dark head resting in the crook of his arm. One eye, one bloodshot green eye snapped open.

“*You,*” came the barely audible whisper.

“Oh yes,” he replied, grinning down at the Time Lord.

“You have... a *beard*.”

“Oh, yes.” he replied again, running his free hand over his whiskers.

“It’s totally rubbish...”

“Says the man with the fringe!”

“.. and you cannot... cannot... be here,” the Doctor’s words slipped away even as the green eyes, heavy with sleep, began to close. “It’s imposs–imposs...”

“Impossible? Now that’s where you’re wrong, Time Boy. It’s you that can’t be here. But we’ll get to that later. Right now you need to rest. Trust me,” he grinned.

“I’m the Doctor.”

Chapter Four

“What did you mean?” Amy asked after they’d lugged the now unconscious Doctor up the stairs to deposit rather unceremoniously across the jump seats. “What did you mean, you’re the Doctor?”

“I am the Doctor,” he said simply.

“*You’re* the Doctor?”

“That’s me. Hello!”

“But you can’t be,” she said, tucking the blue blanket around their softly snoring patient. “I mean there can’t be two of you. Can there? That would mean he’s crossing his own time line again, yeah?”

“Again?” That was worrisome to say the least.

“It’s becoming something of an addiction.” Rory told him, examining both a blackened eye and a swollen nose in a mirror on the main console. “He promised he was going to give it up after the trouble it got the universe into last time.”

“Oh, I’m reckless and I have a bad haircut? Another. Bad. Haircut. Uhm. But in this case no. He isn’t interacting with his own past because I’m not his past. Well, not exactly. Well, not anymore. Come to think of it, never. Long story. Had to have been there,” he said, gravitating back toward the navigational displays to examine the new controls more closely. The *Tardis* had never looked so magnificent. He couldn’t wait to

get his hands on her. She was positively sexy.

Amy stepped in front of him, her arms crossed over her chest. He blinked.

Spirited, this one. And not the least bit afraid of him. At least not yet. He liked that.

“Explain.”

“Let *him* explain.” He jerked a thumb toward the Time Lord draped across the battered seats. “I mean, when he wakes up. Later. Let him explain later.”

Amy and Rory both laughed at his words and he looked back and forth between them.

“Oh? Oh. No, I suppose he won’t, well he? I wouldn’t if I were him. Well, what then? You expect *me* to explain?”

“You seem to be the man with all the answers, *Doctor*,” Amy replied, leaning just a bit too close to be polite.

“All right then,” he told her, leaning back against the console, “but you might want to call for a pizza because I may be awhile. And I’m starved. Anyone else fancy a deep dish coriander chilli chicken? No? Could I at least have a cuppa? Whatever that is on the hob, it smells gorgeous.”

“*Doctor*,” Amy prompted.

“Right. Sorry. Where to start? With the Daleks shooting me—him—during their invasion I suppose.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “Again with the Daleks.”

“What? They’re right nasty little blighters. You’d think Earth was a prime bit of intergalactic real estate the number of times they’ve been there. Or will be there. Don’t tell me you didn’t notice them. Crafty little pepper pots. No? Not ringing any bells?

No? Medusa Cascade? Earth whizzing through space? Planets in the sky? What part of the twentieth century are you from? Are you from the twentieth century? Twenty first? Twenty...”

Amy cleared her throat noisily.

“Ehm. Right. Sure. My –his– residual regenerative energy had been diverted into this,” he wiggled the fingers of his right hand, “ever-so-handy biological receptacle. Captain Jack’s Doctor Detector. Grisly, huh? But, it’s a good thing he found it, eh? Even with that slight weakness in the dorsal tubercle which, I suppose, I ought to be grateful for because if it hadn’t been weak it might never have been cut off and in that case I wouldn’t be standing here telling you my tale, now would I? Mind you, I also wouldn’t have a year of my life that was erased from the time line but I still remember. Do you have any idea what it’s like to wake up to dog kibble every morning? Oh, and Rory? Ice,” he said, tapping his own nose in demonstration. “I’d hurry if I were you.

“Aaaaanyway, stop me if you’ve already heard this part won’t you? Donna–good ole Donna Noble!–He’s told you about Donna, right? No? No. You are kidding me. He hasn’t told you about Donna? Swell guy. What? She was *brilliant*! She touched the case my severed hand was in and *wham!*”

Amy and Rory both jumped back as he punctuated the word with a high hick to right field.

“Instantaneous biological meta crisis! There I was, and here I am. Born in battle, full of blood, anger and revenge. But I got better. Mostly. All right, jury’s still out. Time Lord with one heart, one life, but every bit *him* up until the point I became, well, *me*.”

Now they were staring at him. He wondered if he’d forgotten something and

began silently ticking points off on his fingers. Nope. That was everything.

“Can I have that cuppa now?” he asked meekly, turning to see if the tea was still hot.

“Your severed hand?” Rory looked incredulous. Apparently the need for ice had been forgotten.

“Yep. It grew back,” he told them as he lifted the teapot lid and inhaled the rich aroma, disappointed that there was no cup available. “Gotta love that Regeneration energy. Well, strictly speaking *his* hand was severed and grew back. Battling the Sycorax Christmas morning... spaceship over London? A third of the people on the planet under blood control?” He waited for any kind of acknowledgement that they knew what he was talking about. He scratched his check. “Dear me. Tough crowd.”

“You’re right. We should have waited for the Doctor to explain,” Rory said at last. “No. Never mind. It still wouldn’t have made any sense.”

“Wait. So you have one heart?” Amy reached tentatively toward him and placed her hand on his chest. He could feel his heart beating steadily beneath her fingers. Her eyes grew wide. They were very pretty eyes, he thought.

“You’re partly human,” she observed.

“Disgusting, isn’t it?” The truth of the matter still made him shudder.

“Oy!” Amy snapped at him.

“Oy!” he snapped back, then grinned. Fantastic! No wonder the Doctor had scooped up this one. He’d have done the same in a heartbeat. Two hearts beat. Rory didn’t seem too bad either. Two for one and attached to each other. That simplified things.

“All right,” Amy said slowly, following him around the console as he checked the nooks and crannies beneath for a tea cup. “Say I’m following you so far. Following what you’re saying, I mean, not following you. “

“You are following me.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do I?”

She pursed her lips at him. He grinned and went back to searching.

“No, but it sounds enough like him to believe it even if I don’t completely understand it. But how did you get here? And why has he never told us about you? I mean, you’re like clone-brothers or something. He always says he’s alone. The Last of the Time Lords.”

“Oh, I don’t think he expected to ever see me again.” He had almost said *us. Rose and me*. That explanation he really did intend to leave to the Doctor. Come to think of it, he was owed that much himself.

“Why,” Rory asked slowly, trailing after them. “Where are we?”

“Earth,” he said, sadly coming to the conclusion that there were no tea cups on hand. Why brew a pot of tea and not have tea cups?

“Earth is good,” Rory began.

“Serves the local population well enough, I suppose. But it’s not the one you left. At least I expect not. Mind you, if you don’t remember anything about the Daleks or the Sycorax maybe he picked you up someplace I don’t know about. Seems like he’d have noticed if he’d slid sideways through a crack in Time and Space, but fish fingers and custard can do that to a bloke,” he said, bringing himself up short. *Fish fingers and...*

what?

“Wait, how do you know that?” Amy asked him.

He shrugged. “He was thinking about fish fingers and custard, now I’m thinking about fish fingers and cu— seriously? At the same time? Tell me he doesn’t... Uhm. Where was I? Oh yes. I... stayed behind, in *this* parallel world. Retro-closure of the Rift at Darlig Ulv Stranden in Norway meant no one in and no one out, and trust me, we checked. Torchwood and UNIT both monitor all the hotspots. Well, they used to. Budget cuts and all that. Frankly, he was right. Your being here is impossible.”

“Take it up with the *Tardis*,” Amy told him.

“The *Tardis*?” But he was not nearly surprised. He had long known that the ship had a mind of her own. He looked up into the glimmering assembly of globes that made up the Time Rotor, sensing again what he’d sensed inside the Doctor’s troubled mind. Searching. Longing. *Hunger*. He was missing something. Something right in front of him.

He looked down at the face he would never see in the mirror. Such a young face for an old man. And this one ever so much older than he was. Amy moved closer as if, just then, she wasn’t entirely sure she trusted this stranger in their midst. In their *Tardis*. Quite right, too. It was powerfully clear she did not like seeing the Doctor this way and from their brief contact he knew it had happened more than once. It seemed fate continued to place him in pivotal moments in Time. Amy’s reaction was more basic than that, though. She simply didn’t want to see her friend hurt. Her friend. Her best friend. He touched her arm gently and looked deeply into her brown eyes. He knew what it was like, to have a friend like that.

“He’ll be fine. Really. Five minutes and a cuppa and he’ll be right as rain. Well,” he drawled, seeing that she was not about to take him at his word, “maybe ten minutes and a banana. Even so, something messed with the neuro-pathways. Some sophisticated, telepathic, neuro-disrupting, trans-dimensional, timey-wimey stuff.”

He swung the Doctor’s handsome moleskin jacket off the back of one of the jump seats, rifling the pockets for clues. Lint, more lint, crumbs, something sticky that smelled like jam. And a wrinkled orange. He tossed it up then snatched it out of the air.

“Where have you been?”

“*We* were at home,” Rory told him.

Amy concurred. “We haven’t seen him in awhile. A long while, really.”

“–right.” He sniffed loudly. “Psychic pollen doesn’t work that way. You’d all be having hallucinations and, I can assure you, I’m not an hallucination. No evidence that the Trickster’s been at work. Encounter any brain devouring parasites in your travels? No? They can hibernate for years, then they get restless and bored and start poking around. Get right into your ears while you’re sleeping, cosy up in there where it’s warm and dark, disrupt auditory processing before attaching to your–. Oh. Sorry. Too much information?”

Both Amy and Rory looked more than a little alarmed, hands straying involuntarily to their ears. They made the cutest bookends, he thought, clad in jeans and red plaid shirts. And cowboy boots. Proper, American cowboy boots, no doubt from a proper America. Not like this world, where the Land of the Free and Home of the Brave was sandwiched between the United States of Mexico and Imperial Canada.

“Wait a minute,” Rory said, “we haven’t been in the *Tardis* is ages, but wouldn’t

any brain devouring parasites that were roaming around in here have infected us too?”

“Depends,” he replied, deftly peeling the orange and handing the rind to Rory.

He balanced it on the hand rail when he was finished, then went back to searching pockets.

A chess piece, bus tokens, a dry cleaning claim ticket from 1952, a wooden yo-yo, a Rubix Cube with only the blue face done, a hefty metre-long torch, a stick of chalk, a recipe for curried fish heads, a rubber ball, and a half eaten package of Coco Dodgers which he helped himself to seeing as he was still feeling rather famished. In an inner pocket he found a familiar leather wallet and flipped it open as he munched, wondering if there were more biscuits to be found. The psychic paper was covered in gibberish. Gallifreyan gibberish involving complex mathematical calculations that defied even his logic. The symbols changed as he watched, as if the equation was still in the process of being worked out. He set it aside to study the curious, new sonic screwdriver, wondering if it had a red setting. Or dampers.

“On what”

“Psychic interface? Oh! Get out of here! No way!” He tested applications on the device with great pleasure. An automatic garage door opener. “Oh, that’s dead clever, that is. Never know when you’ll need to—Oh. What? Did I miss the question?”

“Depends on what?” Rory prompted, hands waving, orange peel dropping around them. “Infected brains? Parasites?”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” Amy, in particular, seemed to be amused by him and was no longer hovering over *her* Doctor like a mother hen. He smiled at her, enjoying the slow smile that edged over her lips and wrinkled her nose. “Depends on what it was hungry

for.”

“Are you saying we aren’t complicated or, I don’t know, *tasty* enough?”

“Not at all. You lot can be plenty complicated. No opinion on tasty, mind you.”

He flipped the screwdriver end for end, aimed it, snapped it open. Closed it.

Seeing that they were watching his every move he slid it and the psychic paper into an inside pocket, patted it gently, and placed the green jacket back where he’d found it. The other pockets would have to wait.

“Oh, you are so the Doctor,” Amy mused.

“Yes, I am,” he said with a little toss of his head. How fabulous not to have to explain himself. Or wear a badge.

“Wait. What are we supposed to call you? We can’t call you both *Doctor*. That was way too confusing the last time. What is it with you and no proper name?”

He blinked. “Wait. What? Last time—what—?”

“I mean, is it all like, I don’t know, titles? The Doctor,” she pronounced each syllable with a sassy little tilt of her head. “The Corsair—”

“Oh, he was a great bloke, uhm, usually. A bloke, I mean.”

“—the Butcher, The Baker, The Candlestick Maker?”

“Him not so much...”

But Amy had moved on as quickly as he often did and was ignoring his interjections. Which, he mused, was just as well because he didn’t really want to explain why the Candlestick Maker called himself that. She looked grave.

“You’re sure he’ll be all right? I mean, did it—whatever it was—, I don’t know, suck out anything important. Okay, so that didn’t come out right at all.”

“His memories are all there, if that’s what you mean. Unfortunately. Could do with forgetting some of that,” he sighed. “No, it’s all in there. No doubt with a little bit of my special blend of neurosis as well. It was like...like an overloaded circuit that he cut off to avoid lethal feedback, but it was on a continuous loop giving him quite a headache, which I now appear to have as well. Closed the gateway but couldn’t escape the loop. Too much in a hurry I suppose.”

“Sort of like you and your shoes?”

He’d completely forgotten. He untied the laces, balancing on one foot at a time to tug the trainers on. A moment later he yanked the left one off and turned it over. An enamel cat pin dropped into his hand and he blinked in surprise, rubbing the ginger tabby’s face with his thumb. Curious. He thought he had put all of those safely away long ago. Well, he mused, casting a glance toward the Doctor, maybe *he* had. He affixed the brooch to Amy’s collar, tugged on his other shoe, then jogged up the nearest steps to the upper deck to test the fit. From that vantage point he could take in the whole of the primary control room. *Molto Bene!*

“Oy, Running Bear,” Amy addressed him on his third investigative lap and just before he had finally given into the temptation to wander down one of the corridors.

“Sleeping Beauty is waking up.”

He checked his watch. Tapped it to make sure it was still running. “Right on time.”

Sure enough, the Doctor was stirring. The Time Lord rolled up into a sitting position with a groan, hands fluttering at the hovering crowd.

“I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m just going to need something for a headache. Two

headaches.”

“You aren’t fine. But you will be. Eat.” He put chunks of the rather desiccated orange into the Time Lord’s hands. “More. Come on. Vitamin C, powerful antioxidant. Good for the hearts.”

The Doctor’s face twisted with evident disgust. “I’d rather have a banana—”

“—yes, we have no bananas and I’m fresh out of celery. Eat the orange and be thankful it isn’t a pear.”

After a moment of thoughtful chewing the Doctor looked at Rory: “There’s something splattered on your shirt. You really ought to speak to your laundress.”

“Yeah, thanks for that. Next time you’re having convulsions I’ll pretend I’m *not* a nurse.”

“Doctor?”

“Yes, Amelia?”

“If you haven’t noticed we have a visitor.”

“Yes, Amelia. I know. I’m just being rude.”

The Doctor swallowed the last bit of orange, before attempting to stand. Rory stabilised from one direction, Amy from the other, until the Time Lord was done rocking side to side and back again. What followed was a methodical neatening of hopelessly dishevelled attire, starting with the rolling down and buttoning of sleeves, the adjustment of braces, the retying of a red bowtie with quite a flourish, and lastly, the donning of the green moleskin jacket.

It never got any easier, meeting himself.

“Hello,” the Doctor said at last, squirming slightly, fidgeting with the new sonic

screwdriver.

“Hello.”

“How have you been?”

“Oh, you know. Drink a pint. Watch the telly. Crash a zeppelin and come home for afternoon tea. Sun rises, sets. Time passes. In order.”

“Riiight. Sounds terrible—terribly exciting.”

“What did you expect would happen?” Not that he really wanted to know the answer.

“That you’d live happily ever after?” the Doctor replied weakly with a shrug before poking Amy playfully in the arm. “That’s one of my favourite lines, you know. ‘And they lived happily ever after to the end of their days.’ Which is really rather depressing if you think about it, isn’t it? Oh, never mind that. I didn’t really expect anything. I just thought—”

“You *thought?*” he snapped back, with a short, mirthless laugh. “You *thought?* You didn’t think at all. You just did what you always do. What I always do. You moved on. My legacy to myself. Move on. Don’t look back. Never look back! Did it ever occur to you that you had no right to leave me here?”

The Doctor looked him square in the eye. “Not for a moment.”

“Oh, that’s just *wizard!*” he hissed.

He hadn’t intended to have this conversation in public, let alone in front of virtual strangers. Hadn’t thought he’d ever actually *say* the words he had rehearsed silently so many times over the years. But it was too late. Somehow he always seemed to bring out the worst in himself.

“Did you really think that with over 900 years of memories in my head I’d just settle down and live a single lifetime in this–this–gingerbread house? With Torchwood picking my brain, and UNIT saluting me, and everyone expecting I could defend the Earth from ancient vampiric evil and grumpy Yeti with black market space junk I find on EBay, an augmented iPad XTP and a sonic screwdriver I cobbled together from *more* space junk and have to keep hidden in my sock drawer so Tony Tyler doesn’t short out the electrical grid and shut down the whole south of England again?!”

“You had Yeti?” the Doctor asked, eyes wide.

“I–what?” he asked, surprised at the response.

“Yeti? Really? I haven’t seen Yeti in *years*! Amy! Rory! *Yeti!*”

“Oy! Distracted much Time Boy?”

“Oh dear. You’re still angry.”

“No I’m not! Well, maybe. Well... sometimes,” he admitted weakly.

He drew a long, calming breath, considering the merit of a hasty exodus before he said anything else stupid. Forget international incidents. Arguing with the Doctor—with *himself*—was an incident of intergalactic magnitude. And when they were finished yelling at one another he would not be the one flying away. Again.

Amy and Rory stared at both of them. Amy with her long, lovely fingers pressed to her lips, as if she was holding back her words and Rory with his mouth slightly open as if he, too, wanted to say something but didn’t dare. The Doctor was studying the bits of orange peel strewn across the floor now, that outrageous mop of brown hair flung forward over half-lidded eyes.

“Thanks for pulling me out of the cupboard and... the rest,” the Time Lord said in

soft, measured tones. “I see you found your shoes.”

“Yep.”

“And pinned the cat on Amy.”

“Yep.”

Silence.

“You,” the Doctor waggled a finger at him and took a step closer, bobbing up and down, back and forth, examining him, “look different. Hair. Beard. Greyer. Wrinkles/? Are those wrinkles around your eyes? Look at that. I have *wrinkles!*”

“No, you daft plum. *I* have wrinkles. *You* regenerated.”

The Doctor straightened a crumpled bow tie.

“Yes I did. But you already knew that. I could tell when we were in the cupboard with half our lives scattered around us and our minds doing the Vortex Limbo. You weren’t at all surprised to see I had changed. How exactly is that possible?”

He shrugged. It wasn’t something he could explain. Not entirely. Not with words. “You tell me. Bad dreams. It must have been difficult.”

“It’s always difficult. But we live.”

Amy snorted. Rory whistled.

“That’ll do, Ponds.”

“We both knew.” *Rose and I*. There, he’d said it. Or, thought it, and was sure the message had been received. But the Doctor was playing mental hopscotch.

“Wait. Bad dreams. You had bad dreams about me? No, don’t answer that. Wait. No. Interesting,” the Time Lord said, scratching a cheek. “Very interesting. Sorry about the suit, by the way.”

“Awww, not the *blue* one...”

“No, the brown one. I kept the tie. It’s around here somewhere holding open a door I think. A little singed mind you. The *Tardis* was exploding, after all. And crashing. Did I mention you left me crashing?”

“I didn’t leave you anywhere. You left me, remember?”

Amy cleared her throat loudly.

“Boys! Play nice. Listen to the two of you! Like yelling at your reflection in a fun house mirror. Boys, boys, boys. Got myself three now. One more and we can go on the road with a Beatles tribute band.”

“I’m playing drums,” all three men chimed in, and might have argued the point had Amy not interrupted.

“What I want to know, is why you changed your face. Didn’t you like the last one well enough? Because, I’m telling you, Doctor, that is not half bad right there.”

He felt himself blush as she raked him up and down with her gaze. He looked apologetically at Rory.

The Doctor sniffed. “It isn’t like I have time to look through a catalogue. I’m usually dying at the moment.”

“Usually?” Rory asked, clearly confused.

The sound of the proverbial pin dropping filled the silence. He and the Doctor looked at each other, sharing that unforgettable moment on Gallifrey when the Time Lords, in all their smug arrogance, had done their worst, leaving him bereft of his beloved young Companions, exiling him and forcing a Regeneration on him all at the same time.

“It’s complicated,” they said in unison.

He had parted company with many a travelling companion in his long years. Watched them walk away. Watched them die. But the cruelty of that moment, when the Time Lords had, in their haughty wisdom, returned sweet Zoe and braveheart Jamie to their respective timelines, still haunted him when he allowed the memories entrance. It used to be easier, he mused. Easier to let those memories sleep. But the Time Lords had not wanted him to forget. Why else exact such a sentence for what they deemed meddling? He would remember every moment, every tale told, every note played. They would remember nothing. In his dreams they would run. Together. In their dreams? Who could tell.

He blinked when the Doctor snapped fingers not two inches from his face.

“Hello again.”

He cleared his throat, embarrassed at having been caught out thus, lost in memories he should have come to peace with hundreds of years ago. Damn *human* frailties reinterpreting his emotions at every turn.

“So, why are we here?” the Doctor asked slowly, eyeing him closely, as if the answer were written on his face. “Not just because I was having a neural implosion. Though I suppose that’s reason enough and perhaps I should be thankful you did show up or else I’d still be locked in a dark cupboard with cases of things and other things, and all those shoes...”

“Don’t ask me.” He tapped the phone. “It isn’t like I rang you up. According to Amy the *Tardis* brought you.”

“Did she? Did she really? Thanks Dear,” the Doctor told the ship with great affection, then spun around to Amy and Rory. “Wait. When did you two come on board?”

I was in the year 8792 having victory tea with Big Al and Brother Nic after the defeat of the Big White Wahooey and his Jack Boot Marching Band. Well, I say *tea*, but it was more like an herbal slurry with leaves in it and it made me rather sleepy and have cravings for rare Charlie Chaplin films. You weren't there. I'd have noticed. Why are you here? And why are *we* here and..."

That obvious thing. That thing staring him right in the face suddenly became crystal clear. To both of them. There he went again with a head so full of stuff he couldn't see the obvious. He smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand just as the Doctor leapt to the console.

"Where is she getting her power?" they both said, hands spinning dials, nearly bowling one another over to assess the power readings. "That's impossible!"

"Oy. Are you two going to be doing that all day?"

"Doing what?" they asked Amy, then looked at each other.

"But it's a fair question—" the Doctor began.

"—as is where is the *Tardis*—" he added.

"—getting her power. I know, I know. But look at her. She's running at full capacity which means—"

"—she's drawn power from somewhere nearby," he finished.

"Or somewhen. Which could be very not good at all."

"But," he said slowly, the other thing suddenly dawning on him, "might explain the cannonball."

The Doctor's head poked around the Time Rotor column in interest. "The what? A cannonball? What sort of cannonball?"

“Frankly,“ Rory’s words were directed at Amy, but were loud enough for all of them to hear, “them finishing each other’s sentences is going to be far more annoying than them talking at the same time don’t you think?”

“Rory. Do stop interrupting our guest,” the Doctor said. “It’s terribly rude.”

“Just before you got here—well, just before I found that you were here—how long have you been here anyway?—what appeared to be a Civil War cannonball containing traces of *Zeiton-7* landed in Pete Tyler’s garden.”

“Ooooh!” The Doctor said, hands rubbing together with evident anticipation.

“That’s a neat trick, assuming it was fired in the 17th Century. Well, let’s have it.”

He turned out his empty pockets.

“Sorry. Wrong kind of pockets.”

Chapter Five

Light rimmed the eastern horizon by the time they left the *Tardis*. Dawn. Blue-black storm clouds hung low above the mist, the November air cool and crisp, the earth beneath their feet slick from the rain. He led them back through the forest and across the motorway, thankful for the early hour. Three blokes and a tall, gorgeous, red haired woman trudging out the wood at daybreak? It wouldn't do to arouse that kind of suspicion. Not that the local authorities didn't already expect the unexpected where he was concerned. Just not that sort.

The Doctor placed the *Tardis* just a moment out of sync, hiding her in the unlikely event that someone were to wander past in their absence. She had landed there for a reason, even if they were not yet privy to it. Relocating, even the relatively short distance to the Tyler home, might jeopardize a return to their universe if she relied on a power source they were as yet unable to detect more than residual traces of. If a return was even possible. He had held his tongue in that regard, allowing the Doctor to placate worried companions with techno-babble laced assurances. He'd have done no less. They would address the prospect of a homecoming later. For the moment the ship would remain hidden. And rightly so. Pete and Jackie Tyler both knew the sound of those engines, and the sight of that big blue box. They would not, however, recognize the Doctor's new aspect. He wondered if Rose would be so easily fooled and what her reaction would be to this new face on an old friend.

They climbed the hill into the nature preserve that lay to the east of the Tyler

estate, skirting one of several idyllic lakes where wintering Tundra Swans— *Cygnus columbianus* and *Cygnus columbianus bewickii*—and rarer Icelandic Whooper Swans— *Cygnus Cygnus*— glided silently across the face of the water. He had begun watching them during the summer when the first pair arrived, using it as an excuse not to return immediately to Scotland after his miscalculations had resulted in his *Tardis* crash landing in south-eastern England, destroying Pete's new garden shed. Not that Rose had been fooled. He wouldn't insult her that way. They both knew the truth but, as was often the case, she was the only one able to put it into words...and he wasn't listening.

A small herd of Roe Deer scattered into the mist as they hopped a pasture fence and made their way across country. Before long a string of Pete Tyler's prized Fell Ponies fell in behind them, long tails skirting what was left of the summer grass. Amy was enchanted by the ponies, the wildlife, the rolling hills, even the clean morning mist, taking pictures by the dozens with her camera phone, but it seemed to him that she belonged on the other side of the lens.

Seeing where they were, not far from the copse of trees separating pastureland from the orchard, he motioned for them to stop. He pressed a finger to his lips, smiling to dispel any worry. The Doctor, in particular, looked concerned, turning every which way as if some great evil was sure to emerge from the shadows. He would have laughed if it weren't for the fact that he still got those same feelings himself—that whisper of foreboding scurrying up his spine. In a moment he saw what he was looking for and drew Amy closer, pointing at the secretive Pine Marten atop a fallen limb, its mouth wide with a yawn. Amy managed one picture before the creature darted into a hollow tree.

As they walked on he explained that more of the English countryside around

London had been preserved on this world, the quaint old homes and rolling pastures a contrast to the city sprawl the inhabitants of Amy and Rory's world were accustomed to. Central London itself they would recognise, if only for the major landmarks. The Tower was still there, as were Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral, and the Houses of Parliament, where the President and her cabinet conducted state affairs, still crouched above the Thames. He had certainly frequented there enough over the years, had even grown fond of Harriet Jones again, though it had been odd seeing her that first time, knowing that she had died in another universe opening the sub-wave network to find him. He glanced at Doctor. Well, *almost* him. She had proved herself that day and here, in this world? She'd shone like a star even in adversity. Her unprecedented third term in office had been fraught with difficulty. The Golden Age of The People's Republic of Britain had already begun to lose its lustre before the last election. Not her fault, he supposed. It was the cyclical nature of economics and politics, professions he had long ago determined to eschew.

"This is amazing," Amy said, trudging along the path ahead of them beside Rory. "To be so close to the city and have it still be so beautiful. But wet. You might have mentioned needing Wellies."

Apologizing for November English weather seemed pointless. He was glad of the coat the Doctor had snagged from the wardrobe before embarking on their hike. It swept along behind him like a familiar shadow.

"I don't know if our timelines are in sync but in any case the history here isn't quite what you were taught in school..."

"By the looks of you, I'd hazard they are not," the Doctor commented. "Is Harriet

Jones still President?”

“Not for much longer. None of my doing this time. She fancies me.”

“Rightly so. Still. I imagine you kept an eye on her.”

“Both. But she did well here. Brilliant career.” That, at least, was the way it always should have been.

“And then there’s the zeppelins,” Rory said suddenly.

“The what?” Amy laughed.

“The zeppelins,” Rory repeated, pointing up when she laughed again. “No. Seriously. Really big zeppelins.”

Sure enough, just as a sliver of sunshine shone through rolling clouds, a silver airship bearing Pete Tyler’s Vitex advert drifted fully into view. The ponies scattered as a holographic billboard rippled to life, Pete smiling down at them and giving a cheery thumbs up. *Trust me on this* flashed beneath the image. Peter Tyler might have been a key figure in the establishment of the People’s Republic and an influential director of Torchwood, but to the man about town Rose’s dad was still the friendly face of Vitex health drinks. Vitex, at least, had remained stable, even during the economic downturn.

“Now, that’s *really* amazing,” Amy said, snapping pictures as the zeppelin passed overhead.

He barely looked at the great airship, having grown so accustomed to their presence. On a world where the Hindenburg had never crashed and the tides of the Second World War had turned in Britain’s favour sooner, zeppelins had become as commonplace as aeroplanes had been on the Other Earth. After a few minutes the zeppelin turned along its established course, and seeing as the rudder was not as

interesting as the ship itself, Amy and Rory set out again. The Doctor remained, standing next to him quietly.

“How long have you been here?”

“I’d think that would be obvious,” he said, pointing at his hair.

“That long,” the Time Lord repeated slowly. “Which explains the greyness and the—”

“Wrinkles. Yeah. It’s called aging. I do that now.”

“So I noticed. And you look remarkably good for a man who is—uhm—aging. What would they call that? Being middle-aged? Oh, that was a rubbish thing to say wasn’t it?”

“I’m sure you’ll do worse before the day’s through. I always do. Welcome back to Pete’s World, Doctor,” he sighed, looking up as it began once more to rain.

“I’m sorry I left you here,” the Doctor said at last, softly so only he could hear.

“No you’re not.”

“No, I’m not.” the Doctor agreed.

They both knew it was true.

The blues and twos were their first indication that something was amiss at the Tyler residence. Handfuls of black ore and what looked like musket shot, scattered like marbles across the close-cropped lawn, was the next. Smoke and steam wafted from gaping holes in the roof of the 17th Century manor house and the acrid scent of sulphur permeated the humid air. The fire brigade and three DPG units were lumbering onto the tarmac by the time they reached the house, blue beacons switching off as the vehicles

pulled away. He groaned inwardly. The presence of the Diplomatic Protection Group was never a good sign. They were a tenacious bunch to say the least. Not his favourite, nor he theirs.

Jackie Tyler, clutching the front of her pale pink mac, her blonde hair twisted into one of those up-dos he still couldn't quite fathom, was closing the front door as they rounded the building. He could see the boys, Tony and Rusty, already in the family Jeep with what appeared to be a great deal of luggage. Tony lowered the window and waved enthusiastically.

"Well it's about time you showed up!" Jackie told him, gripping her pink umbrella tightly as she hunched against the cold rain. "What were you thinking swanning off in the middle of the night and not telling us about the meteor shower you plum?! Rocks the size of cricket balls hit the house. The roof is a mess and the gas line was leaking!"

"It was totally *wicked*!" Tony exclaimed, hanging out the window now. The boy was the spitting image of Pete Tyler—albeit with more hair. A brush had yet to touch that tousled reddish mop this morning. "I thought we were under attack from *aliens*! Maybe even the Fendahleen! Who are your friends? Don't you have a broolly? Mum said you'd probably run off to the pub but I told her that's not where you go when you—"

"—Tony, you're going to fall out the window!" Jackie chastised her son as she loaded the last suitcase into the boot. "And you! What kinds of ghost stories have you been tellin'? They had all the table salt in the house in their bedrooms!"

"Honestly, Jon Noble, I don't know what's got into you! Rose is right. You're not right in the head these days. Not that you ever were totally right in the head, but

really, this is too much. Pete got called to an emergency session in Paris just after you skived off, Mrs. Browne had the night off, the boys and I were alone, and next thing I know the boiler explodes in the cellar! They don't know how. I guess meteors went through a window, or the kitchen floor. I don't know. I'm not going back in to look. I thought we were under attack. I suppose we should be thankful for all the rain. We're lucky the whole place didn't go up in flames or fall down around us. As for your old room, I hope there wasn't anything in there you wanted –"

She kept talking but his attention was drawn to the bemused expression on the Doctor's face.

"You must be Tony," the Time Lord incognito told Rose's brother. "I know your sister."

"You do?"

"Yes, I do. She's... amazing."

"That's what Jon says. All the time. Then the snogging starts!" the boy said, eyes rolling dramatically. "Mum tells them to 'get a room'."

The Doctor let out a bark of laughter and gave him a sideways glance. He could only shrug. He wasn't about to make excuses. Or maybe this was the appropriate time to try out the one that went *I'm only Human*. Jackie was still talking—something about bad weather in Scotland— but his attention was still on the Doctor who was now intent on the Tyler's younger son. The Time Lord leaned in though the open window, waggling fingers at the freckle-faced, red-headed boy in the back seat.

"Hello, who's this?"

"My brother, Rusty," Tony told him. "He doesn't say much."

“Doesn’t he? Rusty,” the Doctor said, rolling the name around as if it were a tasty treat. “Brilliant. Hello, Rusty Tyler.”

Rusty beamed. He groaned. Jackie was never going to get out of the drive at this rate, which meant they were never going to get around to examining the cannon ball or...

“Do you like magic tricks, Rusty Tyler?”

He yanked the Doctor back into place by the collar and scowled, but that old Time Lord charm had gone to work and both boys were clambering out the open window. He caught Rusty in one arm before the child fell and nabbed Tony by the seat of his trousers, turning him deftly back around to point into the Jeep again. Not that the boy stayed there for long. Boys were like that. Rather like keeping frogs in a box.

“Aw, Jon! Leggo! Can’t I stay with–hey! Is that a brolly in your pocket? How’d you get a big ole brolly in your... mrmph. ” The words were muffled as he dumped the boy back through the window of the Jeep.

“Shhhhh,” he told Rusty, seeing that the younger Tyler boy had also gotten a glimpse of the umbrella handle. Rusty shushed him back conspiratorially, a chubby little finger pressed comically against chubby little lips.

“Muuuum,” Tony begged again, “can’t I stay here with Jon and his friends?”

“Don’t be daft. The house is a mess. Jon’ll be going over to Torchwood Towers or, knowing him, will be sleeping in the ruddy greenhouse. You know something tore through there, too, don’t you? Don’t worry, I rang up Pete and it’s all squared. No one saw your... Hold on. Where did you get that coat?”

At last she paused to take a breath and looked the four of them over.

“Don’t any of you have umbrellas? It’s been pouring all morning! Tony! Get

back in the Jeep. Jon, quit muckin' about with the kids!"

He put Rusty into her arms. He winked at the boy and Rusty grinned, winking both big, brown eyes back at him.

"Sorry Jackie. Really. I--didn't realize it was going to get so bad," he said, ushering Tony back into the Jeep a final time, mussing the boy's hair playfully. "Tony's right. I went to meet some friends of mine. Experts on... stuff. This is, uhm, John Smith from the-uh-Ministry of -uh-Meteorology."

"Yes, quite right," the Doctor said, flashing credentials at her via the psychic paper. Too late, the Time Lord seemed to realize it still held the gibberish that had appeared earlier and it was swept back into a pocket. "Happy to be of service Mrs. Tyler. And these are my colleagues, Rory and Amy Pond. Expert meteor cleanup crew. We... work best in the rain. Better to... see things... that are... wet."

"Lame," he whispered under his breath.

"You didn't give me much to work with," the Doctor whispered back, smiling all the while. "And you failed to mention there was a problem with the psychic paper."

"Is it a problem?"

"I have no idea."

Not that Jackie was listening. She was too busy strapping Rusty back into the Jeep. He considered wishing her luck with that. He had yet to see a child seat that could contain the younger Tyler boy.

"Yeah all right, well just get on with it and don't mind the builders and the cleaning service when they get here," she told them, sliding into the front seat of the Jeep. "They say it could be weeks before everything in the house is fixed. Maybe longer."

Kitchen's a mess. I reckon you plan to live on take away."

"I'll be fine, Jackie."

"Oh, and don't forget to feed the dog this time. And not just peanut butter and bananas."

"Yes Jackie."

"I'd bring her but I'm taking the boys to stay with granddad Prentice for a few days while I fly over to meet Pete in Paris. Haven't been to Paris in over a month, you know. Oh, here," she said, taking a bright pink, rhinestone encrusted mobile from her purse.

"Take my other phone. Go on, take it. And you'd better ring up Rose straight away and hope she finds the other Jeep once the weather clears up north or you can forget about replacing the zeppelin you wrecked. Pete said you must have disabled the GPS again because Torchwood can't get a lock on it. Rose said she saw you standing outside the house in the rain but by the time she got to the door you were gone. What did you do? Hitch hike 400 miles home? Honestly, Jon, after all you've been through, I just don't understand you. *You're* as mad as *he* ever was."

Beside him, the Doctor was juggling a variety of objects taken from impossibly deep pockets, much to little Rusty's delight. Jackie's words caused a miss and a yo-yo clattered to the ground and split in half, the two sides rolling in opposite directions. Rusty liked that even more.

"Sorry. What?"

"Oh, not *you*," Jackie told the Doctor with a dismissive wave. "A friend of my daughter's. We never knew where he was off to either. Your mate Jon here is just as

bad. Oh, look. I'm going to be late for my flight. Have to leave before the next line of storms roll in. Don't forget little Petunia. Food and walkies!"

He stared at the garish phone in his hand then shoved it into a pocket as Jackie and the boys drove away. The Doctor lifted a questioning eyebrow:

"Rose's grandfather is alive and you crashed a zeppelin."

"Yep."

"You *crashed* a zeppelin? Wait. You had your own zeppelin and you *crashed* it?"

"And lost a Jeep, apparently," Amy chimed in.

"Not on the same day," he said in defence. "More importantly—"

"Yes," the Doctor agreed, scooping up the two halves of the broken yo-yo.

"I meant the psychic paper."

"So did I," the Time Lord retorted, sweeping the wallet back out to examine the calculations.

He wondered if all the turning sideways and upside down was in any way assisting in the deciphering of the code. It hadn't worked for him earlier.

"What 's all of this about, then? Coordinates? And across at least four dimensions. For what?"

"Guys," Rory interrupted, picking up a chunk of the black ore. "I could be wrong, but this doesn't look like what I think a meteor should look like."

"That's because—".

"—it isn't."

As if one were not enough, *two* sonic screwdrivers confirmed their suspicions. The black rock-like substance that Rory had picked up—remnants of which lay scattered all about the property—was not, strictly speaking, meteoric. It was, however, awash with considerable amounts of *void stuff*. They agreed on that at least, even without the aid of 3-D glasses. They also agreed that faint traces of *Zeiton-7* were everywhere. He ran in one direction while the Doctor ran the opposite way, both scanning the debris scattered over the lawn. Every so often they circled back, having to take a care not to collide. He felt more than a little like a Keystone Kop and from their expressions, that's precisely what Rory and Amy thought, sitting side by side on the garden swing beneath the patio awning, arms crossed, watching the pair of them.

“So... Thing One and Thing Two. It isn't meteorites?” Amy asked.

“No, and neither are they cannonballs. But that,” he pointed to the black sphere still laying in the garden not four metres from the back door, “is.”

“And,” the Doctor told them, after waving a sonic screwdriver over it like a magic wand and checking the readings twice, “it seems to be made, at least partially, from the same stuff. Stuff that doesn't belong here. Not only because this is, in fact, a 17th Century cannonball, but because the ore it is made from didn't originate on this planet.”

“And I suppose you—uhm- *both* of you that is—have been to this other planet,” Rory commented, “and did something totally brilliant. Or did you misjudge and end up where you shouldn't have been again?”

“Yes. And something brilliant as well.”

“Excellent response, Doctor,” he said.

“Why thank you, Doctor.”

“Kill me now,” Amy said, head lolling backwards.

“Now, what about our little friend here, hmm?”

Before he could prevent it from happening, the Doctor drew a finger over the cannonball’s smooth surface and took a taste.

“*Aah-aah-aah— that’s disgusting!*”

“What did he expect a cannonball to taste like?” Rory asked Amy. She only shook her head.

“Traces of copper and *Zeiton-7?*” he asked.

“Not the purest sample I’ve tasted but, yes. Also a dash of gunpowder for flavour and, hello? What’s *that?*” the Doctor said suddenly, dropping the cannonball and heading off in the opposite direction. “What a magnificent orangery you have there. And what a magnificent hole in your magnificent orangery.”

He was hardly accustomed to being the one playing catch up, but the Doctor was off like a shot, hopping the garden fence with ease, running up the hill to where the greenhouse stood. Though it post-dated the last addition to the manor house by half a century or more, the majestic stone and glass structure remained an architectural marvel and a point of pride for the Tylers. At least for Pete. Jackie said the old place always gave her the creeps. As did the cellar under the house.

In his haste to determine the origins of the cannonball last night he hadn’t stopped to inspect the building or its contents. Now, he could clearly see the splintering hole in one of the arching windows some ten feet above his head where the cannonball had apparently exited the building. That meant there was another hole where it had made

entrance. The long and short of it was he had the unenviable task of repairing it.

Probably alone.

“There’s something in there besides orange trees. I can hear it... no. I can feel it!” the Doctor said, pressing an ear against the door and rattling the doorknob. “Ooh, and a locked door. A locked door just begging to be opened. A locked door just begging to be opened and—”

“Save the sonic, Time Boy.”

He produced the key from his back pocket and slid it smoothly into the lock. For just a moment he paused, enjoying the build up of suspense. He knew himself well enough to know that very few things would surprise, well, him. He hoped this was one of them.

As the door opened, he was relieved to discover that the solar-powered sun lamps he had augmented for optimal growing conditions during the winter months were still operational. That meant the ice box and cook stove in his workshop that drew power from the solar cells were also still running. And *that* meant hot dogs and spaghetti rings for Tea. Or perhaps for breakfast since he was still peckish. He never had gotten that cuppa on the *Tardis* earlier. Despite the damaged windows it was warm inside, and the scent! Intoxicating! He shrugged out of his coat and tossed it over the back of a teak garden bench, leading Amy, Rory and the Doctor past rows of ornamental and fruit-bearing trees. He paused to pluck ripened kumquats, distributing them to his companions. His companions. He had companions. The notion made him smile.

“My God, that’s a Siva and Neville Tourer.”

Rory drifted away from their group to lift the car cover off the partially restored

roadster parked just inside the double carriage doors on the north side of the orangery. More than mere recognition shone on the man's face. This was sheer pleasure. Maybe even love. He nodded his consent and before he could say "bob's your uncle," Rory had peeled off the cover and was lovingly caressing the bonnet. He had discovered the derelict Edwardian kit-car in a scrap yard in Dorchester two months back and, feeling nostalgic, had arranged for it to be towed here. This time he might paint it blue.

"Does it have minimum inertia hyperdrive?" the Doctor asked him.

"It will have," he grinned.

Amy seemed only peripherally interested in the car. She followed more slowly, her fingers trailing along the pink and purple blooms of climbing bougainvillea and brilliant fuchsia. A break in the clouds sent a shaft of sunshine in just as they reached the far end of the structure. He didn't have to wait long for their reaction to what waited there.

"What's that, some sort of statement in modern art?"

"No, Amy, no," the Doctor said with a broad smile. The man was practically dancing across the floor. "That's a *Tardis*. A **baby** *Tardis*!"

"That? What? But it isn't, you know, a big blue box. Or even a little blue box."

"I've explained that to you before. The police box is a carefully analyzed, clever disguise. To blend in."

"Blend in where? The same place you'd blend in with your bowtie?"

"Bow ties are cool," the Doctor said, straightening it deliberately. "Our Amelia seems to think I couldn't be more conspicuous."

"You evidently haven't mentioned," he cleared his throat, not sure he should

bring up past Regenerations, “that coat we had.”

“That was an *amazing* coat!”

He laughed. “I think I saw it down in the cupboard you were tucked up in if you fancy—”

“*No!*”

“It looks like a Nautilus.”

They all turned to look at Rory.

“What? It does. Do you think the only thing I know about is cars? And Romans? Really? It looks like a giant Nautilus shell. Which would explain it, you know, why the *Tardis* seems to go on forever.”

He was rather intrigued by the statement about the Romans, but before he could ask the Doctor draped an arm over Rory’s shoulders and steered the man back toward the car.

“Rory, Rory, Rory. You never cease to amaze me.”

“I’m right, aren’t I? It’s like a giant growing shell.”

“It’s almost completely nothing like a giant growing shell, but if you want to believe that I won’t stop you,” the Doctor said, abandoning Rory to go back to touching the smooth surface of the *Tardis*. “Look at you, you lovely little thing. Daddy’s taking really good care of you.”

They looked at each other then and he concentrated for a moment on the younger-older green eyes in a younger-older face glinting mischievously under a pronounced brow. Seeing the expression of genuine amazement, he wondered, not for the first time, if the Doctor had ever really expected that chunk of *Tardis* to grow in this strange parallel

universe. Would it ever find a compatible power source to draw upon or was it all for show, that day on the beach in Norway? *Grow your own, indeed.* As if conjuring a complex space-time event could be done on mere whim. It was as unlikely as, well, as he was. But he had held that piece of coral in his hand the whole way back to England in a Vitex Corporation zeppelin. Held that in one hand, and Rose's hand in the other, as if to let either one go would mean letting go of life itself. After that he had carried it in his pocket for months before finally deciding to give it a go. What would it hurt? Either he would prove himself a fool or a liar. And since when were those two things mutually exclusive?

“Ground control to Major *Jon*—“

He forced himself to heed the Doctor's words. Once again the Time Lord had caught him up in a moment of distraction and was looking into his eyes, as if to uncover some secret hidden there.

“You do distract easily don't you? So?”

“I'm sorry?”

“Are you going to invite us in, or not?”

He hesitated. A scant few had even seen the *Tardis*, let alone stepped foot inside. She had yet to achieve dimensional stability. He had ventured beyond the central control room only a few times since the Architectural Configuration System seemed to have gone haywire. Once, last spring, he was gone so long Rose was certain he'd gotten lost. Of course he had, but he wasn't keen to admit it. He had taken to sleeping in the control room rather than risking waking up levels above or below where he had started out. Or between levels. Always a nuisance. Add to that the sheer strangeness of a native state

Tardis and the experience was unlike any other.

“You may find it rather unsettling,” he cautioned the Ponds, pressing his hand against the plasmic-shell surface to release the hatch. He glanced side long at the Doctor, enjoying the expression of boyish anticipation. “You, on the other hand, are going to love it.

“Lights, Little Girl.”

If the old *Tardis* was ravishing in her steam punk, Maritime glory, this young *Tardis* was her beautiful native sister. Coral-like buttresses not unlike those he remembered from a previous desk top theme twisted from floor to ceiling, but here they gleamed with the lustre of pearl and jade. Pulsating lights glimmered from beneath roundels that adorned the walls in apparently asymmetrical patterns. Spiral staircases with the appearance of speckled cowries and shimmering abalone defied the laws of gravity, winding left, right and centre to an upper deck that ran around the interior of the vaulted room. Long corridors resembling the interiors of living coral corkscrewed off at illogical angles, some of which looked impossible for anyone dependent on gravity—or feet— to actually traverse. The alcove in which he’d spent many a night sleeping was shaped into the wall of the lower deck to their right. Little more than a writing desk and a ship bunk, really, the bed unmade, a curtain of pale light hinting at the containment field that afforded that secure space a modicum of privacy and peace. The closest thing to a Zero Room the Time Ship had to offer. He’d spent a long time there after the crash. A very long time. The hexagonal main control console directly ahead sprouted mushroom-like from a floor of green shell, the central column encased in a fibrous lattice that climbed to the ceiling, becoming one with the arching colonnades. Within the confines of

the lattice, blue light twisted like a living thing.

“Oh, you are a beau-ty!”

“Steady on, Soldier. Oy, you two,” he said, tossing the ball of yarn he now kept beside the door to Rory. “Mind you don’t wander too far. I fell asleep in here one night and it took me two days to find my way out.”

Rory gave him a mock salute then hurried down the corridor Amy had already ducked into.

“What’s down there?” the Doctor asked him.

“I have no idea.”

“Ha-haa!” the Doctor laughed and he couldn’t help but grin himself.

A moment later the Time Lord was everywhere at once, hands rubbing together like a pianist preparing for a symphony. Whipping out the sonic screwdriver like a baton, the Doctor passed it rapidly over native and electronic circuitry alike, moving first around the console, then along the bottle green crystalline floor, up one of the massive buttresses, and down rows of golden, pulsing roundels. Apparently satisfied, the device was returned to a coat pocket and the pressing of buttons, big, red, and otherwise, commenced. Well, he mused, the admonition *Do not touch* never had held much meaning for him.

While the Doctor tinkered with flight controls and giggled about isomorphic interface nodes, he performed his own diagnostic review. Aside from some indeterminate fluctuations in the trans-power system, everything seemed to be stable, if still in the state of evident hibernation it had lapsed into after their arrival in the Tyler garden a few months previously. Stable and quiet... but still growing.

Donna, the *Doctor-Donna*, had been exactly right about how to accelerate the growth of the chunk of *Tardis* coral. By shatterflying the plasmic shell and modifying a dimensional stabiliser he had assembled from a crashed Transperion ship to a foldback harmonic of 36.3—well 36.3392 to be precise—the *Tardis* had burst into life. In the space of two weeks the meta-structure had torn through three consecutive garden sheds and after the minor explosion in the orangery, where he had moved her in secret with the help of a forklift and the closed-lipped old gardener, Norman, he was no longer able to keep his little secret.

A mighty battle of words had ensued then, with an incredulous Pete Tyler insisting that for security reasons alone the Time Ship should be housed at one of the Torchwood facilities. He'd have waged a war to the death to keep her from falling into the wrong hands but finally acquiesced on the condition that she was transported to Scotland with him and Rose. And there she might have remained to complete her initial life cycle in a barn populated with shaggy Highland cows, four Clydesdale horses and Rose's llama, had it not been for his one desperate attempt to time jump. Just one, very small, very necessary time jump. And he had failed. It was a wonder either of them had survived that ill fated journey that had ended with them crashing here, and he knew, deep in his all-too-human heart—that he owed his life to this, a sentient ship. Rose had begged him not to even attempt it. She, of all people, understood the dangers, but the lure was too great. The stakes too high. His grief too powerful. He had deduced the probabilities and accepted the risks and he would have done anything to preserve that precious life they had created...

“Care to share your thoughts with the class?”

“Hmm—what? Oh, sorry. Sorry. It’s easy to get distracted in here. You should see the Cloister Room. *Molto Bene!*”

The Doctor was looking hard at him, hard and knowingly, but any suspicions were kept behind a carefully rehearsed façade. Thankfully, the psychic link they had shared earlier was no longer in place. At least for his part.

“You haven’t taken her into space?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call where we went space, no,” he admitted, busying himself on the far side of the console to avoid accusing eyes.

“But you’re going to need to get her off planet soon. Keeping her here during this stage of development is dangerous. Think of the potential for time spillage!”

“Do you think I don’t know that? Pete’s got good connections, but not that good. Not anymore. Not without raising too many questions about the payload. The only intact Transperion ship we know of fell into the hands of the Earth Prime nutters in Findanavia,” he said, deciding that it would serve no purpose to admit to his having piloted the ship there. Albeit unintentionally. With Harriet Jones. No, that was best left for another day.

“We’ve got a little side project getting ready to launch from Torchwood West in America, but it isn’t like on Gallifrey. Even if I got her up there, where am I going to dock her? I don’t have access to even a fraction of the technology I really need—and I’ve never grown a *Tardis* before. No ship looms. No docking bays. No Eye of Harmony. I didn’t know what I’ll end up with,” he said, running his fingers along the latticed central column. She grew more magnificent with every passing year. “I’ll tell you one thing they lied to us about at the Academy though.”

The Doctor lifted an eyebrow in question.

“A *Tardis* is far more than a complicated code series of block transfer equations.

In fact, block mathematics are a whole lot of Time Lord rubbish.”

“If only they’d let us present that paper.”

He nodded his agreement, his attention drawn by the reappearance of the Ponds.

Amy looked pale and her ginger locks were mussed. She was clutching the ball of yarn tightly with both hands. At least half of it was wrapped around her body and more than a few loops entwined her husband.

“You might have warned us about Audrey II,” Rory complained.

“Yeah. It’s a jungle in there. Literally. I think I saw monkeys.”

“Lemurs,” he told them. “They’re lemurs.”

“Why do you have...?”

“*Ye-ow!*” the Doctor cried, jumping back from the controls, right hand waving as if it were on fire. “She bit me.”

“She what?”

“More importantly, look at this,” the Doctor mumbled around an injured index finger. “Drive system, life support, guidance all coming on line...”

“*What?*” he asked, rushing around the console to examine the displays. He hadn’t gotten readings like those since the crash earlier in the year. He scowled. “What did you do?”

“Nothing. I mean, I just touched the thing. You know. That thing,” the Time Lord pointed at the Primary Initiator, “and systems check came up just like you’d expect it to. Aside from the biting part. Why do you look so surprised? You must have had

fully operational systems before.”

“I did.” His emphasis was on the past tense. Most of the main systems had been unresponsive in the wake of their catastrophe.

“I guess she just needed a little energy snack,” the Doctor told him, counting fingers as if to establish they were, in fact, all still present and accounted for. “Needn’t be so greedy. No wonder you look so... tired. She probably used your life energy to start her life cycle and continues to feed off of you every time you step through the door. Must be exhausting. Say, how was navigation before? I don’t like *that* at all.”

“Eh,” he said, tossing his head. He pulled absently at one ear. Navigation had definitely been a concern. To say he had had any real control over their aborted flight would have been stretching the truth even more than usual.

“Ok. Need work on navigation. Power fluctuations in the trans-power system means something isn’t aligned, which is why you’ll be wanting that *Zeiton-7*. Not much going on with defence that I can see, but I’m sure I saw an extra tribophysical waveform macro-kinetic extrapolator in storage 2 that we can wire in. Oh, this is going to be fun!”

“Well I’m glad someone is having fun,” Amy muttered behind them.

“I’m having fun,” Rory offered. “It’s brilliant. But does it fly?”

“It... did. Once.” He scanned the current interior configuration, pleased to see expanded living quarters and an increase in crystal growth in Power Room 3, then turned back to the Doctor to show off some of his more innovative modifications. “I integrated the inherent biological plasma screens with holo projectors that turned up at a crash site at the South Pole and we recovered a Trachoid Time Crystal nursery in the jungle near Kota Kinabalu which I introduced successfully to the power room but I’m having trouble

converting the—”

“—yes, I see. Well, of course. You’ll need—”

“Precisely. And it still needs a proper artron energy capacitor to modulate the phasic output from the core. I started adapting the systems to standard Type 40 configurations and some of the later model specifications but it isn’t like rebuilding her back at UNIT when I—we—still had all the original, well, most of —well, some of the original parts. Then there’s the small matter of a briode nebuliser—”

The Doctor visibly paled. “You didn’t try to go into—”

“Not exactly. Well, no. Well, almost. Let’s just say I burned the first one out in about 3 minutes flat and did heavy damage to her Symbiotic Relationship Circuits. I don’t think she’s quite gotten over that.” For that matter, neither had he.

“Sorry. What? Stupid humans here,” Rory was saying.

“Oy! Speak for yourself,” Amy told him, still winding the ball of blue wool.

“But, yeah. What’s a bio nebula whazzit?”

“A briode nebuliser,” the Doctor corrected her. “Every *Tardis* is primed with the biological imprint from the symbiotic nuclei of a Time Lord’s cells. Without it, travel through the Time Vortex is... inadvisable to say the least. At least that’s what it says in the textbooks. Not many people are crazy enough to try it.”

“So, what? It’s like some sort of genetic link between a Time Lord and a *Tardis*?” Rory asked.

“Something like that.”

“But, you’re half human,” Amy pointed out.

He exchanged glances with the Doctor. “I’m *part* human.”

“Yes. Well. No one’s perfect,” the Doctor told him, adjusting the switches on the chrono-synchronization feed until the holographic screen appeared. “Ooh. Pretty! But, first things first. Assemble a proper nebuliser or possibly override the dematerialization circuit.”

The interior lights visibly dimmed.

“Or not. Interesting. Very interesting. Nebuliser. Right. We can do that. Probably. Likely. We’ll look in the storerooms in the *Tardis*. See what we can find for you, eh dear?”

The lights dimmed further...

“Oy. Fringe. My *Tardis*. Mine.”

...then brightened again.

“Yes, I see. And nebuliser or no nebuliser she’s very attuned to her designated driver, isn’t she? Well, well. Just remember whose biological imprint woke you up, you sassy thing. At the very least you need to take me on a test drive.”

He considered this for a moment. Fair enough. Besides, though it pained him to admit it, he might require the Doctor’s assistance if he were ever to finish with the necessary modifications before something disastrous occurred.

“What do you say, Little Girl? Take this lot for a spin around the galaxy shall we?”

The lights brightened significantly.

“Okay,” Amy said slowly. “That’s just a little spooky.”

She had finally come to the end of the ball of yarn and tossed it triumphantly into the air before performing a slam-dunk into the gardening basket beside the door. She

walked up the steps lightly, linking one arm around his and another around the Doctor's.

"So. Boys. Where is everything, then? I mean it's a little overgrown in here, but this is the control room, yeah? But in the *Tardis*—the other *Tardis*—there are rooms and buttons and lights and I don't know, a swimming pool..."

"And no giant man eating plants," Rory added.

"Not that you know of," the Doctor said, wiggling free of Amy and going to the right.

"All here. Or will be. Might even be a little shop down one of those corridors," he said, going to the left.

"Oh, I do like a little shop," the Doctor chimed in, not looking up.

"Don't I know it," he replied, not looking up either.

Amy was still waiting for an explanation and seemed rather put out that they had both abandoned her.

"It's... young. Really young. Still adapting. There's no real interface other than the raw, organic circuitry. Back to basics here," he said, patting the casing around the Time Rotor affectionately. "Very basic."

"A little too basic," the Doctor said with a visible shiver.

"It's very pretty," Rory offered, running a hand along one of the buttresses.

"And pretty deadly with all these isomorphic controls and telepathic links still in place," the Doctor commented. "Dodgy stuff. Even for... us."

"What, this isn't how they're issued to Time Lords after you get your pilot's certificate?"

Both he and the Doctor laughed.

“Like this? No. Never. Not in thousands of years. Millions. A long time anyway. It’s...,” he swallowed deeply, searching for the right words. “Let’s just say it’s hard on the pilot. A *Tardis* is a very sophisticated *living* ship. Which is why later models, like the Type 40’s, need a crew of 6.”

“Or one very clever old man,” the Doctor pointed out smugly.

“Yes, well, there is that.”

“You do realize what this means, though,” the Doctor told him excitedly. “You’ll be able to leave this planet. Maybe not this Universe—not sure we’re going to get back ourselves honestly— oh. Did I just say that out loud? Shame on me. Amy. Rory. Forget you heard that.”

“You’re kidding, right? Tell me you’re kidding...”

“Just kidding,” the Doctor sang the words. “But think of it. The Doctor in the *Tardis* with Rose Tyler, as it should be. Saving the... ”

“Yeah,” he interrupted, rubbing the back of his neck absently. It seemed as good a time as any to broach that subject. “About Rose—”

His confession was short lived. Shattering glass outside the *Tardis* put an abrupt end to any further conversation. At times, he mused, the universe seemed to have its own agenda. No matter which one he was in. Or when.

Another cannon ball lay mere feet from the roadster and more broken glass littered the greenhouse floor. At this rate he’d need to employ a professional glazier. Outside, musket balls and more bits of iron ore lay scattered amid the perennials.

“Doctor-s!” Amy protested as they shouldered their way past one another to get out of the greenhouse. “You’re going to get your heads crushed! Or didn’t you notice

the sky is falling?”

“Under ordinary circumstances I’d agree with you, Amelia—”

“But this is not ordinary circumstances. I’m reading more traces of *Zeiton-7*.”

“As am I, but something more. Temporal energy. Boatloads of temporal energy, but the fluctuations are off the chart and coming,” the Doctor said, spinning in circles, sonic screwdriver extended like a dousing rod, “from... that way. No, that way. No, wait. *That way*.”

“Hey Rocky, watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat...” he said, enjoying Rory’s involuntary laughter at the joke. Amy was still, sensibly, concerned about cannonballs landing on their heads.

“Did you not hear the part about fluctuations?” the Doctor asked.

“Sure you don’t want to have another go?” he jibed. “No, wait. There aren’t many directions left are there?”

“I’m not the one with the rubbish sonic,” the Doctor told him, petulantly.

“Uhm, Doctors,” Rory interrupted, “I think we may have a more pressing problem.”

Indeed, a more pressing problem was on fast approach. Furthermore, it was on horseback.

“No way,” he breathed. Wherever, make that *whenever* the cannon balls had come from, so to had this hapless cavalier.

As the small bay horse crested the hill they could clearly see a dishevelled-looking man in a buff coat, baggy red breeches and bucket boots. One hand clutched at a magnificently feathered cap perched crookedly on a head of blazing red hair, the other

hauled on the reins. The frothing horse snorted and kicked as it came over the laurel hedge, nearly spilling its rider amid the last of the Kaffir lilies, Morning Glories, and Jackie's favourite rose bushes.

The horse shook itself violently as the rider drew rein before the greenhouse, pausing a moment to gape at what must have appeared to be the strangest of ensembles gathered there. A young man, clearly, with eyes like chips of a summer sky, swivelled in the saddle to gaze across the lawn toward the old house that might well have been a familiar landmark, now rendered strangely out of place. And Time. More slowly, that gaze turned back to the greenhouse and to the four of them. This close it was hard to miss the sword and pistols in the saddle holsters.

As if the full weight of the situation had dawned upon them both, the horse began to back away.

"Whoa there, whoa..." he said gently, reaching for the bridle to steady the wild-eyed gelding. It was a stocky creature, not unlike the native ponies in Pete Tyler's stables. Battle sound though it might be it was, nonetheless, not accustomed to time travel.

The Kids are All Right ring tone erupting from Jackie's mobile in his pocket spoiled any chances of a proper introduction. The horse tore away from him, taking its rider back in the direction from which they had come whether the man had wanted to depart or no. The feathered hat landed at the Doctor's feet.

"Oh, no you don't," Amy said, reaching for it, but the Doctor already had it in hand. She grimaced, then turned toward him. "Aren't you going to answer that?"

"No," he said, silencing the mobile before shoving it into his back pocket.

“Com’on!”

It was his turn to lead. Vaulting over the garden wall, he led them back along much the same path they had taken earlier. The ponies in the meadow had formed a herd behind the fleeing horse and rider, not breaking off until they had galloped clear to the far end of the pasture where their leader jumped a low stone wall and continued on into the nature preserve that stretched east to the main road. They heard the blaring of horns and the squeal of tires on tarmac long before they got to the scene. He wasn’t sure who was panicking more, the horse, the rider, or the coach driver whose vehicle was now blocking two lanes of traffic. The mayhem gave them a chance to catch up to the frightened horse before it bolted into the forest, heading toward the rematerialized *Tardis*. What? *What?*

He skidded to a halt just as horse and rider plunged into a swirl of mist and light for places unknown, shielding his eyes from the waves of energy spilling from the newly opened portal.

The Doctor circled the distortion field, sonic screwdriver in hand, sputtering disbelief.

“That’s impossible! That was *not* here earlier! I’d have known!”

“Well, it’s here, now, Time Boy.” He pounded his own sonic against his palm until it lit up and he checked the readings for himself. “Yep. It’s here. And this is definitely where the *Zeiton-7* came from, too. Look. If we could bring back even a fraction of what we got on Varos to combine with the elements I’m already using it would solve any remaining problems with the trans-power system!”

“Nice plan, but it’s massively unstable,” the Doctor warned, gesturing at the gathering clouds above them. “Atmospheric abnormalities on top of the temporal flux. I

don't like it. Not one bit. It could close again in minutes or days or hours."

"Then what are we waiting for?" he yelled back over his shoulder, not waiting to see if the Doctor was following or not. "*Allons-y!*"

Behind him he could hear Amy and Rory yelling *Doc-tor* as he leapt forward into shimmering adventure.