

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

Chapter Ten

“Well, look what the poodle dragged in.”

He opened his eyes slowly. Every inch of his body ached, most especially where he had been shot. Shot. What a novelty. He steadied himself as the upholstered bench beneath him lurched and tipped. They were riding in a finely appointed coach. After their incarceration in the smoke house and the dreary, pongy cellar it was encouraging to see they had moved up in the world.

The Doctor sat across from him, leaning forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped. Clean hands. Clean, shaven face. Clean, combed hair. Well, clean at any rate. The Time Lord's mud-caked moleskin jacket had been replaced with a dapper Harris Tweed, the red bowtie swapped for blue. He looked every bit the eccentric history professor. Between them, on the carriage floor, sat a very large, very black poodle, its luxurious coat trimmed so as to give it the appearance of an ebony lion.

A horse drew alongside the carriage, a hell-spitting stallion that put poor George Mott's plough-cum-war horse to shame. No doubt it had the temper to match its wide eyes and flaring nostrils. A well-dressed young man with long flowing black hair and the most magnificent hat he had seen yet looked in with keen interest.

“Your brother is fortunate Boi took a liking to him or else he'd have been executed as a Roundhead conspirator before you arrived with your credentials, Doctor.”

“Timing *is* everything. Thank you for providing us with transport and give my regards to your mother. And thank *you*,” the Doctor told the dog, opening up the coach door to allow the poodle to leap down to the ground. It loped off after its master. Try as he might, he could not remember what had happened. Except...

“That dog... talked to me.”

“Yes. Rather well versed in Time Lord history for a poodle, too. I couldn’t confirm it without arousing suspicion, but I suspect the prince’s pooch is a relative of the *Whifferdill*. Which explains a lot, really. The Parliamentarians got it half right. I gave ole Boi a little heads up about the Battle at Marston Moor. It seemed only fair. Kept guard over you and wouldn’t let anyone near you until I arrived. Not even Rupert.”

He struggled to stifle a fit of coughing as the coach hit another rough patch of road. Correction. Rougher patch. The Doctor poured a thimble’s worth of amber liquid from a decanter into a small glass and held it out.

“How long have I been here?” he wheezed, sniffing the fluid suspiciously, then downing it in one gulp. A rush of warmth rose from his chest into his head and for a moment everything was crystal clear. Including his injuries. “You were gone--”

“I was gone. But here I am. Surprise! I was gone long enough for the bleeding to have stopped, but I see it has begun again—in various places. Lucky for you I know a nurse,” the Doctor told him, holding out a clean handkerchief.

“Check Jackie’s phone,” he said, pressing the hanky against his head and seriously debating another drink. He could do with some numbness just now. “Doctors Sullivan and Jones are both on speed dial.”

“Are they?” the Doctor smiled.

“Go on, you want to ask.”

“Tell me then. More?”

He shook his head, handing back the glass. “I’ll regret it. You?”

“I already regretted it.”

He gathered a blanket about himself and settled back. “They’re brilliant. Both of them. Twirled Martha off the floor first time I met her. Forgot where I was. Who she was. Or wasn’t. But she’s the same. And Harry... well, Harry looks at me sometimes like he remembers everything that he can’t possibly remember and it’s all I can do to pretend that I’ve only known him on this world. That world. Whichever.”

“Then we’d best get back and see if we can save it for them. The Rift is growing even more unstable. Rifts, actually. All over the country. And they’re shifting. I came out on the other side in an art gallery on Eel Pie Island. In the Ladies, no less. Rather awkward, really.”

He looked around the inside of the coach, tugging the blanket closer. He almost felt warm. “Nice wheels. Who do they think we are now?”

“Yes, well, don’t get too comfortable. You... need to stay awake.” The Doctor handed him the psychic paper. “Here we are. Doctors John and James Lambert, recently arrived from Gallavally with a special dispensation from Charles himself.”

“Wait,” he said, the handkerchief dropping from his fingers as he gripped the wallet with both hands. “The equations are gone.”

“Oh good. You noticed. It took a while for four dimensional calculations to be expressed two dimensionally. The last bit appeared while I was attempting to reassemble the hand dryer in the loo,” the Doctor told him, squirming at the memory. “We need to get back. And we need to get your *Tardis* off world before the planet is destroyed. Well, part of it anyway.

She's been quite insistent. Haven't you been listening?"

Someone spoke his name.

He swallowed deeply, his vision narrowing. The Doctor was talking, but he could no longer make out the words.

Don't you hear me? Why can't you hear me? Where are you?

"Stay awake now—"

"Wh-what?"

The coach slowed, each grinding bump a reminder of what had turned out to be less than a fun time. He would have to register his complaints with the Brentford Tourism board. If he lived.

"This will be our stop. Can you walk?"

"If I can stand, I can walk... maybe... but--"

"I'll explain later."

"You'll explain now."

"No, I won't. There's no time. And I don't say that very often." The Doctor pushed open the door so they could exit and bid the driver to move on.

It took an inordinate amount of concentration to keep from collapsing there in the dirt. More to shuffle his feet forward. He squinted up at the three storey brick building looming in the mist. Time had wrought changes, but there was no mistaking the dwelling. It was Pete Tyler's manor house. Or would be in several hundred years. The Doctor led him around back... led by half-dragging, half propping, half... wait. That was too many halves. He forced himself to focus. The Doctor had told him to stay awake. Why did he need to stay awake? Why—

"Why are we here?"

“I’m assuming that is not a philosophical question. Short cut. Not a pretty one, but it will have to do,” the Doctor told him, heaving open the cellar door while he concentrated on not falling head long down the cellar steps.

“Down there... what?”

“Lady Spencer? *Yoo-hoo!* It’s the Doctor. Ah, good. No one’s here. *Walk*, don’t fall... thank you... I did say walk, didn’t I? “

“I’m trying to remember how,” he moaned as they descended into cool darkness.

“Yes, well, you’re doing fine! Well, you’re upright, that’ll have to do. Stroke of luck locating this. I found it on the other side while I was looking for something else. Wild chance, really. I like it when that happens. Come along then, don’t dawdle. This one is going to be rough...”

They passed into a corridor of ice and shadow. He felt twisted, as if every atom in his body was separating and the pattern for reassembly had been lost. Passing between worlds, between *Time* and *Space* itself had once been so simple. When there were still rules governing such things. When there was logic and order... not that he had ever felt obliged to entertain such notions. Well... not in a long time. When had the passages gone from being like drifting through fog banks to tearing through razor blades? They should have emerged on other side by now, no matter where or when that was. Streaming needles of scarlet coursed past him, through him, intermingled with equally blinding ribbons of cobalt blue. The Rift was collapsing. Physical context had lost all meaning, yet was he aware of the Doctor’s presence, aware that the sheer power of the Time Lord’s will was manipulating the event. From somewhere deep within himself, corresponding energies emerged, coalescing into a single thought. Together they burned like a beacon outside of Time, their distress call broadcast in narrow ranges only a Time Ship

might detect.

Come home. Come home.

The forward rush into real time was a sickening jolt. He drew a lungful of stale, damp air and began to cough again. They were still alive, standing knee deep in swirling water in the cellar of Pete Tyler's house. The boiler had sustained significant damage and the old galvanized water tank was riddled with holes. While he concentrated on not being sick, the Doctor reached over and twisted the stop valve closed. Water continued to drip. After this, Jackie would have no trouble convincing Pete to install a tankless water heating system.

"Oh dear. I really shouldn't have sent the plumber home earlier," the Doctor muttered, sloshing back to where he was still standing, eddies of warm and cold water swirling around his legs.

"Hello? Did I lose part of you back there? How was *that* for a spot of Vortex Walking!"

He realized he was still clutching the psychic paper, staring at the names.

"Jamie," he said suddenly, dropping to his knees in the wet sludge. Musket balls dotted the floor like dark pearls in a muddy soup. "We called him Jamie."

The Doctor caught him before he slipped entirely into sorrow's cool embrace. "My son's name...was Jamie."

"Yes. I know."

The first sense to return was his hearing. And the first thing he heard returned all his

other senses in a hurry. From deep within the ship, the sound of the Cloister Bell reverberated like a mournful Tibetan gong. That, and the *Tardis* engines were phasing. More like groaning in agony. He sat up. Mistake. It was all he could do not to be sick right there in the alcove where they had placed him, safe and secure behind shielding that provided the most healing environment he was aware of on his ship. Not that there was anything left in his stomach. 17th Century Brentford could not be noted for cuisine. At least not this trip. He clutched at his throbbing head, squeezing water from aching eyes, waiting for the interior of the *Tardis* to stop spinning. Even so, visions of flickering roundels and light scattering off every burnished surface brought him to the edge of consciousness. After a few more tolls the head-splitting ringing ceased, but the ship still sounded like it was in pain. He could sympathize. When he managed to open his eyes again, he found Rory Williams beside him, offering a tall drink of something cold. Being so parched, he wrapped quivering fingers around the glass and drank without hesitation.

“*Aaagh!* What is that?” He wiped his tongue frantically with his fingers. “That’s *disgusting!*”

“Celery juice. The Doctor said it might help.”

“Maybe if you give me the rest of the Bloody Mary to go with the celery! Oh, never mind. I don’t even fancy them. What I need is-is-is...” he ran his hand over his expertly bandaged shoulder, struggling to remember why he had required medical attention in the first place. “Was I shot?”

“Well, yes. Twice. And you really should rest--”

“What? And miss out on all the fun?” he asked, staggering to his feet to look over the scene in front of him. When the *Tardis* began once more to spin, he sank back down heavily on the bunk. This time Rory pressed a tall glass of water into his hands. Good, but a ginger beer

from the cooler in his workshop would have been better.

The floor was a sea of co-axial, tri-axial and fibre-optic cable, multi-coloured tie-wraps and gaffer tape. Several enormous power leads had been wired into an elaborate lash up with the main feeds beneath the central console, the lot of it run down the stairs, out the hatch, and through the open door of the blue Police Call Box now sitting nearby. Once more the bell tolled a mournful warning, setting every nerve in his body on fire. There was nothing more exhilarating. Or more terrifying. After what seemed an eternity, the noise stopped again and he realized that the pounding he could still hear was rain... that and the Doctor, working feverishly at an open panel below the central column which housed the Time Rotor. A great heap of seemingly random *stuff* scavenged from the house, his workshop, and the other *Tardis* lay within the Time Lord's reach.

Amy entered the ship then, one of Tony Tyler's football equipment bags slung over one shoulder, her arms loaded down with clothing he recognized as having come from the bureau in his bedroom. It was only then he realized that he wasn't wearing any. He gathered the duvet about himself. Her eyes danced as she placed the stack of clothes beside him but she said nothing. To do so obviously required a great deal of self control.

"So," she told him, shaking the water from her rain-drenched sleeves, "the Doctor told me to get the blue pin-striped suit from the back of the *Tardis* wardrobe. As if you need to be wearing a suit right now. Are we going to church? I don't think so. I got what I could from the house."

She lowered the bulging equipment bag to the floor with a terrific metallic clunk that reminded him of young Rusty Tyler banging a wooden spoon on the tea kettle. That could only mean... the Doctor was improvising.

He mumbled his thanks, not so much out of embarrassment as a mouth that tasted like antibiotics and... narcotics. They'd knocked him out. No wonder Amy's dripping ginger tresses were haloed in angelic light and she had three, four, three, yes three eyes.

When Amy dragged her gear bag full of cookware off to where the Doctor was working, he attempted to dress himself. Torture by clothing. This was new. Simply stepping into the blue jeans with an injured leg was an experience he was unlikely to forget. Rory assisted with his shirt, but the effort of donning either the Christmas jumper Amy had retrieved from under the bed, or the shoes with all those... laces... was too much to even consider. Ignoring Rory's protestations, he padded barefoot up the steps and across the cool, crystalline deck, gingerly stepping over a partially dismantled strimmer. He ran a gentle hand along the length of one of the shell-like buttresses.

"Poor little girl, what are they doing to you?"

"Your poor little girl needs a talking to," the Doctor told him, scooting out from under the console, a pair of tweezers in one hand and half of a hand-held game system in the other. Oh. Tony was not going to be happy.

"She's been trying to dematerialize on her own without any coordinates. I've connected her directly to the *Tardis* to try and stabilise her, but she's threatening to drain our power, which will be very inconvenient if I'm to return Rory and Amy to their world. I'll have you know they said they were more concerned about you than getting back to their Earth, which seems foolishly sentimental on their part seeing as they hardly know you."

He lost his response in too many words for his diminished capacity. Instead, he lowered himself to the floor to survey the work being done. Belatedly, he realized he might not be able to get back up. The Doctor scarcely looked at him, intent on wiring the video game console into a

bit of 32 gauge wire. He wasn't sure he even wanted to ask.

"There. Done. And maybe now that daddy is home she'll behave herself."

"You came back for me," he said, watching the Doctor snap what remained of the digital game, in place with evident satisfaction before grabbing what looked like a dismantled mobile phone.

"Yes I did. I thought that would have been apparent in the coach."

He ignored the Time Lord's sarcasm. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Probably not. But I was out voted. Besides, I knew where I'd left you. I thought it would save time. But never mind that, we have more important things to talk about."

"Right," he said, rubbing a cheek thoughtfully. "Dematerialization? I suppose--"

"Rose phoned. We patched it through to the big screen in the *Tardis* so I could show off."

"Oh? Oh..." he hoped he didn't sound as startled as he felt, realizing that the Doctor had spoken to her. Had seen her. Had—

"I told her you were fine."

"Did she believe you?"

"Not for a minute. Do I really have a face that can't be trusted?" the Time Lord asked, looking up at him briefly. "Never mind. Don't answer that. Before we lost the connection she said that at last count there were 162 documented Rifts just in Britain. The good thing is that's keeping UNIT and Torchwood busy and they aren't here to bother us. Just in case, I've extended the *Tardis* shielding over the entire greenhouse. I thought about materialising around the entire structure, but containing such dimensional instability is likely to give the Old Girl indigestion."

"And the bad thing?" he asked, sure he didn't want to know given what the *good* news had been.

“It’s our fault. You really should drink the celery juice,” the Doctor told him, reaching for a set of pruning shears and a plastic spork. “You’re going to need it.”

Chapter Eleven

Rory wiped his brow with the back of his hand. There. Finished. He set the bipolar Lepton actuator aside and surveyed his work. He had to hand it to himself. His aptitude as a *Tardis* engineer was surprising. He ran his hand over the Feynman electron depletion matrix. For some reason working on these ships reminded him more of medical school than being in Car Club. Elsewhere in the *Tardis*, however, his voice carried over the open communication system, the Doctor--the Other Doctor-- was not faring as well. According to both Doctors, the dimensional stabilizer circuits were shorting out. That and about an arms length of other complaints. All he knew for sure was that the *Tardis* was making unhappy noises again and another pane of glass in the greenhouse came crashing down outside.

“*No, no, no. no. no!*” A fit of coughing followed.

Rory shook his head sadly. No one was taking his medical advice today. Wasn't that always the case? Who listened to the nurse when there was a Doctor in the room, let alone *two* Doctors? Of course if they'd been proper medical doctors they would have agreed with him that I.V. antibiotics and fluids were preferable to celery juice cocktails, a hand of bananas and a large bottle of chilled ginger beer. There were no less than two specialists on speed dial on Jackie Tyler's phone and he had talked to both of them. Unfortunately, one was in America and the other could not get to where they were because of the flood warnings. He made an adjustment with the quarter-turn anti-clockwise Leptonic isolation ratchet, passed his masterpiece to Amy, who in turn passed it into an open ganglier access port to, well, *their* Doctor. Something large crashed and splintered somewhere. They heard a faint moan over the open com system.

“You try,” Rory told his wife. “They aren’t listening to me. Use your feminine wiles.”

“What, on him?” Amy whispered, pointing down into the shaft. “That would be your daughter’s job, now. Oh, all right. Doctor,” she said sweetly. Most effective, Rory thought.

“Yes, Amelia?”

She winked at Rory, then continued, even more sweetly. “Do you think it might be time to feed and rest the troops? He sounds--”

Another mighty crash interrupted them followed by lung-splitting coughing, then a low hum, like the sound one got off the rim of a piece of good crystal.

“--tired. Rory said he’d do with a good kip.”

“We’re all tired, Amy. Must I remind you the fate of the planet is at stake? Penny.”

Rory pushed aside the tool box and reached for the pressure cooker Amy had pilfered from the house earlier. He selected a coin and handed it to his wife who placed it into the Doctor’s open palm.

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned about the planet, but he’s really tired. More than we are. You don’t count. Where is he, anyway?”

“Power Room 3, I think,” Rory told her.

“I thought he was in the Cloister Room,” the Doctor said, voice muffled inside the conduit.

“I thought *we* were in Power Room 3.” Amy sounded confused.

“I thought we were below Power Room 8,” Rory confessed.

“Don’t we know?” Amy asked them both. “And Power Room 8? How many Power Rooms are there? Doctor? Doctor! How many power rooms are there?”

“Hmm? What? Fifteen in our ship, but I don’t remember what they’re all for. And we’re *above* Power Room 6--where you do not want to go. You won’t like the looks of it,” the Doctor warned them.

A penny flipped out of the tunnel and landed, head’s up, on the floor beside Amy.

“That one won’t work. I need one dated after 1920 but before your Second World War and I need my favourite tweaker. It’s long and red and rather rusty. I got it off a submarine in the-- Amy?” The Doctor’s head poked out of the shaft. His hair was a mess. More of a mess. “Really, he’ll be fine. I work well under pressure. More pennies, please.”

“You start making mistakes,” she said crisply, dumping half of the coins over the Time Lord’s head and slapping the preferred tool into an open palm before she walked away.

“Ow! Job hazard,” the Doctor muttered, sliding back into the cramped corridor then out again to look up at Rory. “She likes him.”

“Yes,” Rory answered slowly. “Be careful what you say next. I do have a spanner in my hand.”

“Why?” the Doctor asked, brow furrowed. “Why does she like him? She hardly knows him.”

“Why wouldn’t she like him? She likes *you*, doesn’t she?”

Another unknown piece of equipment or tool hit the floor, somewhere, the resounding *clang* followed by another round of coughing. Rory could hear Amy talking over the com link now, trying to coax the other Doctor, *Jon Noble*, into taking a rest. Perhaps she’d have more luck with the earlier Time Lord Model.

“Even he’s not immune to it,” Rory observed, handing the Doctor another penny and a cotton bud.

“Eh, what? Immune to what? Oh, look at that. Pete’s got a Cromwell,” the Doctor said, tossing the coin out to Rory.

“The need to impress you,” Rory said, tossing the 17th Century coin back into the cookware. “As if your expectations are all that matter, and your expectations are impossible. He’ll do anything not to disappoint you.”

“I guess that’s just who I am, Rory.”

“You really don’t get it, do you?” Rory looked down into the shaft. Not finding the Doctor there, he rolled over to find the Time Lord wedged in a gravity defying position in the space above. “He isn’t you. You aren’t the same. Maybe you were before, well, I guess you were. You’d have to be wouldn’t you? But you aren’t now. Haven’t you realized that yet? You haven’t, have you? Neither of you seems to.”

“Rory,” the Doctor said, using that patronizing tone that always signalled the Time Lord was about to state the obvious. At least what *the Doctor* thought was obvious. “We are the same person. Same memories. Same... heritage. Just because he’s part human--and what *is* that sound?”

“What sound? You mean the coughing? That would be your--other--self.”

“Coughing? Why?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Rory said, making no attempt to mask his sarcasm. “Double pneumonia maybe?”

“Pneumonia? No,” the Doctor laughed in apparent disbelief. “You think just because he’s part human that--”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with it,” Rory interrupted, tired of the Doctor’s constant deflection of the obvious. “Well, all right, it does because I suppose if he was still fully

a Time Lord he wouldn't be so tired, or sick--and might have liked your celery cocktail--but that isn't really the point."

"What *is* the point? Hand me that penny? Ow! I did say *hand*, didn't I?"

Rory scrubbed at his hair in frustration. Had the entire Time Lord race been this thick? Or was it just the Doctor? Both of him. All of him.

"You're starting to *get* tired but he's *been* tired almost since we met him yet he'll do anything to keep pace with you because that's what you both expect. I saw what you looked like when you came back from the Civil War. You were a mess, but he looked like he'd been through a meat grinder."

"Yes, well, we were pummelled, chained in a dungeon, I fell off a horse, he got shot, and we barely squeaked through a closing fissure in Time. We're allowed to look messy. He'll just take a little longer to recover is all," the Doctor said, scooping up handfuls of spilled coinage before sliding out of the tube and closing the rounded casing.

They heard another crash. Then a whimper. Then Amy's panicked inquiry about the possibility of missing digits.

"Maybe a lot longer," the Doctor amended.

"You still don't get it, do you? It's more than his half human physiology. He's actually become someone you aren't. And you've become someone he isn't. At least not entirely. It isn't just that you Regenerated and became, *that*," Rory waved his hands at the Doctor who looked himself up and down incredulously before straightening his bow tie. "He's become something else, too. Someone else. Someone that doesn't even have a proper name."

"Yes he does," the Doctor said softly, dropping a handful of rare coins, one by one, into Rory's outstretched hands. "He's called The Doctor."

“You might want to tell him that.”

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Convincing Amy that he was fine had been the hardest part. He doubted she believed him, but eventually she agreed to leave him, even offered to make him a cup of tea with honey to curb the insidious coughing. A cup of tea, would, indeed, be lovely. Darjeeling perhaps? Or some of that lavender tea that Donna used to make. Anything besides celery.

Having done all he could do with their meagre Ancillary Power stores, he swept up everything he'd broken over the past hour. It amounted to rather a lot. Bits of crystal sang as it brushed across the polished, ebony floor. Not knowing where to put the debris, he swept it to one side of the room and sank down to rest. The Doctor would be along any time, loping down the long corridors with energy to spare, wondering what was keeping him. They'd have noticed he'd switched off the com link. He wondered bleakly if they had realized it had been open on his end, too. Fitful coughing shook him until his eyes welled with tears. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, staring for a moment at the blood. Not good. Not that he was going to tell anyone. They'd know soon enough.

He returned to the main control room to recalibrate the Tropospheric Nullification Probe. Failing to find it—or even quite remember what it looked like—he took a moment to survey the repairs and further augmentation the Doctor had made to the native *Tardis* circuitry. Impressive. Ingenious. Well, he always had been clever. Having a surplus of functional alien technology at his disposal helped.

He gently toggled switches, analyzing data. The *Tardis* no longer drew a steady stream

of energy from the Rifts he now realised it had been opening slowly over time--or holding open as the search for viable sources of energy grew more crucial. Instinct was winning over. A ship at this stage of development should not be planet bound. On Gallifrey it would be held in the complex environs of the Looms in the *Tardis* shipyard off world. Unstable Rifts only prompted ingrained programming to be linked to an endless supply of energy as the final stages of Trans-dimensional intensification took place. He had been forced to modify the power systems in the other *Tardis*—*other Tardis!* how incredibly odd that sounded!--in the wake of the Time War, but this one held the genetic imperative of the original. The search for the Eye of Harmony would prove fruitless, but that wouldn't keep the ship from trying. No matter the peril. And it was not ready to traverse the Vortex. Not yet. Not without a stable energy transference system--or a compatible pilot. If it managed to dematerialize prematurely there was no telling where or when it might end up and a good chance wherever that was was going to be on the receiving end of a very large explosion. And were it fail to dematerialize? England would be wiped from the face of the planet. If there still was a planet.

He worked his way around the console, stepping over the Doctor, tools, and a portion of the Tyler's high-efficiency automatic dish washer. Tripping over, in all honesty. On his third shambling circuit he noticed that the Time Lord had cleared him a path and a briode nebuliser not unlike the one he had originally assembled had been installed and awaited priming. The raw state of the *Tardis* possessed telepathic circuits and isomorphic controls which a Time Lord could manipulate, but what about him? It hadn't gone particularly well last time. Fail that, he noted that an override had been engineered and installed neatly next to the, next to the, the... Chronosynchronization Feed. He shook his head to clear it.

Not good. Not good at all.

“I’ve programmed it to accept a dual prime that should cross match the required nuclei,” the Doctor told him, adding a milk pan to the growing pile of stainless steel skillets and saucepans on the floor.

The Time Lord looked silly sitting there, cross-legged, bow tie askew, hair a tousled mess. He reached down and plucked a coin from behind the Doctor’s ear and held it out, turning it over his fingers like a magician.

“You missed one,” he wheezed, trying not to resume the coughing that had been plaguing since he’d woken up. Whenever that was.

“Look at that,” the Doctor said with a smile, “another Cromwell. Maybe I’ll keep it as a souvenir. But trust me. She’ll fly for us. Either of us. *If* there isn’t too much turbulence, and the *Artron* Energy Capacitor remains fully functional to feed the Main Space Time Element and... stop that!”

The Time Lord thumped the floor with a saucepan. “Stop trying to connect to the Prime Eye of Harmony you daft thing! Oh, she is being stubborn about that. She keeps rewriting my command codes. How rude.”

More cookware clanked and clattered as Jackie Tyler’s brand new toaster was lifted from the pile and examined closely.

“It does eggs *and* toast? That’s brilliant! Amy!” the Doctor yelled just as she crossed the threshold back into the control room, a streaming cup of tea in hand. At last! A hot cuppa! The Doctor thrust the toaster toward her. “Take it over to the *Tardis* and make it work. Tea? Oh, thank you!”

“It isn’t for you,” she said pointedly.

He wrapped his fingers around the cup and he sank to the floor, inhaling deeply, feeling

his chest loosen somewhat. Lavender. Honey. Something else... *whisky*? Damn, that woman was smart.

“Oh. I see how I rate.” The Doctor sounded rather hurt.

Amy took the proffered toaster. “What? Not only do you have me raiding the kitchen so you can play pots and pans like a three year old, now you want me to cook you breakfast? Shall I put on the maid’s uniform too?”

“Amy Pond, what you and Rory do on your own time is your business. I merely thought-- thank you!

“And I still need a CRT!” the Doctor added cheerily as Amy stalked away, the toaster tucked under one arm.

“CRT? Right then,” he took a deep breath, managing to stand after the third attempt. Hot tea splashed on his fingers. “There’s an old Mac in the cupboard in Pete’s study, I’ll--”

“No. I don’t want that. Apples are rubbish,” the Doctor laughed helplessly. “Apples are rubb... ish. Right. Sorry. Had to have been there. Rubbish for *this* of course. That’s what I meant. I need something larger. Something primitive. More primitive.”

“In that case you’ll want Mrs. Browne’s old telly. But you’ll need a squad of Judoon to lug it out of her sitting room. I suppose if I got a garden trolley--”

“Rory!” the Doctor roared like a drill sergeant. “Go fetch the telly from the housekeeper’s sitting room. Just don’t go poking about. I made that mistake earlier. There are things even 1100 year old eyes shouldn’t see. Amy, go with him.”

“Yes, oh great and powerful Time Lord. Right after I fix the eggs and toast, and I suppose you’ll be wanting bacon too? Bacon, then. For my boys!”

He watched as she followed her husband into the orangery, Jackie’s Westie, Petunia,

scampering after them, a blur of fluffy whiteness. Amy scooped the small dog up and he felt vaguely guilty for not having attended her as he had been bid. They had shared a banana earlier. Surely that counted for something.

“Sorted,” the Doctor told him before going back to rummage through the cookware. A steamer and a fondue pot went onto the pile. The final item was the pressure cooker full of what had been the contents of Pete Tyler’s rare coin collection. The Doctor dumped pennies and shillings across the floor, bent forward into the pot, and took a deep whiff.

“Aha! Aluminium!”

“What can I--”

“Not. A. Thing. Sit down. Rory!”

“Sit down?” he asked, confused. Not that it wasn’t tempting. Lay down, even. Sleep, even better.

“Yes, sit down. Before you spill your tea. On my head. Again. Is there whisky in that? Rory!”

Rory appeared back at the open door, hair and shirt soaked. If he listened carefully he could hear the raging storm outside. Jackie’s award winning gardens were ruined. Norman, the grounds keeper, was going to be very cross when he returned from visiting his niece in America.

“There is only one of me, Doctor.”

“For now. Remember what I showed you earlier under the--yes, down there. I want those cables passed through here first and connected to the--. Yes, yes, yes. good man. Use that thing to punch out the bottom of the... Right. Good. Good,” the Doctor said, toggling controls. “Oh look! It’s working. Well, not yet, but it will be...”

As he watched the Time Lord scramble around the hexagonal control panel, he felt

himself sliding slowly down a pillar until he could slide no further. Was the room tilting or was it him? He gripped the tea cup tightly. Not one of Jackie Tyler's patterns. From the *Tardis* then.

A souvenir from some long-forgotten Royal Tea. At least he had forgotten.

"There. Isn't that better? Drink your tea." The Doctor inhaled deeply. "Smells like our favourite kind."

"What are you playing at?" he asked, trying to take another sip but unable to steady his hands. The cup kept missing his lips. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"I'm not being nice to you," the Doctor told him flippantly. "Well, maybe I am. It was pointed out to me that I've been rather cross and unfair and other things. I'll sully my reputation at this rate. Further sully. Not how I want the universe to remember me. Well, my universe. This universe probably doesn't even know I exist, which has a certain appeal. But since I have you here, I'd like to point out that that my life did not end with yours, no matter how much you thought it would."

He looked at the Doctor blankly. Perhaps if he had more whisky?

"Oh, never mind," the Doctor muttered, flapping a hand carelessly. "You wouldn't remember that. It hasn't happened to you. Do yourself a favour and don't let it."

"I take it I did something stupid. Or will have."

"No. *I* did something stupid. Then I did it again."

"That sounds like me." And as he said it, the cup slipped from his grasp and shattered between them.

He startled as the Doctor reached out and took hold of his jaw with a cool, dry hand, and looked deeply into his eyes. He stared back, wondering what the Time Lord was looking at. Or

for. Did stars still spin in his eyes, the way they did in the Doctor's? A moment passed before the Doctor gently patted his cheek.

"You'll be all right."

He didn't feel all right. But he didn't imagine stating the obvious was necessary. Nor did he seem to have the words. All he could do was stare at the face he would never see in the mirror and wonder what had precipitated the change.

"You have a concussion. Among other things. Oh, this does complicate matters. I need you to stay focused on what we're doing if we're to have any chance of finishing it before the Thames overflows its banks and your friend, Harriet Jones, calls back, and I need to know what's keeping this little ship of yours from dematerializing at this point because it isn't anything I've done even though I've been pretending that it was because, well, I am the cleverest man in the room. At least until your brain is working again which it is clearly is not and are you even looking at me because your eyes look stranger than normal."

He blinked hard. "Wh-what?"

"The ship. She ought to be half way to the end of the Universe by now."

"Really?"

"Oh dear. This is worse than I thought. Come on, come on. Snap out of it. The human part of your brain can go to sleep. I need the rest of it. I need you to focus. I need you to remember who you are. Could it be component K-7?" the Doctor asked suddenly.

That made him sit up straighter. He shook his head. "No."

"I think it might."

"No." He shook his head again, more emphatically. "No it isn't that."

"You could at least humour me and take a peek," the Doctor said, bounding away from

him and moving about the room with enviable amounts of energy. “That wouldn’t be so taxing. Go on. Have a look.”

“It isn’t component K-7!” he said, struggling to stand and stepping on the broken bits of china. He gripped one of the buttresses to keep from toppling back to the smooth, glass-like floor. The Doctor offered no assistance.

“I think it is. I think it’s component K-7.”

“It isn’t either. I should know. She’s my ship.”

“Yeah? Well, she’s rubbish--”

“For the love of God, you two,” Rory told them, climbing back out of the hatch the Doctor had indicated several minutes before. “What now? I’ll check it myself.”

“No, Rory,” the Doctor said levelly, pointing toward the door. “Go on to the house and fetch that telly. *Jon* will check it.”

“Don’t call me that--” he said, rubbing his forehead against clenched fists. Dazzling lights flashed behind his closed eyes. Stars burst and spiraled.

“Why? I have to call you something. You certainly aren’t the man I left here.”

“Neither are you!”

“I’m not the one that’s run out of K-7. Where is it? Do you even know where it is?”

“Doctor, leave him alone!” Rory stepped forward to intervene. “Were you listening at all earlier? He’s in no shape for any of this and you know it.”

“Go on up to the house Rory.”

“No,” came the faltering reply, then with more moxie, “No! Not until I take care of *my* patient. You entrusted his care to me, remember? You had *more important* things to do, remember? Then you’ll listen to what I say for once. Now, leave off and tell me what’s K-7?”

“The damn fluid link,” they both hissed, pointing in opposite directions.

The Doctor gaped. “You put it back over there?”

“It was easier to get to,” he retorted, feeling his head clearing. The room came brightly into focus. “And besides, that isn’t the problem!”

“Faulty filament?” the Doctor piped innocently, sliding down the nearest handrail to saunter off down a corridor.

“Watch it, Time Boy. Now you’re just being irritating.”

*

For a moment he couldn’t remember why there were three octaves of piano wire dangling above him. He squeezed his eyes tightly closed, willing the pain away, willing himself to stay awake. He could not afford to start making mistakes. More mistakes. The Doctor’s ruse had brought him to his senses earlier, but it was only a matter of time before they would have to ring up Doc Sullivan and hope he had a boat because Greater London was under a flood advisory.

The scent of fried bacon and eggs permeated the air. He inhaled deeply.

“mmm G62 L6.”

“Have a good kip?” Amy Pond’s pretty face swam into view.

“Sorry. Was I--?”

“*Shhh*. Our little secret, yeah? Rory keeps telling the Lord and Master you need to rest, but it’s all Mr. Grumpy Face, work, work, work. The fate of the planet is at stake.”

“Well, when it’s the fate of the planet I can’t be nodding off,” he said with a short laugh.

He gestured toward the plate of food. "Is that for me?"

"If you want. It might be cold. You ate two other plates full. You don't remember, do you? Rory said you might have a concussion."

"So I heard." He stuffed a piece of bacon into his mouth.

At least he wasn't coughing up a lung anymore. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and focused once more on the resonance harp he had been trying to assemble. The tool the Doctor had given him to use was still in his hand. A pair of spectacles had been left beside him. He put them on.

He remembered now. Amy had joined them in the Dynamorphic Power Room, marvelling at the beauty of the Trachoid Time Crystals. It was all so fragile still, delicate emerald pillars rising to the ceiling, fusing into an interconnected canopy like some living crystalline jungle. It would be decades, centuries, before they attained the grandeur of the sea green columns that filled Power Room 3 on the *Tardis*.

"You've done this all by yourself? Until now, I mean."

He nodded, concentrating on the tonal quality of each string. The Trachoid Crystal contrabulations needed to be in synchronic resonance with the referential difference index. It was a good thing he had an ear for music. He had, after all, written a symphony, hadn't he? Well, he'd begun to write one. He wasn't sure if it had ever been finished. Or performed.

"It's beautiful. The ship. All of it."

"Even Audrey II?"

She laughed. "All right, not that. Don't know where she's got off to, to tell the truth. Or the lemurs. But everything else. The colours, the textures, the ceiling in the Cloister Room. It looks like a Van Gogh."

“Van Gogh? Oh, I’ll bet he’s brilliant! Mad as a hatter, but what he did with sunflowers...”

“He hated sunflowers,” Amy told him.

“Did he? Did he really? He took you there?” He tightened a string, plucked it. Half a step flat. He tightened it a bit more.

“There, and to ancient Rome, and to Apalapucia, and to the future on Spaceship UK, riding on the back of the last Star Whale,” she said, eyes alight with memories.

“But you’re leaving out all the good stuff,” the Doctor interjected, hanging upside down above them in a repair harness between spires of green crystal. “Cybermats and Weeping Angels and sexy fish vampires.”

“And the Silents?” she commented.

“Oh, forget about them. Haha. See what I did there? Forget about them? Oh, fine, then, don’t laugh, Amy Pond. See where I don’t take you next time I pop by for a visit. It’s not all about Christmas dinner, you know.

“Tell him how I was stranded on Earth--the other Earth, at least I think it was the other Earth. It’s all getting rather confusing. I had a flat mate called Craig. Good man, Craig.”

“I think you just told him.”

“Yes, well, it was amazing and I played football.”

“Yet somehow you still found time to shatter the time line and implode the universe. I was in your head,” he reminded the Doctor as he adjusted the next string. Sharp. Still sharp...

“That was part of *stuff*...”

...flat... *aaaand* there. Done. He moved on to the next string, and the next, and the next. Too long. The process of tuning was going to take too long. They were running out of time. The

Doctor had not mentioned it in the last five minutes, but he knew it was true. Rose had managed to ring them up again, but they had barely spoken two words before interference broke up the call. They used the *Tardis* phone then, only to get a busy signal. Two words. Two unmistakable words. *Tony* and *Rusty*. But the Doctor was already three steps ahead of him. The boys, and Granddad Prentice, were safe. He closed his eyes and ran his fingers lightly over the strings. It wasn't music. Not yet. He needed to open his eyes again; he didn't want to.

"Is he tuning up or tuning out?"

"Wha--?" The Doctor was so close he could see his reflection in the other man's safety goggles.

"Go on, you," Amy shooed the Time Lord away. "This was a private conversation."

"I see. Well. I won't bother telling the *Doctor* that his star charts—which look bang on, by the way--should all be accessible now, but if he tries to adjust the Dysomorphic Generator before the resonance harp is aligned it may just cause an earthquake."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You just can't stand not being the smartest boy in the class can you? But can you remember to turn off the kettle? No, I didn't think so."

"Hah. I'll just take my spare briode nebuliser and go home." The Doctor winched back up into the high reaches of the vault. A penny dropped from above, spinning wildly before settling heads up between them. Amy picked it up, turning it over and over between her fingers.

"He never talks about it, you know," she said, gazing up to where the Doctor had disappeared into a conduit linking the Power Room to the chamber above it. "I've known him so long and he never talks about it. Your home planet."

"Gallifrey."

"Gallifrey. Sounds like an Irish village. Show me. Come on," she said, standing up and

extending her hand. “He said the star chart thingies are working. Come on, then. You know you want to.”

Too right.

They made their way back to the main control room by way of twisting corridors, smooth like the inside of molluscan sea shells, softly lit like early morning. He walked slowly, fingers trailing along walls the colour of cuttlefish bone, fascinated by the subtle changes in pigmentation and shifts in light polarization. Ever in flux, the Time Ship had nonetheless achieved a modicum of dimensional, as well as aesthetic, stability over the last hour or so. He dearly wished he could say the same for himself. He felt oddly disconnected. And broken. His part-human body had taken more abuse in two days than it had in all the years he had spent on Pete’s World and was taking far too long to recover. Not that he expected to ever completely heal. Not anymore.

Rory gave them an update on the weather and as much of a news brief as could be reported while stacking cookware, dismantled equipment, and various appliances into a garden trolley to be trundled out to the growing scrapheap in the greenhouse. None of it was good. The news, that was. The stack of miscellany contained all sorts of useful items. Not that Jackie would want most of the kitchen gadgets back after their abuse at the hands of not one, but two mad men.

According to the BBC, a state of emergency had been declared in The People’s Republic of Britain, with reports of anomalous weather and unexplained phenomena being reported globally. A pack of presumably extinct English Wolves had been spotted near Nottingham, giant dragonflies were interfering with air travel in Imperial Canada, and a Woolly Mammoth had been spotted wandering through a rural town in the small Independent American State of

Michigan.

He pressed his hand against one of the tablet computers they had wired into the display systems, gently rotating it until a virtual 3-Dimensional screen flicked into life above them. He pointed at the Milky Way Galaxy, then brushed his hand through the stars, scattering them into a new configuration.

“That way,” he said, pointing toward Sagittarius, “in the constellation of Kasterbouras. Gallifrey. The Shining World of the Seventh System. That’s where I came from. Well,” he amended with a sad smile, “where *he* came from. I guess I was born in the Medusa Cascade which is... there.”

“It’s beautiful,” Amy told him. He wondered if she had seen it for herself.

“That it is. I dream about it. Never quite get there,” he said, scattering the image with a wave of his hand. He removed his glasses and set them down. “Strange life, sharing part of it with him.”

He reached to switch off the program, knowing that he must return to the resonance harp they had devised at the cost of one grand piano. Pete Tyler was going to be ever so cross with him. But it had to be perfect. They were only going to get one chance to get his *Tardis* off planet and set things to right. He ran a hand over the bump on his head, wondering if it might be time for more oxycodone and another ginger beer.

His shoulder and thigh ached as well. He might even take that celery infusion. It couldn’t hurt. Just taste bad. Amy was still gazing at the stars.

“Maybe it’s still there.”

He took his hand away from the controls.

“Gallifrey? No. It’s gone now. All gone. There was a war. The last Time War. Well, last

one so far. We can hope it will never be repeated. At least on that scale.”

“But, that was in our Universe. Who’s to say it didn’t happen here?”

“It doesn’t work like that. It was Time Locked in the war, across all of reality, burning. He was there. I was there.” And the memories of that never went away.

“But just say in this Universe, whatever happened in our Universe didn’t happen here.” she insisted. “History isn’t the same, right? So what if it is still there? What if there are other Time Lords here?”

“I’d know,” he said softly, stirring the stars into half-forgotten constellations once seen from the Gallifreyan night sky above his mountain home. At least he thought he would know.

And were he ever to find a world parallel to his home world, would they accept him, or would he be Outcast because of his abhorrent physiology? For all their engineering and intellectual prowess, the Time Lords were an arrogant and petulant lot.

“Even if I didn’t know, your Doctor would. Besides, the *Tardis* would have found a link to the Eye of Harmony instead of poking holes in the fabric of Space and Time to siphon off energy it wasn’t finding here. No. There’s no going home for me. For us. It’s impossible.”

“You said it was impossible for us to be here,” Amy pointed out, still watching the display change with every flick of his wrist. “You both said it. But here we are.”

“Here we are,” he agreed. “With a *Tardis* about to tear a hole in the fabric of reality. Story of my life. I guess I should have read the manual all the way through. Or paid more attention at the Academy.”

“But a *Tardis* is telepathic, isn’t it? Why can’t you just, I don’t know, talk to her? The Doctor does--the *other* Doctor, I mean,” she said with a smile.

“Oh, I can talk to her all right... though I seem to have been rather deaf to what’s she

been trying to say to me. Too distracted by other things. *Buuuut*, what needs to be done to operate her in flight requires incredible, sustained concentration that's more in tune with Time Lord physiology than what I've been left with."

He knew what to do. Knew how to do it. The question was how long could he maintain it. The Doctor had offered to pilot her but he had refused. The Time Lord might be needed to clean up whatever mess he left behind.

"Too bad you can't wire yourself up like they do in those virtual video games..."

Her words gave him pause.

"That's crazy isn't it? You'd probably have to have it go right into your brain and that's impossible. Right? Even for you?" Her smile faded.

"Wait, you are not seriously thinking..."

"Amy Pond, you're a genius!" he cried, gripping her by the shoulders. "I could kiss you!"

Rory ran the trolley smack into one of the buttresses.

"But of course I won't because you're married. To Rory. And so am I. Not to Rory, though. Ehm. Blimey. Awkward," he said, making a dash for the door, Petunia scrambling after him. "Don't touch anything. And tell *him* not to touch anything. I'll be right back!"

Chapter Twelve

Jackie Tyler's assessment of the condition of his bedroom had not been in jest. The entire north-west corner of the historical manor house had sustained considerable damage. It would be encased in scaffolding for months. He entered the room cautiously, stepping lightly over the door which now lay flat on the floor, along with portions of the ceiling and much of what had been in the loft above--including a large wardrobe in which he had placed a number of items for safe keeping some years before. Well, he thought grimly, looking at the gaping hole in the plaster, it would save him the climb. Two flights of stairs had him nearly doubled over in pain as it was. Just getting to the house had been a chore, what with Lake Tyler floating away the patio furniture. He had carried Petunia so as to save her the swim. Jackie was going to be incensed about the ruined carpets on the ground floor.

The telescope he had kept out of guilt was no longer an issue as it lay broken to bits under the weight of the wardrobe. Along with just about everything else that had been on the bookcase in that corner of the room. Pages of notation on Trans-Space Thermodynamics—a project he'd begun one night while bored--and fragments of his laser screwdriver prototype littered the floor Amy's search for clean, dry clothing earlier had apparently required the opening of every drawer in the room. He had left Scotland with nothing more than the clothes on his back last summer. Had arrived here with less after the fire in the *Tardis*. He made due. As much as he loved a little shop and the exotic bazaars on a hundred planets, he wasn't overly fond of 20th Century department stores. Unless it was the toy section.

Lowering himself painfully to his knees, he reached inside the open wardrobe, fingers

scrabbling along the floor seam in back until he found the catch. He pulled out his sonic screwdriver, all shiny and fresh-looking. It switched on at the merest touch and a short burst was all it took to spring the latch, revealing the hidden compartment beneath. A blue jacket and trousers, the ones he had donned the day he was born, were folded neatly within. He lifted them out gently, passing his hand over the fabric. He drew a deep breath at the memory of charging his old enemy, Davros, with a weapon he had assembled within minutes of consciousness, only to be struck down just paces outside the *Tardis*. He had constructed that weapon in no time flat. Had every intention of using it. It might as well have been a hundred years ago now.

He tossed the suit over his shoulder and reached back in for what he actually wanted. There. His hand closed around a Cybus Industry Earpod, a nasty little souvenir Pete Tyler had kept after the downfall of John Lumic. Following the Cybermen incident, Earpods had fallen out of favour, people once more turning to less invasive forms for accessing the WorldNet. Lucky for him, Pete had possessed the foresight to retain certain items of technology. Unknown to Pete, he had palmed it the very first day he had walked into Torchwood. He tossed the silver ear set up and down in his hand. It might just do and was more streamlined than adapting the Chameleon Arch. He didn't have the best memories of using that particular device anyway.

"The Doctor said you're probably going to do something foolish and I'm supposed to stop you."

He startled at Amy's appearance in the doorway, sliding the Earpod into his pocket as he clambered back to his feet. Petunia trailed after her, sniffing about the room before running off with one of his dirty socks.

"Sorry. We didn't mean to creep in on you--and I'm sorry about the mess. Well, the clothes everywhere. Half the ceiling was already on the floor when I came in." She was soaked

from the relentless downpour, her dripping jacket hanging limp around her. "I see the builders patched the leaking roof at least."

He nodded, bending stiffly to pick up his discarded suit.

"Let me," Amy told him, stooping to grab it. "It was in there, yeah?"

He nodded again as she offered to put it away in the wardrobe.

"I thought he was kidding about you and the suits," she said, giving the rumpled clothing a good shake.

A twist of yellow spilled from one of the pockets and he inhaled the bright scent of lemon peel. Amy brushed it aside, refolding the coat and trousers neatly, smoothing the wrinkles beneath her fingers. An odd look crossed her face and she reached into a coat pocket, taking out a monochrome photograph of a llama. A sign above the building behind it read *Shangri-La Tea Rooms*. He had wondered where that had gone.

"Norman," she read off the back, nonplussed, then slid it back where she had found it. "Why am I not surprised."

"Nothing surprises you," he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. He picked up a framed photograph of Rose and himself that had apparently fallen to the floor but had been picked up and placed on the bedside table. He traced the cracked glass with his fingers. "You haven't just travelled together. You've known him a long time, haven't you?"

"I met him when I was a little girl. He... just took awhile getting back. I started to think he was a fairy tale." She smiled as she spoke, but her bright eyes were older than her years. Eyes that had seen too much.

"Oh," he said softly. "Oh."

It wouldn't be the first time he had been accused of being a child's imaginary friend. For

the first time in years he thought of little Reinette Poisson, looking back at him through her bedroom fireplace in 18th Century Paris, as surprised to see him as he was to see her. Especially considering he was onboard an abandoned ship, deep in space. Ah. Beautiful Reniette, who grew up to be one the most remarkable women in the court of King Louis XV's. A woman not only possessed of uncommon beauty, but an uncommon intellect as well. She had seen the lonely little boy inside of him. The lonely little boy that lingered still in the Doctor Amy clearly adored. She had waited for him. She had waited a long, long time.

"I'm sorry," he began, but she cut him off.

"Don't be. It's fine. It's good. He's good."

And he could see in her dark eyes that she meant it. No matter what else had happened in between times, no matter what had happened since, she meant it. He wondered how much her devotion had cost her. It came with a price, being the Doctor's Companion. Some had paid more dearly than others.

Thunder rolled in the distance.

"Raining again. I mean, I know it is England and all, but-- At least it isn't raining cannon balls, yeah?"

"It's the *Tardis*," he told her, putting aside the picture frame. He stepped over a fallen lamp to get to the broken window. The longer it took to get off world the less likely it was that Amy would ever see her home again. And if they ripped the universe in two, he would never see Rose again. He was not going to let that happen. To either of them.

"He should have taken you home. By coming back for me he may have jeopardized your ever getting out of this universe. Mind you, if he hadn't come back I'd probably be buried in an unmarked grave outside St. Lawrence's in Brentford."

“He always comes back,” Amy said absently as she put his suit away and closed the wardrobe doors. The broken hinge on one prevented them from closing properly. Something else to fix,

“Oh, now I know that isn’t true. Don’t forget who you’re talking to. You have no idea how many times we’ve--”

“But you always try,” she told him, looking up at him, looking into his eyes.

He wished he could tell her that was true. “And if he hadn’t come back? What if he can’t get you *home* this time?”

She picked up the photograph and looked at it. “That’s Scotland, yeah? Glencoe? Thought so. So it’s a lot like home. And Rory is here. That’s all I really need. All I ever really needed. So. Yeah. I... could live with it.” She lifted her gaze to his once more. “Can you?”

He took the picture frame from her outstretched hand. *Rose...*

“We couldn’t just leave you back there. Besides, he didn’t really have much of a say in the matter, did he? Not after I rang up Rose and she told the Doctor that if he didn’t go back for you she’d go herself. Should have heard them going on about vortex manipulators and the portals reactivating a dimension hopper. Then he turned off the speaker and chased us out of the *Tardis*. Whatever she said seemed to motivate him pretty quickly, though.”

“Did she? Did she really?”

Amy laughed a little. “What is it with the two of you? Why can’t you just accept that people actually care about you? Love you. Rose told me... is it true you burned up a star just to say goodbye?”

“I, I--” he stammered, surprised by her words. Rose never told anyone about that. “I... yeah.”

“And she crossed parallel worlds to find you again? Whoa. You two really are proper love birds, aren’t you?” But her smile faded after a moment. The room was growing dim as sun set drew nigh. “That must have been terrible. Leaving her here. Leaving *you* when he’s always going on about being the Last of the Time Lords. No wonder he’s so broken. No wonder you’re both so broken. You’re like... two parts of the same melody but in different keys.

“Right. So,” she changed the subject quickly and he took a deep breath, realising that he’d stopped breathing somewhere in the last few minutes. “This clever Time-Lordy plan of yours. Is it as mad as he says it must be?”

“Oh, yes,” he replied, tossing the Earpod up and down in his hand.

“And I suppose he’ll try to talk you out of it?”

“Probably.”

“And you’re going to do it anyway and he’s going to help you because he’s already had the same brilliant plan himself. Are the two of you sure about this?”

“About as sure as we ever are,” he told her, following it up with the biggest grin he could manage.

Amy sighed. “I was afraid of that.”

He opened the top drawer of his bureau and took out a pair of tortoise shell rimmed glasses. He was going to need the real thing.

By the time they ascended the steps to the orangery, the falling sky had pinched all light from the day. He set to work immediately. By the sound of the *Tardis* engines, and given that the Tyler’s hilltop home now boasted an indoor swimming pool in the cellar, there wasn’t much time

left. Time. How many times he would have traded the curse of a long life for a stroll on the Slow Path, then, given his hearts' desire, realized it wasn't what he wanted at all. The Out-of-Time Lord, out of Time. How was that for irony? The ship sighed around him. Whatever was holding her in place wasn't going to hold much longer.

Though he had structured the hexagonal console in much the same order as any Type 40 capsule he had ever been in, he was still digging deep to sort this jumble of resident and synthetic instrumentation. Nothing approximating this had ever been preserved in the antiquities museum, though he had briefly examined—all right, nicked and then lost-- scrolls in the restricted archives at the Academy that lent credence to what he now saw before him. To say it had been ages since his time-travelling ancestors had harnessed the raw power of a Time Ship with such native configuration was an understatement.

For thousands of generations before he had been born, Time Lord engineers had been rigorously modifying Time Ships to suit their own purposes. He had accelerated the growth in this one--a mere peapod compared to the vastly complex *Tardis* from which it had been taken--and allowed it to develop more closely to its native form out of necessity, single-handedly adapting ship-wide systems with whatever corresponding technology he could come up with but without any kind of systematic timetable. It wasn't like cobbling together an unshielded space hopper or riding the Time Winds on the back of a cold-fusion-powered sentient metal bird for a one way, wild ride through space. Though, he had to admit to himself, that *had* been one of his more brilliant moments—even if it had taken almost three years on the cold prison planet of Volag-Noc to accomplish it. This was a whole ship. A whole *living* ship and one that appeared to be as feisty as its sister. It seemed rather a shame she already looked so hodge podge when her systems were only just fully coming online. That she had grown at all was a testimony to

someone's genius. His, or *his*.

Or Donna's.

Hear me. Do you hear me? I need your help.

"I hear you, Little Girl," he said softly, but the ship only shuddered and groaned.

The Doctor bounded into the control room not long after he had set to work.

"Give it over. You aren't going to finish in time. Wait. What are you doing?"

"Sorry!" he snapped, refusing to be deterred and refusing to make room for the Doctor to slide in next to him. He needed to create a neural relay to the telepathic circuits and was only too conscious of the time constraints. "It's been awhile since I've done programming code in Old High Gallifreyan!"

"What are you even doing with neural interfacing and... that's a Cybus Earpod!" The Doctor snatched it from his hand.

"Yes it is," he said, snatching it back. He ripped handfuls of carefully assembled lash-up down, much to the Doctor's consternation. "I need to tap into the telepathic interface system more directly. Think of it as a stylish option to adapting the Chameleon Arch, which I've already thought through and dismissed so don't even suggest it."

"All right, I won't. But what do you mean, 'more directly'? Wire yourself into the Artronic Mainframe? Are you insane? I mean it most certainly could work. Maybe. Probably. But more likely it could kill you! You won't Regenerate!"

"Assuming this ship flies at all we may still have dimensional instability once she's in motion, and judging by these readings she simply isn't processing all the data that's required. Trust me, I know how that feels. Timing is going to be everything. If I don't get every command right, dot every "i," cross every "t," then we are going to have ship-wide failure. If we're trapped

in mid-dematerialization she'll bleed to death; if she materializes too soon who knows where or when we'll end up; and if we get thrown sideways through one those open Rifts it could rewrite history. Either way, I'll be dead.

"Listen to me," he pinned the Doctor with his fiercest gaze. "You saved my life and I thank you for that. Really. And for all your help, I-- couldn't have done it without you, and I've been a fool not to see what was happening. An old fool. What's new? But you have to leave. You have enough residual power. It's the *Tardis*. Your *Tardis* drew power from this one, which drew power from me at the start, and has been converting power from the Rifts which--oh, never mind. Why am I even explaining this to you?

"Take Amy and Rory back to their universe. Take them home. Go get Rose and her family--at least give them the option. No, no options. Take them. If I can't save the planet, at least I can save *them*. Just get out of here. As soon as we dematerialise, the portals are going to start closing, but if this *Tardis* explodes you won't have enough rooms to jettison to get the thrust required to punch through to the other side. You could end up anywhere. You could end up in the Howling."

Green eyes rolled in response. "Oh, you do have a flair for the dramatic! There's another option. There's always been another option but like usual you aren't listening. Pull the plug. Shut down as many systems as we can, wrap a stabilization field around her and we hand deliver her safely to another location in Space and Time."

He looked at the Doctor over the rim of his glasses. "Use a tow rope through the Time Vortex? Are you mad?"

"It can't be any harder than towing a planet--" the Doctor shrugged.

"It can be a whole *lot* harder if she doesn't want to go!" he cried, slipping out from under

the console and getting to his feet. “She isn’t going to let us take her off-line without a fight.”

“If she was functioning properly, she’d understand that she’s ripping holes in the universe. And if *you* were functioning properly you’d have seen it, too.”

“Searching for Rassilon’s Star is an inherent part of her organic programming!”

“That *you* should have taken into consideration and compensated for a long time ago. I didn’t realize I was going to have to leave the manual. If I even still had the manual. We sorted that little issue out after--you know--when all that stuff happened. With the fire and the ships and, you know--” the Doctor said, hands waving, cheeks puffed up to make explosion noises any small boy would have envied.

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “The Time War?”

“Yes, yes, yes. That. Dreadful business. I try not to think about it.”

“Try not to--? But you, we--”

“I especially try not to think about *that!*” the Doctor cried, arms flapping again. “The point is, the modifications can be made. Haven’t we been working on the same project?”

“That took *months* and the final solution was a happy accident involving a wedge of Flosserkase and a bottle of Chateau Cheval Blanc ‘79.”

“I made the necessary modifications while you were...resting,” the Doctor told him carefully, taking the glasses from his hands and putting them on. Off. On again. “I can override her systems from my *Tardis* and program her to--go somewhere. Sacrifice herself if necessary—how do you *see* out of these?”

“You won’t either!” He spread his arms protectively in front of the Time Rotor column, appalled at the mere notion of condemning the *Tardis* to certain death. Lights flashed on the main console and the ship shuddered so fiercely they were both nearly thrown to their knees.

The glasses fell to the floor between them. “I can’t send her out *there* alone. She’s *alive*.”

“More than you realize,” the Doctor muttered, grabbing one of the buttresses for support. “Fine. Have it your way. Which I suppose is my way. But, this had better work because I don’t want to have to come back here and explain your death to Rose. I don’t have enough Regenerations left to survive her wrath!”

That was a fact. He picked up the broken glasses,

“Let me talk you out of this,” the Doctor pleaded, then, seeing the determination on his face gave a yowl of exasperation. “Then... what? Race you to the end of the Universe?”

He bent back to his work, cursing his middle-aged human eyes. “I’ll settle for the edge of the galaxy.”

“As if you’ve ever *settled* for anything. Don’t start now.”

Chapter Thirteen

Shimmering blue green light danced around the control room as the Time Rotor began to rise and fall, energies surging and splashing like it had before. Like it had when he had made a desperate bid to change what could never be changed. His heart beat hard against his chest and he tried very hard to ignore the beating inside his head. The rest of his pain would have to wait. Amy's last cup of tea before their departure helped.

He rechecked every reading and adjusted the Earpod. Twice. All systems functioning within acceptable parameters. Good. Excellent. Now, carefully, carefully. Silver lights moved rapidly through the circuitry as the *Tardis* prepared to dematerialize.

The Doctor's face appeared on his main screen.

"12, 11. Are you sure about this?"

"Amy asked me the same thing," he said without looking up from the controls.

"7. What did you tell her?"

"I told her we were as sure as we ever are."

"4. Are you ready?"

"Ready!"

"*Geronimo! Allons-y!*" they shouted as first one, then another *Tardis*, dematerialized...

... rematerialized.

And flew.

He snapped open the throttle, accelerating past Jupiter, skimming the rings of Saturn,

tripping lightly along the far-flung reaches of the solar system, pushing on, on, on far beyond the Mutter System. The ship responded to his very thoughts and he felt... joy.

Computations scrolled down every display and he worked his way from one control panel to the next, until at last all was silent save the sound of the Time Rotor's gentle hum. He swallowed deeply as he stepped back, prying his fingers from the Brentford artefact that now capped the zig-zag plotter. Then he grinned, punched the dematerialization circuit again, threw the little ship into reverse, and reappeared just this side of the Earth's single moon, sailing into the sunlight. Proximity alarms rang but he only laughed at the warnings, flicking up a visual scanner to see the other *Tardis* come soaring out from around the moon behind him, joining him at a safe distance in orbit about this, his second home.

"Have yourself a proper little roadster there," the Doctor smiled broadly, then looked serious, "but don't push your luck. Are you sure you don't want to set her down on one of Neptune's moons just to be safe? Ooooh, fine. All systems go for a slow burn and re-entry. I've always wanted to say that."

"Roger that, Houston," he answered back with a grin, preparing to dematerialize again.

The ship shuddered, throwing him to the floor as overloaded circuits throughout the room began to sizzle. He pulled himself up to check the scanners. The Rifts on Earth were diminishing and closing, the weather stabilizing over the northern hemisphere, but he was losing geosynchronous orbit. In minutes he'd be in freefall over—he checked. Belgium. Yes, well, that just figured, didn't it?—the stabilisers were off line, and the Dematerialization Circuit was on the fizz. He checked energy conversion readings, tapping the monitor impatiently. Just a little more *umph* and they would be back to smooth sailing. Neptune was beginning to look attractive. He looked at the scanner again. *No, no, no, no, no!* He was losing altitude rapidly. His finger

hesitated over the override. One touch. One touch and he could force her into the Vortex for a prolonged jump, buying them time as long as she didn't explode. Or implode. Or consume herself into a trans-dimensional bellyache resembling a black hole. If necessary... the thought was horrifying, but if necessary he could hijack her into the Void to prevent any further cataclysm. And he would go with her.

“Uhm, Houston? We've had a problem.”

The com link hissed static in reply. He jiggled the telepathic circuit link leading to the Cloister Room in an attempt to open communications directly between the two ships. Nothing.

“And, apparently, we still do.”

A rumbling vibration deep within the meta-structure rose until the entire ship shook like the west coast of North American during last year's mega-quake. The integrated controls popped and hissed under his fingers as, one by one, the direct links to the ship's organic circuitry began to fail. He scrambled from control panel to control panel, assessing and reassessing the damage. He made adjustments to the neural flow being accessed via the Earpod. Then adjustments to the adjustments. Nothing. Some key component had failed. Again his gaze fell upon the fail safe switch that the Doctor had installed. He gazed up at the latticed crystal column, watching the Time Rotor and spinning gears rotate around one another in the cerulean brilliance.

Once more he struggled to toggle unresponsive controls, but it was of no use. The native circuitry twinkled like fairy lights on an overloaded electrical circuit. Christmas was being cancelled. Deep in the belly of the *Tardis*, the Cloister Bell began once more to toll the peril and he yowled in frustration, at once desperate and angry at his inability to do... *anything*. A searing pitch almost above the threshold of his already heightened auditory senses assailed him then, the deafening keen raising in half step increments until he thought his ear drums might burst. He tore

the Earpod from his ear and threw it to the floor, clamping his hands over his ears in a vain attempt to diminish the sound of the ship's agony. Around him, dozens of organic roundels opened into the space of the control room like flowers, tendrils of living *Tardis* circuitry spilling onto the crystalline surface of the floor. Slowly, hesitantly, as the banshee din lowered in pitch, pink extrusions like a fusion of echinoderm and sentient vines converged on the controls, sweeping along essential connections. Fine, silvery filaments emerged from the glistening tendrils, tapping directly into sizzling cables, attempting to reestablish control over malfunctioning systems.

He stared in wonder, momentarily forgetting that his head felt like it had been struck, again, with a pell mell mallet. It was like a Gallifreyan fairy tale he had heard growing up on the mountain, of the Timeless Ones that had once travelled, unhindered, along the outer edges of space itself, cocooned within their immense, unending shell-like mantles. Lost now, like so much else. Lost to the ravages of Time. And the great desire of men to harness the power of the universe for themselves. Long ago, the predecessors of the people who would christen themselves the Lords of Time, skillfully harnessed *Tardis* technology, mastering the use of the telepathic circuits, replacing the truly alien components with machinery of their own design. In all the wide universe, his ship might be the only one still possessing enough native instinct to assert herself this way. That was something at least.

A dozen instruments became operational at once and he sprang to the console, stumbling over flesh-like creepers, careful to avoid direct contact with the threads of living silver. One of the 3-Dimensional scanners flickered to life, displaying their current trajectory, followed by lines of High Gallifreyan programming code interpreting data, projecting what he already knew to be a grisly outcome, and listing limited options and posited formulas to counteract the inevitable.

The information scrolled down four screens at such a rate that he could scarcely take it all in. One by one the monitors went dark until a final line of complex coordinates appeared on just one. An algorithm of despair.

“Com’on Little Girl, com’on--there must be something else,” he pleaded, pulling at his hair in frustration. He pounded his fists against his already aching skull, turning himself in dizzying circles. “Think, think, think! Something! I don’t want to take you into the Void.”

Someone spoke his name.

Trust me.

He swung back around...

...and then felt it. A gentle caress on his right arm. A tendril of the ship, *his ship*, looped about his elbow, softly brushing toward his outstretched hand. Faster than he could draw breath, hair-like filaments sprouted along the length of the tentacle, penetrating deeply into his skin, attaching to his nerves and muscles like sea silk spun from *Pinna nobilis*. He gasped at the searing pain but held still, fascinated in spite of himself.

They had altered too many under-developed systems to accommodate their own needs. The *Tardis*, still so immature, could not repair them. Could not fully interpret them. But he could. Another tendril wound tenderly around his other arm, and his heart beat wildly against his chest. To his knowledge, no Gallifreyan had undertaken such a thing in eons--and he questioned whether his altered Time Lord DNA would even make it possible--but he was running out of options. And she had spoken his name. He had been too preoccupied with life, with death, with *grief*... to hear it.

The Doctor hailed him from the other ship, and he stepped closer to the monitor, playing with the dials, all the while aware of caressing fingers that were at once both exhilarating and

terrifying.

“The good news is you saved the Earth. Bravo! President Jones has a medal for you. The bad news is your systems have almost all gone critical. She’s going to explode and likely turn this arm of the galaxy into an intergalactic marble scramble in less than 8 minutes. No, six. Seven and half.”

“Possibly, but not here. Not now. I’m overriding the dematerialization circuit. We’re taking a trip.”

“You’re what? Don’t be absurd! You’ve lost too many vital systems. If she explodes there you’ll send cracks through Time and Space. Trust me on that. It is no fun at all. If you tear apart in the Vortex you might be thrown into the Void and that’s one place I can’t come looking for you. No matter how much Amy likes you. Or Rory threatens me. Or Rose... cries.”

“That was the risk,” he said, trying not to look at the silken hairs emerging from the filamentous extrusions entwining him. “We both knew it.”

“But it isn’t necessary,” the Doctor insisted, leaning forward until his entire face filled the screen. “I can adjust her course from here.”

“And do what? Pitch her into a black hole and hope for the best? Not happening, Time Boy. Besides, you can’t.”

He could see the deepening frown on the Doctor’s face as the Time Lord punched buttons in vain, flicking back a silly mop of hair in agitation.

“You disabled the emergency link to your flight controls! Fine. Just, just, just *fine*! Then we’ll do something else clever. Com’on. There are two of us. We have more clever thoughts before breakfast than a hundred people combined have in their entire lives.

“Here’s one. We’ll wrap her in a safety bubble and get her as far from here as possible

before the fireworks begin. Or, we'll wrap the Earth in a safety bubble and hope your *Tardis* bounces off of it without knocking any other planets in the system out of orbit! Hang on. Here's a better one. It's called Abandon Ship. I've almost got a lock on your bio signs--we're pulling you out of there!"

"No!" he grit his teeth against the pain in his left arm as the silken hairs crept, spider like, to access his central nervous system More ganglia brushed against the back of his neck and into his scalp. "I'm going to attempt a direct neural interface. There's no other way. I won't let her die out here."

The Doctor's face lost all colour as the realization of what was actually happening fully dawned.

"You can't *do* that! Those were fairy tales—*mad* fairy tales!"

"You're just jealous," he said, attempting to smile, but suspecting he failed.

"No, I'm not! You don't know what you're doing!"

"No," he agreed, his breath coming harder as his pulse continued to increase. "But she does." He made eye contact with the Doctor. "Tell Rose I'm sorry. Tell her... what you couldn't say before."

He closed down the visual relay and stepped back from the console, raising his arms one last time to watch the spreading byssi, silken thread spun from the very heart of the Time Ship.

Such... exquisite... pain... he gritted his teeth once more against the agony, finally closing his eyes, allowing the blending of his flesh with that of the *Tardis*. The fabric of his life began to unravel as living ice coursed through his body, fused with nerve and sinew, tearing through his cellular structure until... *yes!* In one blinding moment he was one with the ship, his blood whispering the codes the Dematerialization Circuits required. Understanding grew.

Stability was attained. And she swam, *they swam*, into the Time Corridor, racing her sister ship through the Vortex like dolphins in a sea of Time and Space. He opened his eyes briefly, basking in the rushing Time Storm that swirled blue-green through the interior of the ship, playing the resonance harp in the crystal chamber far better than any program might have done.

Well done.... well done...

That voice! Shimmering sapphire light twisted though the Time Rotor's lattice enclosure like moonlight through an arbor of climbing rose vines. He threw back his head and began to laugh, unlocking the memory of what was, what might have been, and what had to be. Then he wept at the unspeakable joy as full Harmony was achieved.

Chapter Fourteen

At first, the Doctor refused to talk to them. Nor would the Time Lord accept any assistance with the controls as the ship was pressed for increased speed. On they raced through the Vortex in pursuit of the other *Tardis*. One that had apparently run amok and stolen its pilot. When pressed, the Doctor told them, in no uncertain terms, to shut up and let him think. A moment later those words were tempered with gushing techno-babble explanations about what could happen within the Vortex if the other *Tardis* was mortally wounded. The words *annihilation* and *The Howling* figured prominently. Neither sounded remotely promising to Rory. Not a heartbeat later they were told to shut up again. After which the Doctor told himself to shut up, following the words with a sound smack to his own face. Mad, Rory thought. Utterly mad. Box or no box. The Doctor was utterly mad. Perhaps they all were.

“No...” the Doctor whispered, riveted by something the Time Lord alone could interpret as screens of looping Gallefreyan code flowed over every monitor. For the briefest moment, a smile played about his lips, only to be tempered by an expression of near horror in grey-green eyes.

“Doctor!” Amy called over the din. “What is it? Is he all right?”

The Doctor looked at her, hard. Rory knew that look. Their world was about to go pear-shaped. Again.

“Amelia Pond, do you trust me?”

“What? Is this really the time for--”

“Do. You. Trust. Me?”

“Yes!” she shouted across the control panel, then repeated it more quietly. “Yes.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me?” Rory asked, gripping the flight console as the ship continued to pitch and rock. “Or doesn’t my opinion matter?”

“Why?” the Doctor asked, flipping switches and mashing buttons. “Has the answer changed? You’ve never completely trusted me. Quite right, too.”

“But--”

“That’s it!” the Doctor cried. “I’m bringing them onboard!”

“Onboard?” Rory gasped, struggling to keep both feet in contact with the floor. “You’re bringing the other *Tardis* inside this one? I thought you said it was dimensionally unstable?”

“Not--any--more!”

And with that the Doctor slapped the final controls and bounded down the stairs. Typically, Amy was off like a flash in pursuit, Jackie Tyler’s West Highland Terrier in pursuit. Rory stared after her. The Doctor was off on a lark and Amy Pond was right behind him. Even now, after so long. After so much. And in spite of a thousand mixed feelings, Rory loved her for it.

They raced after the Doctor, following down endless white corridors that seemed to shift as they ran, as if the *Tardis* itself were creating the shortest possible route. Lights guttered and a gust of air swept past them. Leaves... *leaves*? scattered down the passageway as they pushed open towering doors to reveal a great cathedral of a room and ... the other *Tardis*.

The Doctor pressed a hand against the other ship’s door release. Nothing happened. A second attempt met with the same result. The sonic screwdriver was employed next. Internal mechanisms tumbled like some great, complicated lock, but the door remained closed. Another

sonic blast revealed an access panel beneath the isomorphic touch pad containing an array of Gallifreyan symbols which the Doctor rapidly tapped in a series of codes, none of which worked.

“Come on!” the Time Lord roared, pounding the lot, all semblance of calm ebbing away as Rory and Amy watched, unable to assist.

Rarely had they seen him so angry. So desperate. Amy attempted to make a case against force, citing what they already knew to be the younger ship’s preferential nature, but the Doctor shook her away, kicking the unyielding door savagely. Petunia cowered.

At last, the Time Lord placed both palms against the shell-like plasmic surface, forehead bowed against the outer hull, entreating the ship in low, measured tones to permit them entry. An eternal moment passed before the hatch slid away. Steam and smoke and the smell of electrical fire accosted them. The interior of the Time Ship was barely recognisable from the space in which they had laboured to transform into a functional command hub, wedding circuit boards and a hodge-podge of everyday items to pre-existing onboard systems. The cool, blue light that had illumed the chamber earlier had dimmed, the air choked with fumes Rory could not identify but had no doubt were toxic. Grey-green light cast shadows on the jungle of organic and inorganic circuitry spilling from fractures in the ceiling.

Amy gasped.

A body hung above them, suspended in the tangle of living circuitry.

Though visibly shaken, the Doctor climbed on top of the console, shimmying partway up the lattice, reaching, but unable to touch the man held in the *Tardis*’ strange embrace.

“Please. Please, you must release him. His body can’t withstand this. You know only a Time Lord can. Please. *Please.*”

At once, the silken byssi begin to unfold and withdraw, lowering their part-human

conduit slowly to the floor. Even with crisis centre training, Rory was taken aback. Jon Noble, the man they can come to think of as being as much the Doctor as the Doctor they knew, looked small and fragile, his body now broken and bloody. Seizing on professional training, Rory rushed forward, unsure where to begin to assess the myriad injuries but determined to do something. The man's clothes were shreds of denim and cotton, exposed skin peppered with blisters where the ship's living circuits had connected to flesh and nerve. The Doctor knelt beside him, touching a shoulder first, then gently, with both hands, turned the burned, bruised face toward them. The Time Lord sat back heavily, staring at the blood on his hands.

After a moment, Rory stood slowly and turned to face Amy.

"Do something," she whispered, eyes brimming with tears. "Just, do something."

"Oh, Amy," Rory murmured against her hair, resting a cheek against her head, unwilling to admit that there was nothing to be done. Nothing any of them could do.

"But you can treat him, can't you? Rory? Doctor? Can't you? No... no..." she pushed away and knelt beside the Doctor, gently stroking the handsome, battered face of the man before them. Petunia crept forward on her belly, trembling.

As they held their silent vigil, more of the pale, fleshy tendrils swept up and down along the injured man's body, passing gently over Amy's outstretched hand to caress the fallen man's hair before moving on to entwine the Doctor.

"Yes. Yes, I hear you. Yes, it's me," the Doctor said, voice hushed, head bowed. "No one is supposed to do that. Not even a Time Lord. It was abolished long before even the Dark Times because of what happened... what could happen..." his words trailed off.

"But you could save him. You could save him the way River saved you."

The Doctor slowly shook his head, seemingly preoccupied by the blood on his fingers. "I

can't..."

"Why?" Amy demanded, gripping his arm. "Why can't you? You promised Rose that he would be all right! You went back for him! Won't you even try? River asked if you were worth it. We told her that you were. Isn't he?"

The Doctor turned toward her, slowly shaking his head. Rory could see pain mixed with confusion on the Time Lord's face. "You like him. Why? Why do you like him so much?"

"Of course I like him," she said, tears streaming down her face. "I like *you*, don't I?"

Before the Doctor could reply, a thorny protuberance erupted from one of the otherwise smooth tendrils, drawing blood from the back of the Time Lord's hand.

"Ow! What was that for?" The Doctor clambered to his feet, shaking his hand in evident pain.

Rory pulled Amy back quickly. Petunia ran for the safety of the Cloister Room.

A flicker of energy spread like living fire from the drop of blood, racing along the entire length of the offending ganglia, spreading throughout the tangle of living circuits. A golden shimmer danced across the ceiling like fairy lights on a winter night—stars falling from heaven itself. Dozens of the delicate silver filaments brushed against the dying man's blistered cheeks, and the light began to travel his body, closing his wounds, erasing his bruises, drawing away all evidence of blood. Rory shielded his eyes as the coursing energy grew in intensity, almost blinding them as the wounded man's body twisted and convulsed. Beside them, the Doctor staggered against one of the buttresses, gasping, arms wrapped about himself as if in sympathetic agony.

When he could see clearly again, Rory realized that the large, primary tendrils that had been lying like coiled snakes throughout the room had all but disappeared back into the hidden

depths of roundels which closed up like the petals of flowers. The Doctor laughed nervously, and they all let go pent breath, then stopped. There was no change in the man lying before them. He was still like unto death, his clothing in tatters, his eyes closed. Rory stooped to check his pulse, nearly jumping out of his skin when Jon Noble, *the Doctor*, gasped, a cry parting his lips as his chest heaved, his body twisting a moment in anguish. All at once, he sat up with a mighty shiver, his head bowed forward, dark hair cascading around his bearded face, dancing light scattering like golden water droplets.

They stared as he gave himself a mighty shake, like a wet dog coming out of the rain. He swallowed deeply, then gazed up at the light display along the ceiling. Rory couldn't help but follow his gaze. They all did. It was beautiful. It was like...

“Oh, hello. Is it Christmas?”

“Oh, I should say so,” the Doctor replied with an enormous laugh. Were those tears on his cheek? “And Easter, and New Year's, and your birthday. Better than your birthday. Who counts at our age anyway?”

*

The Doctor switched the monitor off and flopped down between Amy and Rory, propping his long legs up on the railing. They were out of range of Pete's World now, passing not only into the Vortex, but, if the Doctor's calculations were right, back into their own Universe. Home in time for Tea was the promise. Rory would believe it when he didn't see any more zeppelins.

Amy scrolled through the dozens of pictures on her camera phone. She opened one

labelled *Jon Noble* that showed their new friend standing in the warm light of Pete Tyler's orangey, tall and cheeky and ever so much the Doctor. The fledgling *Tardis* loomed like a monolithic nautilus shell in the background.

"Wait--what—" Amy protested when the Doctor took the phone from her and walked away. "Give it back. You'll erase everything."

"No I won't. I'm fixing it," the Time Lord said, bending over the keypad, thumbs tapping away. "There. Better."

Rory leaned over when the mobile was returned to his wife. The caption merely read: *The Doctor*.

"Could he Regenerate?" Rory asked suddenly, forced to make room as the Doctor again wedged between them. "The energy that restored him, it looked like some sort of Regenerative energy."

"It did look that way," the Doctor agreed, but offered nothing more. Oh. It was going to be one of *those* conversations. Rory hoped the *Tardis* didn't tarry in returning them home.

"Well," Amy pressed the point. She slipped her arm around the Doctor's arm and tugged playfully. "Could he?"

The Doctor shrugged in oblique answer.

"*Doctor*. Could he?"

The Doctor smiled that small, sly smile that was so difficult to interpret. At least for Rory. He made a mental note to ask Amy later.

"Let's hope he never finds out."

"Will we see him again?" Amy asked, leaning her head against the Doctor's shoulder.

"Will *you* see him ever again?"

“No. Impossible. Maybe. But highly unlikely, exceedingly dangerous and--”

“And you’d like that wouldn’t you?”

The Doctor gave a dismissive puff of air and stood back up, too busy jiggling controls to answer properly. “What would you say to some tea?”

“Admit it,” Amy said, arms crossed over her chest. She lifted an eyebrow at Rory and gave him her *watch this* face. “You liked him. You thought... he was pretty fantastic.”

“Amelia Pond, do you take me to be so vain as to admire myself?”

Rory and Amy looked at each other and answered in unison. “Yes.”

“Oh, shut up Ponds.”

Chapter Fifteen

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 blue-green light twisting between the latticed structure that housed the Time Rotor Column. The *Tardis* hummed softly, filtering the music of the spheres into a melody he had thought he might never hear again. He inhaled deeply. Something smelled gorgeous. Tea.

“Back among the living are we?” a familiar voice asked gently. “He was right. Ten minutes and a cuppa and you’ll be right as rain. Just in case, he left some bananas and something nasty and green in a glass. Oh. And he said you owe him a teacup.”

“Rose...” he whispered, wishing she were more in focus. Worrying that it was all a dream. A wonderful, horrible dream. “Rose, I’m so sor--”.

She put her fingers to his lips and shook her head. It was time to stop apologizing. It was time to stop seeking forgiveness for something that had never been his fault. She smiled down at him, cupping the side of his face in her hand. He pressed his cheek against her warm fingers and closed his eyes.

“You smell like sheep,” he murmured. “Wet sheep. Wet sheep with *Void Stuff* on their

wool. Hold on a tick. That's my jumper!"

"Is it?" she said mildly. "Hadn't noticed. You weren't wearing it when I put it on."

He sat up slowly, expecting every joint and muscle to scream out in alarm. But... he didn't hurt. Not much. Well, not *that* much. As his eyes focused he took in his surroundings and exhaled a noisy breath. The interior of the *Tardis* looked like a train had run through it. Electrical wiring hung higgledy piggledy from the ceiling, bits and bobs of their hurried modifications littered the floor. He looked around, expecting to see --but no. No. Of course not. Silly of him to even think it.

"He's gone," Rose told him. She sounded a little sad. "Said he hated to dash off, but he had a one-way ticket back and it was time to cash it in."

"He said that?"

"Well, not in so many words. Actually, in twice as many words."

"You... didn't go with him."

She tipped her head sideways, long brown hair spilling around her face. He stared at her. She was more beautiful than the first time he saw her, running scared from animated shop dummies in the basement of a department store.

"Why would I go with him? I have you, don't I?"

"I thought," he let the words go, suddenly feeling exceedingly foolish. Stupid human emotions. He still didn't know what to do with them half the time. "I thought you loved him."

"I do. I always will. But I fell in love with someone else."

When he gave her a blank stare she leaned forward and twirled her fingers into his hair.

"Well aren't we thick," she told him. "*You*. Remember that bit about 'for better or for worse?' There was nothing in there about 'till the return of another Time Lord do we part.'"

“Something happened,” he said, struggling to remember. His skin was crawling and he shivered. At least he wasn’t naked again. Not that being naked was so bad. “I think I died. Then I woke up. But I didn’t Regenerate. I don’t know what--”

She took his hand and pressed it against his chest that he might feel the steady rhythm himself. He pulled his hand away.

“What? *What?* That’s--that’s--impossible!”

He felt with both hands to make sure.

“That was the general consensus,” Rose told him. “I’m told it was an amazing performance, by the way. He said you should audition for Hamlet.”

“But the *Tardis*--”

“Uh-huh.”

“--and I was part of the—“

“Yeah, that’s what he said.”

“And it was glorious, and terrifying, and beautiful. But I died, Rose Tyler, because not even a Time Lord is meant to sing *that* song anymore!”

She raised an eyebrow at him then took his hands in hers and tugged him out of bed.

“Just had to go up there without me, didn’t you? Come on Space Cowboy. He left you a gift.”

He rose stiffly, but the pain in his shoulder and leg were gone. His head... was filled with wonderful things, none of which hurt. The solution as to how to express his theory regarding cross-temporal muon shift rushed into his mind. Oh? Oh! That was brilliant! Why hadn’t he thought of that before? He couldn’t wait to explain it to Rose! Combined with his notes on Trans-Space Thermodynamics it would be a mathematical tour de force. He paused at

the *Tardis* door, suddenly worried that he would be required to present a paper. In a lecture hall. They might even expect him to wear a suit. A slow grin spread over his face. A tall, wooden hat stand had been placed beside the door, and on it hung his long coat. The one he had left in the orangey. Beside it hung a 17th Century feathered cap. He lifted an eyebrow in question.

“No, not that,” Rose laughed at him, pulling him along. “But he left those, too. He said your interior decorating left something to be desired. As did your wardrobe.”

“Did he now,” he said, poking his fingers through the holes in his shirt. He glanced back over his shoulder at the *Tardis* interior. He’d be ages picking up that mess.

They stepped outside into a light dusting of snow. Belatedly he realized he was barefoot. Across the moors the moon was rising above their home. He looked back at the shiny blue police box.

“You’re kidding me--he?--”

“No, no. Not that. That’s the way I found it. Right beside the other one. I guess it was trying to blend in. He said you can adjust the Chameleon Circuit along with everything else.”

“If I want to,” he said, pouting slightly.

“He said you’d say that.”

“Right. So. Back in Scotland? Have you talked to your mum? She’s going to be really cross about the piano and the carpets. Oh—and the toaster. And, uhm, I hope they’ve got a plumber in.

“So, what’s this amazing gift he left? Find the Jeep did he? Don’t tell me it’s another cannon ball or some other misdirected artefact from Earth’s past. Or shoes. I could do with a pair of shoes right about now. You didn’t tell me it was snowing.”

“Honestly, Doctor, I don’t know how Amy and Rory put up with two of you.”

He clamped his mouth shut and drew a deep breath of the November air. He felt his lungs expand and his hearts beat a steady rhythm against his chest.

“So, what is it?” he asked, looking around. Rose’s hand felt warm in his grasp.

“He just said ‘look up.’”

“Look up?”

“Just that,” Rose told him, pointing. “Look up.”

So he did.

A slow smile spread across his face.

The stars had just gotten a whole lot closer.

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