

# Faith Manages

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*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose  
under heaven:*

*A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and  
a time to pluck up that which is planted;*

*A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down,  
and a time to build up;*

*A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and  
a time to dance;*

*A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones  
together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from  
embracing;*

*A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time  
to cast away;*

*A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to be silent, and  
a time to speak;*

*A time to love, and a time to hate; a time to make war, and  
a time to make peace.*

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A wind arose high in a lonely chain of mountains. West it blew, across a cold glacier, down a river valley, across a cold field where the snow was just beginning to melt. It blew down wet rolling hills with green grass and the earliest spring flowers, then played around the eaves of an isolated house before heading west again, stirring the early buds on the trees.

West it blew, across mostly deserted hills and valleys, until it came to a cold beach. There it tossed the blonde hair of a young woman, crying in her mother's arms, before being caught by a wave and blowing on out to sea.

The wind was not the beginning. There are no beginnings to the cycles of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

*Let the Wolf run again on the winds of Time.*

“Captain?”

He looked up to find Tosh standing in the door to his office, clutching a folder to her chest like a shield. “Yes?”

She came into the room hesitantly, pausing before holding out the folder. “It’s... it’s the final list, sir.” She bit her lip. “From London. Just came through.”

He took the folder from her, flipping the corner open with his thumb. So thick. So many dead. “Thank you,” he told her.

Tosh bowed slightly, gave him an awkward half-smile, and turned to go. She paused in the doorway, looking back like she was going to say something, but when he raised an eyebrow in question, she bit her lip and left.

He took a deep breath and forced himself to open the folder. The top sheet was just a title page: “Ghost Invasion: Deceased and Missing (Presumed Deceased) Persons”, and the ministry seal. So they’d come up with a name for it. A nice, neat label. *Humans*.

There was no Lethbridge on the list, and he let out a breath he’d been holding. One person, safe. There was a Smith, Sarah (confirmed deceased), but a second look revealed a date of birth in the late 80s. Not their Sarah-Jane, then. Neither was there a Stewart, Alistair G, just in case they’d missed the hyphenation. Good.

He turned the pages, and then his breath froze in his chest. No.

TYLER, Jacqueline A. DOB 01-02-1967. LAST KNOWN: Canary Wharf (presumed deceased)

TYLER, Rose M. DOB 27-04-1987. LAST KNOWN: Canary Wharf (presumed deceased)

He threw the list across the room, the pages fluttering down in a disorganized pile, and put his head in his hands.

Wait.

His head came up, and he reached frantically for his keyboard. They were probably safe on the Tardis, somewhere off in the universe (or the future), with no idea they'd been declared dead.

Most of the CCTV images from Torchwood Tower had been lost or destroyed, but... if he knew Yvonne... Yes. There! No one had cared about the storage areas, and so their CCTV cameras and data dumps had survived intact. He leaned back, smiling slightly, looking at a familiar police box on the screen.

He hit the rewind, first, watching as a familiar blonde poked a cautious head out of the Tardis before sneaking out, grabbing a lab coat, and exiting the room. Further rewinding only showed the Tardis being delivered.

He fast-forwarded through hours of the Tardis sitting quietly, watching the time stamp advance through the arrival of the Cybermen and subsequent Dalek invasion. One Cyberman methodically searched the room and left, but otherwise it was uneventful. As he reached the time by which the invasion had ended, he slowed the advance, keeping an eagle eye on the entrances to the room.

Nearly an hour later by the time stamp, one of the big double doors swung open, and he hit the key to resume regular play. What on earth had they been doing for an hour? Although, knowing Rose, they'd stopped for chips.

A lone figure entered the storage area, and although he'd never met the man in person, he recognized the latest version of the Doctor. The sheer devastation on the alien's face told Jack everything he needed to know.

"Dammit!" He slammed his fist down on the desk hard enough to make the keyboard jump. "Dammit, not Rose. Why Rose? God, out of the thousands and thousands of people in London, why her?" On the screen, the Doctor leaned against the Tardis doors, head down, for a few seconds before unlocking them and entering. Jack wiped his eyes angrily. "Damn it," he said again, voice breaking, as he watched the Tardis dematerialize.

The first time it happened, she was sitting in one of their weekly meetings, listening to John, director for Technology, explain why they needed to be more careful about the secretaries and gadgets. She couldn't help thinking that anyone who left gadgets with big red buttons that should never, *ever* be pushed lying around in the break room deserved what they got when a secretary got curious. She also thought the secretary probably deserved what he'd got for pushing such a button, and that such problems were probably self-limiting, but they hadn't liked her opinion.

So she was sitting and amusing herself by sketching cavorting pigs and sheep on her notepad, making her assistant have trouble keeping her mirth from showing. She added a long coat to one of the pigs, hearing a noise rather like a snort from Sharon, and capped her pen while she pondered what else she could add to the drawing.

There was a sudden sensation, like falling and whirling and flying all at once, and when she blinked her eyes open (when had she closed them?) the conference room was gone, and she was sitting not on a conference room chair, but instead on a mossy stone wall. All around her stretched rolling green fields, and the nearest one was populated with... sheep. Completely, utterly ordinary-looking sheep.

"As alien abductions go," she told the sheep, "This is one of the strangest I've seen yet. Unless you're the aliens?"

The nearest sheep raised its head to regard her warily and moved off, chewing a mouthful of grass.

"Guess not." She raised her voice. "Hello? Anyone?"

She waited several minutes, but the only reply was in the form of the nearest handful of sheep moving further away from this strange creature sitting on their wall.

"Well." She looked around again. "Blue sky, white clouds, yellow sun. Green grass. Moss." She pinched a bit of it and brought it to her nose, before tasting it curiously. "Yup, moss. Looks like I'm on Earth, anyway."

She swayed, suddenly light-headed, and when her vision cleared, she was back in the conference room. The emergency lights were on and flashing, and the room had been cleared except for a handful of white-suited figures with all sorts of strange Spock toys, waving them all over the room. A nearby one, armed with what looked to her eyes like a hand vacuum, started back as she appeared in the chair he'd been vacuuming.

“Oi!” he called. “She’s back!”

*Torchwood One is under lockdown*, an automated voice said over the intercom. *Please report to your assigned areas and stay calm. Torchwood One is under lockdown. . .*

Another suited figure hurried up and gestured her to her feet. She followed obediently as she was led down the hallways to one of the contamination suites, and rolled her eyes as he and his partner patiently read her instructions to remove her clothing and submit to a medical scan. “I helped write the procedures,” she said to the nearest suited figure as she removed her jacket, first wiping the moss off her fingers on a white, sterilized towel they handed her. “You really don’t need to tell me what to do.”

“Sorry, Ma’am,” the figure replied, and she realized it was Mark, one of her favorite techs. “It’s. . . well, procedure.”

She tried to keep from laughing as the two techs argued over which procedure to follow. “She hasn’t been held hostage,” Mark pointed out “I don’t see why we need to apply that section.”

“Well, it wasn’t pre-approved, either,” his partner Jane argued. “I say better safe than sorry.”

“Remind me when this is over to re-write that bit, yeah?” she said, making both techs jump a little, and Jane giggled.

It was nearly ten in the evening when she was finally cleared to return home, although she’d been asked to show up early the next day for another scan and debriefing. She was just glad they’d decided to let her go home and rest first.

“Hello, Molly,” she said as she let herself in the back entrance.

“Any chance of a snack? I’m famished.”

“Hello, Miss,” Molly replied. “I think Cook put some dinner up for you in the fridge. Would you like me to see?”

“Ta, that’d be great,” she responded, and turned around just in time to get a face full of her mother’s hair. “Mum!”

“Rose!” Her mother hugged her so hard she started worrying about asphyxiation. “Pete called, said you’d disappeared from work, nobody knew where you were! I was so worried!”

“I’m fine, mum,” she said, hugging her mother back. “Really.”

“But what happened, love?” Jackie pulled back and cupped her face. “Where’d you go?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged out of her mother’s grasp. “I’m starving, mum. Let me eat something.”

“Tsk, you’re too skinny already. Come on, then, love.” Her mother pulled her into the dining room. “Molly! Cook left Rose some dinner in the fridge. Could you heat it up please? There’s a girl.”

“She’s already doing it, mum,” Rose said tiredly, sinking into a seat. “I don’t know what happened. Work doesn’t know what happened. I just disappeared, and then I was back.”

“But where’d you *go*?” her mother demanded.

“Some sheep pasture.” She shrugged. “Nothing alien or weird about it. I don’t get it.”

“Oh, love.” Her mum put her arm around her. “Pete and John’ll figure it out. Don’t you worry.”

“Wasn’t going to.” Molly set the food down in front of her, and she picked up her fork. “Ta, Molly. I figure it’s probably just some weird kind of Rift activity we haven’t seen yet. They’ll update the dampers and it’ll be fine.”

“I hope so,” her mum said ominously.

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They hung all sorts of sensors and wires and whatnot all over Torchwood like a kind of demented Christmas decorating spree, complete with flashing red and green lights (in August, which made Rose

giggle every time she thought about it). When nothing happened for a few days, all the tech types scratched their heads (metaphorically, for the most part) and started throwing ideas around about some of the radiation the new stuff was putting out stopping whatever it was.

The folks who monitored the Rifts, meanwhile, went around looking vaguely worried and mostly distracted. When she stopped one of them to ask what was wrong, she got a reply full of words like “trans-dimensional non-Euclidean Hausdorff manifolds” that meant little to her; an attempt to get him to clarify resulted in the tech gibbering and running away, a response she hadn’t gotten since the first year she’d worked there. When she cornered Pete and asked *him*, he told her that they were worried because the Rift was acting weird, but not in a normal Rift-y kind of way, which was the answer she’d been looking to get in the first place.

After a week, everyone had mostly relaxed, and the staff were starting to get back to normal (well, normal for Torchwood, anyway). Mark told her in confidence, though, that he now made sure he had a toothbrush in his briefcase every morning, and Rose started carrying one in her handbag again herself.

This time, she was walking back from the ladies’ loo with Bess. “I don’t know,” Bess was saying in a low voice. “I think Mark’s kind of cute.”

She wrinkled her nose. “If you like them young,” she replied. “I like him, but not... you know, like that. I wish he’d get over me.”

Bess laughed. “Good luck with that.” She pulled out a magazine. “You realize you made the top ten most eligible bachelorettes list for the sixth year running?”

“Oh, God.” She grabbed for the magazine, but Bess held it out of reach. “You’re kidding me.”

“Nope,” Bess said, an evil grin on her face. “You’ve just got to get used to—”

She never did find out what she had to get used to, because between one step and another, the world went sideways and inside out,

and when she put her foot down from where it had been poised in the air, it landed on soft sand.

“What the—” She looked around, turning in a circle. She was standing on a beach, that much she could tell. The sky over the land to her left was beginning to get light—so she was on the west coast of whatever this was. Looking up, she could see the familiar constellations of Cassiopeia and Pegasus, and in the North, the Big and Little Dippers hung low over the water. Again, probably Earth, then.

It was strangely beautiful, standing here in the sand of an unfamiliar coastline, watching the sun rise. She’d nearly forgotten what it was like to get to see this kind of thing—the unfamiliar and beautiful—nearly every day.

The growing light revealed a pile of driftwood just up the beach, and she made her way over to it, brushing it off before sitting down. Nearby, a bird called, and looking up, she saw the silhouettes of bats, returning to their resting places for the day.

“Okay,” she said aloud. “I’m on Earth, on the west coast of something—in the Northern Hemisphere, no less, ‘cause I can see *Polaris*.” Reaching into her bag, she dug out her phone, flipping it open. *Roaming*, said the small screen. “And I have reception, so I can’t be too far out in the wilderness. Or too far in the past, for that matter.”

After a moment, the screen flickered and updated itself, informing her that it was quarter to six in the morning on the 18th of August. “Well, that’s something,” she said. “Same date.” Looking around, she added, “And if this is the west coast of America, it could even be the same time.” Shivering in the gusting wind off the ocean, she selected Pete from her list of contacts, raising her phone to her ear as it dialed.

It rang once, then twice, and just as she was starting to worry that her phone was telling her lies about the date, he picked up. Immediately she could hear the alarm in the background, and his voice said to someone, “It’s her phone. Hang on.”

“Hello?” she said. “Pete?”

“Rose? Honey, is that you?” Pete sounded worried. She could

hear voices in the background, jumbling together. “Shut up a moment,” he said to them. “Where are you? What’s happened?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I think I’m on the west coast of North America somewhere.”

“You’re what? Hang on, honey, I’m going to put you on speakerphone, okay?”

“Okay,” she replied, and there was a rustling noise, after which she could suddenly hear all the voices clamoring. “Yow!”

“Shut up,” Pete’s voice said, and they fell silent. “Now, where did you say you were?”

“I don’t know,” she responded, “But my phone says it’s a little before six in the morning, and I’m sitting on a beach. The sun’s just thinking about rising.”

“I’ll see if I can pin it down from the transmission,” someone said, and she could hear typing.

“Are you okay? Are you in any danger?” someone else asked.

“It’s a bit cold,” she replied, “and I think my shoes will never be the same.” Several people on the other end chuckled. “S’long as I don’t have to sit here for another five or six hours, I think I’ll be all right. Come to think of it, it’ll probably warm up once the sun’s out.”

“Got it,” the person typing said. “She’s... she’s in America. Near the mouth of the Eel River.”

“How the hell did she get there?” someone else asked in the background. “Nearest Rift’s in Santa Cruz.”

“Okay, honey,” Pete said into the phone. “You hang tight, all right? Just stay where you are. There’s a state park road about half a kilometer away. We’re sending someone out to get you.”

“Thanks,” she said gratefully. “Preciate it.”

“Now,” Pete said, voice going serious. “Can you think of anything you did just before this happened? Anything odd? Any strange lights, or noises?”

“Not really,” she said, leaning back against another driftwood log. “I’d just come out of the loo, with Bess—is she all right?”

“She’s fine,” someone called from the background. “Shook up a bit, but all right.”

“Well, we’d just come out of the loo, and we were talking about— just stuff, you know, girl stuff.”

“Okay,” Pete said. “Then what happened?”

“Well, I felt... sort of dizzy, and when I took another step, I felt sand under my feet, and I was here.”

“You got that?” he said, and someone responded affirmatively. “Anything else?”

“Nope,” she responded. “Just... wandered over to some driftwood and checked my phone. Knew I was on Earth ‘cause of the constellations, and figured it was worth a try.”

“Good thinking, honey,” Pete said. “Okay. The car’s on its way. It’ll be there in... looks like about fifty minutes.”

“Great.” She looked around. “Guess I have time to build a sandcastle.” Someone laughed on the other end of the phone. “Did you all get anything on the readouts?”

There was silence, and finally someone said, “Nothing that makes any sense.”

“Rift went wild,” Pete said, sounding unhappy. “But nothing like the techs have seen before.”

“We’re getting the satellites online now,” said a voice that she recognized as being Mark. “We’ve got one that should be over your position in about five minutes, and I’m trying to calibrate it to take closer readings of your location.”

“Great,” she said again. “Do you need me to do anything? Get off the phone, walk to a nice clear location, anything?”

“Nope,” Mark said. “Just sit tight.”

“Okay. Sitting tight it is.” She took off her shoes and put them in her lap, drawing her feet up under her. “How’s that car doing?”

There was a small silence, and then Pete said, “Still forty-five minutes away, sweetheart.”

“Right.” She took her arms out of the sleeves of her suit jacket

and drew it close about her, curling into a ball. “Remind me to keep one of those emergency blankets in my pockets from now on, yeah?”

Pete chuckled dutifully. “Actually, that’s a good idea,” Mark said. “We could make up a little emergency packet, put a transmitter in it... if this happens again, we could find her faster.”

“Next time I might not have service, yeah?” she said. “S a good idea.”

“Do it,” Pete ordered. “Hand them out to all the staff, starting with the top levels. It’s been her twice, now, but I don’t want to take the chance that it’s just coincidence.”

“We should have done something like that a long time ago,” she said ruefully. “Hindsight, though.”

“Yeah,” Pete replied. “We’ve got a satellite on you now, Rose. Nothing unusual... well, that’s odd...”

“What?” she said, sitting upright.

“We’re getting a spike of—”

The phone fizzed out, and the next thing she knew, she was sitting on institutional carpeting, looking at the beige walls of a hallway. . . . *is under lockdown*, said a familiar intercom voice. *Please report to your assigned areas and stay calm. Torchwood One is under lockdown...*

“Hello?” she asked the phone, but it had dropped the call—unsurprising. “Oi!” she called out, closing it and putting it back in her pocket. “Hello?”

She heard running feet, and a pair of their security guards skidded around the corner in front of her, weapons out. Instantly they swung into defensive positions, revealing the smallest possible cross-section to her while training their weapons on her. “We’ve got someone,” one of them said into their com. “Looks like Director Tyler.” He paused. “No, sir, she’s just sitting on the floor. Yes, sir.” They raised their weapons away from her, although they maintained their positions against the wall. “Director,” the same one said. “Someone will be here in a minute.”

“Thanks,” she said, sitting calmly in place. It was nice just to be warm.

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The third time, she had been waiting in line at the cafeteria, when suddenly she found herself standing in an unfamiliar room. Two small Indian children shrieked and dove behind a ratty couch, and a woman’s voice called out in a language she didn’t know.

Carefully—not wanting to scare anyone any more than she already had—she set the cafeteria tray down on top of the television next to her (showing football, although the commentary was also in an unfamiliar language) and dug the emergency kit out by its lanyard around her neck. A quick twist of the top started the transmitter, and a moment later her phone rang.

“Hello,” she said into it.

“Rose,” Pete said. “Are you safe?”

“I think so,” she said carefully. “I’m in someone’s living room, I think. I’m afraid I gave some children a scare. I hope their parents aren’t too upset by strange people appearing in their house.”

“Oh,” he replied. “You’re in Jakarta, just so you know. Hang on.” There was a rustling, and she could hear him talking to someone in the background. “Okay,” he said, coming back on the line. “We’re getting a translator in.”

“Ta,” she said, watching the children peek out from behind the couch. “Hello,” she said to them.

“Hello,” Pete replied, sounding confused.

“Not you,” she said to him. “The children are getting curious.” To them, she said, keeping her words slow and enunciating, “Hello. My name is Rose.”

The smaller one let forth a stream of liquid syllables at her, and she found herself wishing for the Tardis translation circuits. *I haven’t thought about that in ages.* “I’m sorry,” she said sincerely, crouching down to be more at their level. “I don’t speak your language.”

A woman came hurrying into the room, drying her hands on a kitchen towel, saying something in the same liquid speech. Rose stood up, and the woman screamed. Backing out of the room, she kept repeating the same words, and making hand signs at Rose.

“I think,” she said into the phone, “that the woman of the house is trying to exorcise me.” To the woman, she added, “Hello,” with a smile.

Pete laughed tensely. “The translator’s on her way. Try not to start a war, okay?”

“Gotcha,” she said to him, watching the woman watch her from behind a large, heavily ornamented bookcase.

One of the children got bold enough to come out from behind the couch, and tapped her on the wrist. “Yes?” she said to him.

He replied, making shooing motions, and pushing at her. “What was that?” Pete asked.

“I think the children are upset because I’m standing in front of the telly and there’s a match on,” she said, laughing a little. Collecting the tray in one hand and holding the phone in the other, she moved to an unoccupied straight chair and sat down. “Well, I hope I don’t get in trouble for starting my lunch without paying for it.”

“If Dining gets mad at you,” Pete said to her, “I’ll make it right.” The children, meanwhile, had come out from behind the couch, lured by their football programme. The older one was still standing and shooting wary glances at her regularly, but the younger one had apparently accepted the stranger in his living room, and had returned to sitting on the couch, staring intently at the telly.

“Hello,” she said again during a commercial break. “Does anyone want a biscuit?” She held up the confection and broke it into four pieces, eating one and offering the other three around. The younger child nodded and took a piece, and then the older one had to take one to save face.

The mother (she assumed) made a face and said something disapproving, but the children said something in return and ate her of-

ferings. The woman watched warily, but when nothing happened, she ventured out from behind the bookcase and accepted her own piece of biscuit.

“Here’s the translator,” Pete said in her ear.

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*missing material*

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She found herself standing in a quaint little street, slightly-uneven residential buildings towering over her. In a niche formed where two buildings met, a small statue of the Virgin Mary had been propped, flowers strewn about her feet. Her first thought was that she’d landed in continental Europe somewhere; Italy, perhaps.

Then she looked up, and realized two very important facts. First, the sky was green. Second, there were two suns. “Well, not Italy, then,” she said to herself. *If I’m not on Earth, then there’s no point in activating the transmitter and staying put*, she reasoned, and set off down the street.

The first people she passed looked human enough, if you ignored the fact that they were wearing jumpsuits that looked like they’d crawled straight out of a Star Trek episode. “Hello,” she said to a young man. He looked momentarily baffled, but smiled and nodded his head at her anyway. “Friendly, at least,” she commented to herself when he’d passed.

After a couple of minutes, she found an open plaza, complete with some small reptilian flying creatures that seemed to fill the ecological niche of pigeons. “Flying iguanas,” she muttered to herself. “Can’t decide if that’s better or worse than flying rats.”

There was a small fountain in the center of the plaza, with a lip around it; she headed over to sit on it. Without a translation circuit, her chances of figuring out where she was were slim, but she could sit and observe and maybe she’d at least work out where she wasn’t.

*Well, not Earth.* It was a start, at least. *Not San Kaloon—that only had one sun.* Unless this universe was vastly different from the

original in certain respects, in which case her prior knowledge was fair useless.

An old lady ambled into the square, tugging on a leash. Rose didn't pay much attention to her at first, as she was trying to remember whether New Brazil had two or three suns. In fact, her first thought was *I wonder how she got a cat to walk on a leash?*

Then she realized: it was a dog with no nose.

"Oh my God," she said aloud. "It's Barcelona."

"Si," a voice said near her elbow. She turned to find a small, black-haired boy staring at her in fascination. "Es nuva esi?"

She remembered just enough of her language lessons to make sense of the question. She had no idea what they spoke here, but by the evidence, it was some sort of patois of Romance languages. "Si," she responded after a moment, nodding for emphasis.

"Es pardu? Estan adde?" She blinked at him blankly, and he said after a moment, speaking the words slowly, "Losssta? Nid hal-pa?"

"Non," she responded, shaking her head and wondering how to explain. After a moment, she simply said, "I'm waiting for a friend. Attend un ami. Amigo."

He frowned, then nodded, a smile breaking out. "Mi paro as un shoup alredor il angó." He pointed down an alley, making a gesture of turning left. "Vinda sa estiena adde."

"Thank you," she said, smiling back at him as she recognized the word for 'help' from before, and guessing he was telling her how to find it. "Gracias. Merci."

He looked confused again for a moment, then nodded and darted off into the alley.

She sat and watched the people for a while as they meandered to and from the small square. A small child—she couldn't tell whether it was male or female, in its jumpsuit and unisex haircut—and its mother approached the fountain; the mother sat down near Rose and smiled at her. Rose smiled back, but the woman's attention was quickly captured by her child, who was jumping up and down and demanding something

from the woman's bag.

The woman said something back, causing the child to calm slightly and lower its voice, and then dug a small, pink box out of the bag. She handed it over to the child, who opened the sliding top; Rose could see from where she was sitting that it was decorated with bright cartoon figures. Inside the box was some sort of brown substance, and the child immediately dug its hand in and grabbed out a handful.

This odd behavior became instantly clear when the child threw the handful down on the paving stones, and the flying iguanas swooped down on it. "Feeding the pigeons," she commented to herself, laughing a little. "Humans really don't change that much, do they? I'll have to tell—"

She cut herself off, realizing that in the moment, she'd forgotten that she was waiting for no friend. He wasn't going to come striding around one of the corners, his coat flapping in the breeze. He wouldn't laugh with her at the novelty and familiarity of feeding the flying lizards. And if she got up, and wandered the back alleys, she wouldn't find a big blue box waiting to take her home.

Her breath caught, and she held back tears with some effort. It had been years since she'd forgotten where she was like that; she'd let herself believe the pain had started to fade. *It hasn't*, she realized. *I'd just forgotten how bad it is, that's all.*

In some small way, it made her feel better, and she scrubbed her eyes with the back of one hand. *I'll get through this*, she vowed. *He'd want me to. He'd be proud of me, if he were here, and I'll do it for him.*

An unfamiliar smell caught her nose, and she looked up to find the child standing before her, offering her a handful of the brown stuff with a serious expression. Laughing, she accepted it, thanking the child earnestly, then threw it on the ground for the lizards, who came swooping around her feet, climbing over her shoes to get the choicest bits.

The child ran back to its mother, babbling in that almost-familiar patois; Rose looked up to meet the mother's eyes as she leaned down to let the lizards clean the last of the brown stuff (which was oddly sticky; she decided she really didn't want to know what was in it) off her hands. The woman nodded to her, and she nodded back—

—and found herself falling over sideways onto her office floor, the lip of the fountain having vanished from under her.

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By the third or fourth time she'd wound up on an alien planet, she'd started getting the hang of it again. The initial adrenaline rush as she tried to decide if anything would try to eat her; the excitement of getting to see something entirely new; the mystery of what would be around the next corner or over the next hill.

The fifth planet she visited had a beautiful deep magenta sky with a small host of moons, visible in the sky as the bright white sun set. The portion she landed on appeared to be nothing but rolling fields, filled with fronds, each bearing a large white bloom she'd call a flower if they were on Earth. Experimentally she reached down and picked one; when nothing untoward happened, she picked a whole bouquet. "I don't know if you'll come home with me," she said to it. "But if you do, Mum'll love you." Then she laughed at herself. "God, listen to me. I've started talking to flowers. Now I know I'm going barmy."

Of course, Xenobiology confiscated them as soon as she got back. But it was worth a try—and now she knew she could carry things back, which was both intriguing and a little disturbing.

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*missing material*

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"Jack?"

The voice in his earpiece sounded uncertain, and he frowned. It look a lot to rattle Ianto Jones. "What is it, Ianto?" he asked. Across the small pub table, Owen gave him a sharp look.

“It’s . . . there’s a woman here, sir.” Ianto paused, and then Jack heard the sound change as Ianto left the public part of the Information Centre. “Sir, she seems to have appeared dressed in a nightdress. When she arrived, she was shivering and blue.”

“Appeared? Shit.” He sighed. “A Rift traveler?”

“Seems likely, sir.” Ianto paused again. “She recognized me. Seemed glad to see me. Then asked if this was Torchwood Two.”

He caught the faint emphasis on the numeral and swore again. “Shit. Okay, Ianto. I’m about three minutes away; I’ll be there as fast as I can. *Don’t* ask her anything else. Just make her comfortable.”

There was a pause. “Yes, sir,” Ianto said finally, then clicked off.

He stood up, and Gwen followed suit. “If you’ve got a woman Rift victim,” she said firmly, “I’m coming with you.”

Owen and Tosh glanced at each other, and Owen started to stand. Jack waved him back down. “You stay here.” More people, and the threat of paradox increased. He was willing to let Gwen come, but only because the woman might respond to a female better.

Tosh dug out her laptop, setting it on the table. “I’ll start the monitoring routines from here.”

“Good,” Jack said. “Come on, Gwen.”

He set a pace that she had to almost run to match. “Who is she, Jack?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said darkly.

“You don’t—” she broke off. “Is she from the future?”

“Think so.” He gave her a stern look. “*Don’t* ask her anything, Gwen, not without my okay.”

“Why not?” she wanted to know.

“Paradox,” he answered shortly. “I think she’s from the near future, which makes interacting with her at all hideously dangerous. Trust me, you don’t want to see the results if we cause a paradox.”

She paled a little and put extra energy into keeping up with him. Shortly they were swinging down the staircase from the Plass.

Jack pulled open the doors to the Centre, eyes fixed on the blanked figure huddled on a chair. Peripherally he was aware of Ianto hovering in the background, watching them worriedly.

The woman looked up, and he froze so abruptly that Gwen ran into his back. *No—it can't be—* was his first thought, and then he corrected himself. No, unfortunately, it was all *too* possible. *God, this complicates things.*

By the way she was staring at him, she recognized him too. He tensed; somehow he had to interact with her without letting on that something was wrong. How far was Canary Wharf in her future? And *where* was the Doctor? But part of him was rejoicing at the chance he'd been given—an opportunity, so rare, to say a proper goodbye to her. Even if she didn't know it.

She spoke up, snapping him out of his thoughts. “I think you should know,” she said carefully, “that I think I'm from a parallel universe.” She smiled at him. “Rose Tyler, Director of Alien Relations, Torchwood Institute.”

No. Not his Rose, then. He tried to hide his disappointment behind a smile for her. Whoever this Rose Tyler was, he had to believe she was still as amazing as the Rose he'd known, and she deserved—well, not his disappointment in her not being who he'd hoped. “Jack Harkness, Captain, Torchwood Three.”

She blinked. “Not Torchwood Two?”

He shook his head. “That's Glasgow.”

“Oh.” She grinned, and his heart turned over. “That's Torchwood Outpost Five, where I come from.” Her eyes narrowed, looking over his face. He realized, now that he was looking closely, he could see that she was older than his Rose had been, and her hair was darker. He wondered if it was her natural color. “So, then. Are you still a Time Agent, or is this some sort of a long con?”

He blinked, wondering where and how she'd met him in her universe, and was distantly aware of Ianto and Gwen watching in fascination. “Neither, actually,” he said after a moment. “That's all behind

me now.”

“Hm.” She nodded, still eyeing him. He wondered if she believed him, and found himself wondering how he’d try to con Torchwood, if he still did that sort of thing. He could only imagine what she thought.

They stared at each other for a minute before Ianto broke the tableau by handing Rose a hot mug of tea, taking her empty one back. “Thanks, Ianto,” she said absently.

Jack shook himself. “We’ll get you a place to stay tonight,” he said quietly, “and some clean clothes and things.” He shot a look at Gwen, who hurried off into the Hub. “Tomorrow we can worry about finding you a place and a job here.”

“Oh,” she said, looking back up at him. “Ow. That’s hot. Um, I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

He frowned. “Why not?”

She shook her head, not in negation, but in a gesture that said ‘it’s hard to explain’. “We’ve, um, been having some trouble. I’ve been popping about the universe, like a sort of . . . demented Carmen Sandiego.” He stared at her, and she went on, “If I don’t disappear in another . . . oh, six to ten hours, then we’ll know I’m stuck here.”

He was impressed by how calm she seemed at the prospect. “All right.” He looked up as Gwen reappeared, carrying a bundle of clothing. “This is Gwen Cooper, one of my agents, and you’ve already met Ianto Jones.” She nodded. “Why don’t you go get dressed? Gwen will show you where you can change.”

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When she reappeared, he had another moment where all he saw was his Rose. Something about the baggy sweats Gwen had found made her look younger, and he had to turn away and blink furiously.

“Jack?” He turned back around to find her looking at him in concern. “She’s dead, isn’t she?” Rose said softly. “Your Rose, I mean.”

He nodded. “Almost two years ago, now.”

Her face softened. “I’m sorry.”

He couldn’t help asking, even though he knew he shouldn’t. “What about your Jack?”

She shook her head, face creasing in pain, and he knew the answer before she gave it. “He’s dead, too.”

He gestured her inside the lift, hitting the button to send it down to the Hub. “How’d you meet him?”

“Well, I was traveling with a friend,” she said, leaning against the wall. He suppressed a smile—even in another universe, Rose was still a traveler. It seemed *right*, somehow. “He’d wandered off, and I was just hanging around waiting for him to show up, when y—when I ran into the other Jack.” She grinned. “Actually, I’m afraid I sort of dropped in on him by accident. One thing led to another, and he ended up staying with us for—a while.”

He grinned. That was him, all right. “What happened?”

The lift let them out, and she followed him into the corridor. “He stuck around, and... he tried to help us save the world from yet another invasion,” she answered him quietly. “They got him just as we figured out how to drive them off.” Her lips pursed in remembered pain, and he couldn’t help wrapping an arm around her as he keyed in the combination to open the door to the Hub. “It’s been years, and I still miss him.” She looked up at him. “What about you? What happened to your Rose?”

The door opened, saving him from having to answer immediately. “This is what we call the Hub,” he said, ushering her through. “We’ve got a rift in time and space running through here, and most of this equipment is to help us keep an eye on it.”

She nodded. “We’ve got one here too, although in my universe, Ianto’s in charge.” She paused, then frowned. “Or rather, will be in a few years. I’m a little ahead of you—it’s 2019 where I’m from.”

His eyebrows went up. “Don’t say too much,” he cautioned.

“I know,” she told him. “But I don’t think there’s much to worry about. I suspect most of the important bits are different—do

you even have a President, for example?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Prime Minister.”

“Exactly.” She looked around. “Well, hello gorgeous.” He looked up to find Myfanwy watching her curiously. “What’s her name, here?”

“Myfanwy.” He smiled, watching her coo at the pterodactyl. “Tanto named her.”

She laughed. “He wanted to rename her when he took over. I should have let him. She’s ‘Sally’ where I come from.” She looked back at him. “You never did answer my question.”

He led her to his office, gesturing her into a seat before sitting himself, turning half away to look at the wall, rather than watch this woman who was and was not his Rose Tyler. “She...” he paused, trying to figure out how to say it. “There was a battle, at Torchwood London. A whole bunch of... of monsters came through a rift from another universe.” It had taken him nearly a year to piece this much together. “She helped... a friend of mine... close it down and send them back, but she died doing it.”

There was complete and utter silence, and he glanced over worriedly to find her staring at him, an expression of sheer disbelief and raw hope on her face. “Jack,” she whispered. “This... friend of yours. Was... was he into... brown pinstripes?”

His eyes widened until he was staring at her in equal disbelief. “So I hear,” he said, equally softly. “When I knew him, he was more of the leather and jeans type.”

Her face slowly transformed into a wide smile. “Oh, Jack. It’s me.” He stared at her, and she went on, “We sucked all the Cybermen and Daleks into the Void.” Her smile fell slightly. “I nearly got sucked in too—but Pete from the other universe saved me. I’ve been trapped there for nearly ten years.”

“Rose,” he said hoarsely, rising and making his way around to her. He couldn’t take his eyes off her; he felt his thigh collide painfully with the corner of his desk, but couldn’t bring himself to care. “Oh,

Rose. I thought you were dead.” She stood as he approached, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly. “I saw your name on the lists, and I thought. . . .”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered in his ear. “I don’t dare hug you back.” She rubbed her forehead against his shoulder. “I don’t want to pull you back with me.”

He didn’t care. Rose was alive and well and in his arms, and for that moment, nothing else mattered. His eyes filled up, and he had to try twice before he found his voice. “Does—does the Doctor know?” In his mind’s eye, he saw the image of the Doctor leaning against the Tardis, his face the shell of a shattered man inside.

She nodded. “He managed to find a way to say goodbye, later.” She blinked rapidly, scattering teardrops across his coat shoulder. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were alive.”

He pulled back, holding her shoulders. “He didn’t tell you?”

She shook her head. “When I asked, he made some flippant comment, and I figured he didn’t want to tell me you were dead.” Her eyes misted over again. “Oh, Jack. I’m so sorry.”

He hugged her again, then released her and sat down on the edge of his desk. “It’s all right, love. Now, what’s this about popping about? Can I help?”

She sighed, burying her hands in the over-large sleeves of her sweatshirt. “It started about a year ago—at first it was pretty rare, and I didn’t go far. The first time, I was in a meeting, and then suddenly I was in Scotland, sitting on a stone wall staring at sheep. After a few minutes, I reappeared back in my chair where I’d come from. A little over a week later, it was the west coast of America for about twenty minutes. Then Jakarta, for almost an hour.” She sat back down in the chair, looking tired. “Then I started popping to other planets, other galaxies. . . that was all right, mostly. It was when I started popping around in time that it got stressful.” She rubbed her forehead with one hand. “I never appreciated how hard he worked to find good places to go, you know? I was constantly worrying about

bacterial cross-contamination, paradoxes, everything.”

“Oh, Rose.” He rubbed her shoulder, and she leaned her head on his hand.

“Anyway,” she went on after a moment, “it got to the point where I was spending almost as much time elsewhere as... in my own time and place. We’d thought we’d found a working damper, something that’d slow it down—I didn’t pop anywhere for five days, and I was just starting to relax.” He could hear her voice starting to crack, and wondered just how much strain she’d been under. “And now this.” She looked up at him. “God, Jack, please tell me you know what’s going on.”

He pursed his lips, hating having to deny her plea. “I’m sorry, Rose. I’ve never heard of anything like this.” Her face fell, and he rubbed her shoulder again. “I assume your Torchwood is working on the problem.”

She nodded tiredly. “It’s the top priority of the technical team, and they’ve got everywhere I go absolutely festooned with sensors and wires and God knows what all.” She shook her head. “Normally I’ve got stuff with me, too, but—I popped just as I was changing.” She shot him a quick, suspicious look, and smacked him lightly with the back of her hand when she caught him smirking. “I guess some things don’t change.”

“Can you read a flash drive, there?” he asked, standing up again. “I can give you one with all our Rift readings for the last month. I’m sorry, Rose—I don’t know what else I can do to help.”

She looked up at him, nodding. “That’d be great, thanks.” She rubbed her forehead again. “I’ve got a transmitter I usually wear—sometimes I wind up in the same place several times. Would you mind...?”

“I can get our equipment to watch for it,” he said, sitting down and tapping on his keyboard. “If you wind up here again, we’ll come get you.”

She smiled. “Thanks, Jack.” She gave him the frequency and

code, and added, “It’s got a date stamp, my universe’s time. Just in case I end up crossing timelines or something.”

He nodded, then handed her a flash drive. “Here’s this for you. I’ve put everything we’ve got on it.” She pocketed it and he sighed. “I hope it helps.”

“Every little bit helps.” She looked at him silently for a moment. “Thank you, Jack.”

He came back around the desk and sat on it again, then pulled her back into his arms, tucking her head under his chin. “I wish I could do more, Rose. I’m sorry.” He felt her lean against him. “I sent Tosh a message. She’s bringing some food back for you.”

“Thank you,” she said into his collar. “I’m sorry for just appearing out of the blue like this. I’m sure I ruined your evening.”

“Never,” he told her forcefully. “I’m so glad you appeared, even if I never see you again.” He kissed the top of her head. “Do you—I have a few ways, I might be able to get a message to. . . to *him*, if you want.”

She was silent for a minute, and he waited. “Could you. . . could you tell him,” she said slowly, “that. . . that I miss him, but I have a fantastic life? And. . . and that I meant what I said on the beach.”

He nodded, thinking that he might add a few messages of his own. Just in case she ever came back. “I will. I can’t promise he’ll get it, mind.” She nodded, and he changed the subject. “So, tell me about your job. Alien relations?”

He’d infused the title with all the innuendo he could manage, and was delighted when she laughed. “We’ve got four Rifts in Britain alone,” she said after a minute, “and then six more known ones across the world. On top of that, we’ve made first contact with a handful of spacefaring species, now.” She sat up straighter, and he released her. “I handle both the first contact situations and the more mundane, day-to-day problems of helping the ones who fall through the Rifts make the transition to living peacefully with humans.” She was quiet for a minute. “And I. . . I make sure the ones who can’t are. . . taken care

of.”

He nodded. “Sounds like a busy job,” he commented. “Just this one rift keeps us hopping.”

She grinned. “Oh, it is. There’s several thousand people working for my division, across the globe, and we just opened an outpost on the Moon too.” He couldn’t help noticing how happy she sounded when she talked about her job, and smiled back at her. “It’s our first project with joint living from the get-go. It’s really Technology’s baby—a combination power-generation facility and early warning post—but us and HR have our fingers all over it too.”

“Sounds fascinating,” he said, meaning it. “We do a little of that, here, but nowhere near that scale.” He had trouble imagining it—an early twenty-first century Earth, living in relative harmony with aliens.

“We didn’t start that big, of course,” she said, leaning back in her chair and getting a far-away look in her eyes. “They were—a lot like our Torchwood London, here, when I first joined. Pete—that’s my stepdad; he’s dead here, but he lived there, and he and mum married. We all... almost all ended up over there, mum and Mickey and me. Their Jackie and Ricky—that was his name there—were dead, and I’d never even been born, so...” She shook her head. “Anyway, Pete had sort of taken Torchwood over, though, and he forced them to listen to me. I started AR with a team of three, including myself.” She focused back on him, smiling again. “The first month we were a team, we managed to intercede and defuse what was rapidly becoming a hostage crisis when I realized the alien in question didn’t use verbal language at all—in fact, it turned out they had no sense of hearing. He’s a sought-after landscape painter, now. Anyway, after that, they respected me, and the rest... is history, as they say.”

“I’m impressed,” he said, meaning it.

“How’d you wind up here?” she asked, looking up at him. “What happened? How’d you survive?”

He stiffened, swallowing and turning away a little. “I don’t

know,” he said frankly. “I... a Dalek shot me, Rose, point-blank. I was sure I was dead. But then I woke up to hear the Tardis leaving.” Her eyes widened. “I have no idea how I survived.”

She shook her head slowly. “The Doctor never did tell me what happened there, not a straight answer anyway.” A small frown crept onto her face. “I don’t remember much of it, and he wouldn’t talk about it.” Her face creased. “I remember arguing with the Tardis, demanding that she take me back... and then it all goes sort of blurry, and the next thing I remember clearly is waking up on the floor to find him about to regenerate.”

“Regenerate?” he asked, and she nodded. “Is that when he changed his face?”

“He changed more than that,” she answered him. “It’s a Time Lord thing. Apparently when he’s about to die, he can sort of change himself instead.” She frowned again. “I wonder why he left you behind.”

He felt his stomach drop out from under him. “It’s true, then? He’s really a Time Lord?”

She nodded. “Yup.”

“I thought they were a legend,” he admitted. “I knew he was an alien, but I didn’t think... anyway. I spent a while there, helping them re-build the news stations, and then I tried to come back to this time. I ended up overshooting—” She giggled, and he smiled. “—and I wound up just about the turn of the last century. Eventually I found out Torchwood was also keeping an eye out for the Doctor, and I started working here.” He spread his arms. “Been here ever since.”

She frowned. “But—do fifty-first century humans live longer, then?”

He’d forgotten how quick she was. “No,” he admitted, taking a deep breath. “I don’t know what happened on the Gamestation, Rose, but—I can’t die. Not properly, anyway.” She stared at him, and he shrugged. “I just come back.”

“Oh, Jack,” she said. “I’m sorry. I wish I’d known you were

here.”

He smiled at her. “I thought about contacting you again,” he said, “but I wasn’t sure when your timeline and mine crossed, and I never could track you two down before you disappeared again. And then—” He broke off.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “Then. Oh, Jack.”

“S’okay,” he reassured her, and then they both looked up as Tosh entered bearing a pair of large bags.

“Sorry it took so long,” she said apologetically, glancing between them. “I brought a selection—wasn’t sure what you’d like. Jack, I also brought the Rift readings—they’re a bit weird, I think you might want to take a look at them.”

“Give them here,” he said, suddenly all business. “Rose, this is Toshiko Sato, the technical whiz of my team. Tosh, this is Rose Tyler. She’s been trapped in a parallel world for—a while, and she works for Torchwood there.” He took the flash drive Tosh handed him and put it in his computer, typing rapidly and frowning at the screen.

Tosh held out a hand. “Pleased to meet you,” she said politely.

“I’m sorry,” Rose said apologetically. “I can’t shake hands, but it’s a pleasure.” She smiled at the other woman. “Thank you for bringing food. I’m absolutely starving, and the sugar in the tea is wearing off.”

Tosh looked taken aback for a moment, then recovered and smiled back. “Not a problem. I hope you like Chinese?”

“As long as it isn’t fish,” Rose replied. “I had a bad experience a few years back, and—well, it’s a long story.” She grinned. “Come on, let’s leave Jack to his jiggery-pokery. I thought I saw a table out there we could put the food out on. I bet Gwen and Ianto are hungry too, and I’m never going to be able to eat all that.”

Jack looked up. “I’ll be out in a minute, Rose,” he said. “Tosh, I sent you mail—if you could look at it sometime tonight, I’d appreciate it.”

“Yes, sir,” Tosh replied, picking up the bags again. Rose held

the door for her, and the two went out.

When Jack joined them a few minutes later, the five of them—Owen having returned with Tosh—were sitting around the conference table eating and laughing. “So there I was,” Rose said, laughing herself. “Limping, half my shirt gone, and covered from head to toe in green goo! And guess what he says?”

“What?” asked Gwen, eyes wide.

“Well, that was easy.’ I could have shot him right there!” They all laughed, and Rose grinned. “The next day, though, I found a new shirt on my desk when I came in, so I forgave him. Mostly.”

“That’s so cute,” Tosh opined.

“Is this a private party,” Jack asked, grinning at Rose, “or can anybody join?”

“Nope,” she said cheerfully. “Sorry, by invitation only. You’ll have to come back later.”

“Aww,” he whined deliberately. “But I brought you a present.” He held out another flash drive. “Latest readings.”

“Oh, okay.” She took it from him and grinned. “I guess we can make an exception for you.”

The other members of his team were doing their best not to stare, he could see, and couldn’t help thinking that this would give them something to mull over for weeks. He sat down and snagged a half-full container. “So, who’s this we were telling stories about?”

“Mark,” she answered him. “He’s one of the best techies we’ve got, but he started under me, before Mickey stole him away.”

“Mickey?” he said in disbelief. “The idiot?”

“That’s the one,” she said, grinning again. “Nobody’s called him that in years, now, though. He’s head of Computer Technology, second to John, our Director for Technology.”

He leaned back, shaking his head. “How things change.”

“Yeah.” She still smiled, but it went sad and lopsided before firming again. “They offered him the post of director, but he wouldn’t take it. Said he wouldn’t get to play with nearly as many cool toys.”

She glanced around the table. “So what’ve you lot been up to?”

“Well,” Jack said after a moment. “Have they told you about Tosh getting to visit 1941?”

“1941?” She stared at him in disbelief. “You’re kidding, right?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Tosh and I ended up stranded there for several hours before Gwen and Owen figured out how to get us back.”

She leaned forwards, eyes glancing between them curiously. “How’d that happen?”

He took a big bite of his chicken, aware of Tosh glancing at him. “Well, there were these reports of music coming from this abandoned hall. Tosh went to check it out, and. . .”

They stayed there, telling stories, until nearly midnight. Owen had, amazingly enough, kept his tongue mostly in check, although Jack suspected it had to do with the way he watched Rose with thinly-veiled fascination. Jack had caught himself getting territorial more than once—unusual, for him—and had to keep reining himself in. Who knew? Maybe she’d found someone, back in the other universe. All he knew was that if he only had a few hours with her, he wanted to make them good ones.

“. . .but everyone’s stuck because of the roadblocks,” Tosh was saying. “I’m the only one there who knows enough medical terminology to fake it, and so they shove me in a white coat and stick me in the lab with someone talking me through the procedures on the phone. I’m terrified, of course, I’ve only been working for Torchwood for two weeks and here I am trying to do a critical medical analysis by proxy.” She sipped her drink—Jack had broken out his stash for the occasion—and gestured with the other hand. “I finally get done, and I’m just sitting down trying to get myself together. Then I start hearing these weird noises—banging, like someone’s trying to get out of the morgue drawers.” She gestured with one hand. “I creep up to it, and it’s the drawer with the alien! Of course, I’m terrified. Finally, I get the courage to open the door—and *foom*, the alien shoots past me faster

than you can say ‘boo’. I screamed so hard—the thing was dead, I swear, dead.”

Jack was watching Rose, her head propped up on her chin, sipping her drink. The corners of her mouth kept twitching, but when Tosh glanced over at her, she nodded with wide eyes.

“So anyway, I’m huddling in the corner, absolutely terrified. Then in bursts this guy in a battered leather jacket, ahead of a pack of soldiers, giving orders like he owns the place. I’m terrified because I’ve never even *seen* a live alien before, the soldiers are all freaked out, and what does he do? He gets down on his hands and knees and tries to *reassure* the thing!”

Jack and Rose glanced at each other, and even if he hadn’t heard the story from Yvonne and his UNIT contacts, Rose’s carefully sober expression would have told him exactly who the ‘guy in a leather jacket’ had been. After a moment, Rose managed to say with a straight face, “I’ve heard of him. He’s a bit mad, that one.”

“No kidding,” Tosh said with a sigh. “Cute, though. Anyway, the alien ran away, and he followed it down the corridor. But before he could get to it, it ran into some soldiers, who shot it. And he *yelled* at them, for shooting an alien running towards them, saying it was only *scared*.” She shook her head. “Then he tells me it’s not a real alien, just something someone stitched together. My boss was furious for weeks with me for missing that.”

“S’okay,” Rose said. “I heard they used alien technology to do it. You couldn’t have known.”

“That’s what he said, but my boss didn’t believe me. Well, anyway,” Tosh went on, “my boss is ripping me a new one, when this soldier runs in and tells me to run for my life. I follow him out of the building, and he hauls me behind one of their trucks and shoves me to the ground. I’m just about to demand to know what the *hell* is going on, when there’s this huge boom, and everything shakes like mad. They finally let me stand up, and there’s this huge cloud of smoke rising from the direction of Downing Street. Turns out, someone blew

the entire building up.” She sighed again. “And that was my first real assignment. A fake alien, and Downing Street blowing up.”

They were all silent for a moment, although Rose’s mouth kept twitching. “I heard about that,” she said after a minute. “Some sort of missile, wasn’t it?”

Tosh nodded. “That’s what the inquiry said. Launched from a United Nations nuclear submarine.” They were all silent for a while, and then she added, “Okay, who’s next?”

“Well,” Ianto said slowly, “my first real outing wasn’t nearly as exciting for everyone else, but—”

They never did hear what Ianto had thought of his first outing, as there was a brief gust of wind, and Rose disappeared. Tosh and Jack leapt to their feet, and Owen put his hand on his firearm. Gwen recoiled, nearly knocking her chair over.

“Sorry,” Jack said after a moment. “She’d warned me that might happen. I should have warned you all.” They stared at him, and he sighed, sitting back down. “She’s been stuck in an alternate universe, and for the last year has been popping around the universes, apparently.” He looked around. “Their Torchwood has no idea what’s going on. I was hoping you all could help me figure it out—in case she ever comes back.”

Tosh sat back down shakily. “Well,” she began slowly, clearly still regaining her mental balance. “The Rift patterns when she arrived suggest the formation of a harmonic in the manifold mapping. . .”

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*missing material*

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*test scene!*

“Ugh. Ow.”

The Doctor said something that the Tardis declined to translate, and she looked up from her knitting. “Are you quite all right, Doctor?”

“Yep,” he said after a moment, his voice sounding slightly strained. The one shoe she could see poking out from under the deck grille kicked

once, and he grunted again. “Just hit myself on the hand with the—ow. The housing for the fluid links.”

“Well, what’d you do that for?” she asked him mildly.

He chuckled, the sound changing as he slowly re-appeared, his head finally bobbing up. “Well, it looks like the—Barbara, what *are* you doing?”

“Knitting,” she replied, wondering if he’d ever actually seen anyone do it.

“You’re—why are you knitting?” He stared at her as if she’d lost her mind. The effect of his stare was spoiled, slightly, by the smear of grease right across his nose.

“Because I like doing it,” she told him, turning and starting a new row. “Did you find the problem?”

“Yep,” he said, sounding satisfied. “The fluid transcoupling needs a new viscoelastic pseudosprocket.”

She nodded. “Do we have one?”

He paused, looking a bit bemused. She looked up at him and raised an eyebrow, and he ran one hand through his hair. The grease this transferred made it form into small spikes, and she bit back the urge to giggle. “I—yes, I think we do. I’m almost sure we do. Somewhere. Maybe. Barbara—”

She looked up again from where she had been frowning at a problematic slip-slip-knit stitch. “Yes?”

“I told you, I don’t do domestic, right?”

“That’s fine,” she told him calmly, going back to her knitting. “I do.”

His eyebrows contorted for a few moments before settling on a very confused expression, and he opened his mouth a few times before saying, sounding even more confused, “I’m going to go look for that pseudosprocket. I think it was in the spare parts bin. Maybe,” and retreating out of the console room.

She laughed. “Man-eating aliens? No problem. Trapped in a doomed ship by an insane computer AI? I think the screwdriver has a

setting for that. But knitting? Oh no. Can't handle that. The last of the Time Lords, brought low by a half-finished jumper."

"Oi," his voice called faintly. "I heard that."

She laughed again, stretching her feet out and resting them just on the edge of the console. "He's a silly one," she commented to the Tardis. "How on earth have you put up with him for all these years?"

The Tardis didn't reply, but she wasn't really expecting it to.

She fell back into a rhythm with her knitting, letting her mind drift in a half-attentive state, idly contemplating what, exactly, a viscoelastic gear might look like. Eventually her mind wandered off into thinking about fluid dynamics and stochastic models, and whether the Tardis had a model for the dynamics of the Vortex. She'd have to ask the Doctor at some point.

The phone rang. She jumped about a foot, dropped two stitches, and swore under her breath. "I didn't even know we *had* a phone," she commented as she levered herself up and went looking for it. She followed the sounds of the rings to the base of the console pedestal, and finally located a small door which, when opened, revealed a very plain, old-fashioned white phone.

She contemplated it for a moment before lifting the receiver. "Hello?" she said into it.

"Hello," a female voice said back, sounding a touch relieved. "Is this still the number for the Tardis?"

"That's right," she said. "This is Barbara. Were you calling for the Doctor? I'm afraid he's sort of... busy, at the moment."

"Well, yes," the voice said, sounding a bit embarrassed. "Look, I'm sorry if this sounds intrusive, but I need to know if I hit the time frame right. Could you tell me what he looks like?"

Barbara blinked. "Well—he's... sort of skinny, a bit tall, but then I'm short so everyone is pretty tall to me. Um... rather wild brown hair."

The voice on the other end was silent for a moment, then asked, sounding fond, "Bouncy? Tends to babble on at inappropriate times?"

Wears trainers with a suit?"

"Yes, that's him," she responded. "May I know to whom I am speaking?"

"You may," the voice said, amused. "It's Rose. Rose Tyler. Er, could I leave a message with you for him?"

"Of course," Barbara replied, slightly surprised.

"Then—could you just tell him I called, and ask him if he could please come to Cardiff when he's got a mo'? My date here is currently 8 February 2009."

Barbara nodded automatically. "Got it. Anything else?"

There was a hesitation. "Just that I miss him," Rose said wistfully. "And—that there's someone there who'll tell him everything."

"Okay," Barbara said.

"Thanks," Rose told her. "Goodbye, then."

"Bye," Barbara responded, and there was a click on the other end of the line.

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*missing material*

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"Here we are," the Doctor said, his mind cataloging all the possible ways this could be Very Bad as he checked the location on the console. "Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom, the Earth, et cetera. Local time 10:32 in the morning on 9 February 2009."

Barbara pushed herself off the jump seat, moving around to peer over his shoulder at the monitor. "It's the Millennium Centre."

He nodded. "And it looks like our welcoming committee is here." On the screen, a well-dressed young man was making his way over to the Tardis. "I want you to stay here."

She frowned at the Doctor, then at the man on the screen. "He doesn't look dangerous."

The Doctor made a yes-and-no sort of *mmm* noise. "I'm worried someone might have corrupted the time stream. Rose Tyler should not be here." She put a hand on his shoulder, looking up at him worriedly, and he elaborated. "I'm a Time Lord; it's safer for me than for you."

She narrowed her eyes at him, but nodded after a moment. “Okay. But if it turns out someone is after you, I’m coming to rescue you.”

He grinned briefly, wondering how he had gotten so lucky (but not like that, not that he hadn’t wanted to, with... anyway, lucky in the *fortunate* sense) with his companions twice in a row now. Thrice, really, if one counted Donna. She *had* traveled with him, if only to get home. “Barbara Allen, you are...” He shook his head. “A piece of work.”

She grinned back. “Yup.”

“I mean it,” he said seriously, his mood shifting again as he focused on their mission. “Don’t come out until I know it’s safe.”

“I know you mean it,” she reassured him. “And I won’t, unless you’re in serious trouble.”

It was his turn to narrow his eyes at her. “I suppose that’ll have to do. Well. Here goes.” Retrieving his coat, he moved to the doors and took a deep breath before pulling the left one open.

“Hello,” the young man said before he could open his mouth. “Welcome to Cardiff, Doctor. I’m Ianto Jones. Er—if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, could I ask you to please move your craft about three feet to the left? I’m afraid you’ve parked on our lift.”

He stopped, blinking rapidly at the man—*Ianto*. “Er—” He ran his hand through his hair. “Certainly.”

Feeling rather bemused, he closed the door again and returned to the console.

“Where are we going?” Barbara asked.

“Three feet to the left, apparently,” he responded as he set the Tardis back down, noting with pride that she’d moved three feet exactly (okay, and a half a picometer, but really—who was counting?). “Seems we’re blocking their lift.” The young man had disappeared off the screen—perhaps down the aforementioned lift of theirs?

She blinked. “Someone has a lift that comes up right in front of the water... pillar... thing?”

He stopped, contemplating this. “Interesting,” he said thoughtfully, running a quick query on the console. “She originally picked that spot to settle in because it has a pre-existing perception filter. I think someone doesn’t want to be seen. Now, why would you put a—a *something*—smack in the middle of a tourist attraction, and then not want to be seen?”

Her eyes narrowed, and she moved around the console room to a spot where she couldn’t be seen from the door. He took a deep breath, and strode back down the ramp.

Just as he got there, his time sense twinged, and he suddenly knew who would be waiting for him on the other side of the doors. Another person who really, honestly *should not* be in 2009 Cardiff.

He flung open the door, mentally shifting gears as he prepared to be the Time Lord rather than the old friend, and nodded to the man on the other side. “Jack.”

————— *missing material* —————

“Regeneration sickness.”

He looked up at the alien bent over Tosh’s computer. “What?”

The Doctor looked over at him, brown eyes serious, and pushed his glasses up his nose again. “You asked a question.”

“Oh.” Jack mentally shook himself, getting his mind back on that track from theoretical temporal physics. “What do you mean?”

The other man looked away again, back down at his keyboard. “You know I regenerated, on the Gamestation.”

“Shortly after, wasn’t it?” Jack asked, not bothering to hide his frustration with the Doctor’s . . . loose hand with the truth. His tone got him a sharp glance from the alien. “Rose told me about it.”

“Yes.” The Doctor’s lips pursed briefly, and the skin around his eyes tightened as he gazed at his hands. “I was dying, when I left you there.”

Jack put the Doctor’s sparse statements together, and then made a leap of logic, giving the Doctor the benefit of the doubt. “You were . . . sick and didn’t know what you were doing?”

“No. I knew what I was doing.” The other man’s tone was tired, resigned, and Jack gave him points for being honest at last. “I don’t. . . I don’t regenerate well. Ask Lethbridge-Stewart sometime. Or Benton.”

“I could have helped you,” Jack protested, stung by the implication. “I wouldn’t have. . . hurt you, or Rose, or done anything.” Did the man still think he’d been trying to steal the Tardis?

“Not intentionally, anyway,” the Doctor said cryptically, then sighed and took his glasses off long enough to rub the bridge of his nose. “Jack—have you ever encountered something you didn’t like, not for its sake, but because it reminded you of something, something bad?”

Jack blinked. “Fake peach scent,” he said after a moment.

The Doctor lifted his head to stare at him. “Fake *peach* scent?”

He shrugged. “The Agency training camp—if you got in enough trouble, they made you clean the outdoor heads with your bare hands. The soap was peach scented.” The Doctor continued to stare at him, and he chuckled darkly. “Why do you think I bought Rose all those new lotions and soaps and things?”

The alien’s ears turned a light pink. “I thought. . . oh, never mind.”

“No, wait,” Jack said stubbornly. “You thought I was trying to buy my way into her bed, didn’t you?” The Doctor reddened further, and he sighed in annoyance. “You really are an idiot.”

“What?” Now there was a bit of affrontedness behind the embarrassment.

“You didn’t think I’d noticed, in the market, how that scent turned you on?” Jack laughed sharply. “I saw the way you. . . *reacted*. . . when she tried it.” He shook his head, starting to grin as he moved beyond irritation into resigned amusement.

“I—you mean—you were—” the Doctor spluttered.

“I was *trying* to get you to go for her before she gave up on you and started chasing me in earnest,” Jack answered him, chuckling.

“Oh—if she’d asked, I’d have gone to her bed willingly. I’m not that selfless. But you were the one she was really after.”

The Doctor put his head in his hands. “Now he tells me.”

“Anyway,” Jack said after a moment. “I . . . remind you of something bad?”

The alien was silent for a few moments. “Omega,” he said finally. “I can *feel* you, Jack, in here.” He tapped his head. “And you remind me of Omega.”

“Who?” Jack asked after a moment.

“Another Time Lord—oh, it’s a long story; it’s probably in UNIT’s files if you’re curious,” the Doctor said, waving a hand. “The point is—Jack, you’re a fixed point. A constant in the universe. A living, breathing, walking, talking constant.”

“Okay,” Jack said slowly.

“You . . . that’s not supposed to *happen*,” the Doctor went on, sounding more than a little childish. “You’re not supposed to *be* that way.”

“But I am.” Jack couldn’t keep all of the exasperation out of his voice.

“Yes. And the only other person I’ve ever encountered who felt even *close* was . . . Omega.”

Jack thought that one through. “I take it he wasn’t a *good* Time Lord.”

“Oh—he was a legend,” the Doctor said, a hint of painful nostalgia entering his voice. “One of the best.” He stared into space briefly, then shook his head. “He also tried to destroy me, my companions—and, incidentally, large amounts of the universe. Several times.” He finally looked at Jack again. “So. You feel . . . bad. In a word.”

“I’d apologize,” Jack replied, an edge in his voice, “if I thought it was in any way my fault.”

“I know.” The Doctor sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“So—” Jack tried to remember how this connected to the original discussion. “How does my . . . badness . . . relate to regeneration sick-

ness?”

“Jack. . . .” The Doctor looked at him, face completely serious. Jack sat up straighter; having the full attention of the Time Lord on him had always done something to him. “I was afraid.”

“What?” Jack blinked.

The Doctor took a deep breath. “I was afraid,” he repeated. “Afraid I’d hurt you—afraid I’d scare Rose—afraid I’d do something stupid and endanger you both.” He looked away again. “As it was, I scared her so badly she almost left.”

He just stared at the other man, floored.

After a moment, the Doctor continued. “I tried to strangle one of my own companions, once. I mean it when I say I don’t regenerate well, Jack. What if I’d. . . .” He shook his head. “So I left you behind. It was selfish. I was scared, and in pain, and afraid I’d lose Rose, and I ran. I’m sorry.”

Jack leaned back. “Then—why didn’t you come back?” he asked finally. “It took me *weeks* to get a shuttle down to Earth.”

“I tried,” the Time Lord admitted quietly. “I never told Rose, because I was afraid—I was afraid of exactly what happened.” He looked over at the large blue box standing in the corner of the Hub. “The Tardis wouldn’t take me anywhere near that spacetime point. Kicked me halfway across the universe when I tried.” He rubbed his forehead. “I tried again—and we ended up in another universe altogether. So I stopped trying.” He looked over at Jack again, and added soberly, “I never knew why until now. I’m sorry.”

The pain in the other man’s voice loosened something in Jack’s heart, and slowly his world started to right itself again. Not discarded. Not abandoned without a thought. Not even given up for dead. “Paradox,” he said, nodding, his voice rough. “I suppose it’s what I get for getting involved. You taught me too well.”

Something in the brown eyes looking at him warmed and melted, and Jack found himself smiling. “I’m sorry,” the Doctor repeated, his voice lighter.

“Well.” Jack sighed and stretched. “I suppose, in the end, it’s a good thing. If I wasn’t here, who would have helped Rose?” He looked over at the Time Lord, who was doing a surprisingly good imitation of a lovesick schoolboy. “She’ll be back,” he said gently. “Tosh puts it at between three and five days, if it follows the same schedule she’s been on.”

The Doctor nodded silently, and turned back to his computer. Jack pretended he didn’t hear the other man swallow hard, didn’t see the long fingers shaking slightly. “For what it’s worth, Jack,” the Doctor said just as Jack turned back to his own work again, “I’m glad—I’m glad you found me again. Glad you’re all right.”

Jack smiled at his monitor. “You, too, Doctor,” he responded. “I missed you.”

“Yeah,” the other man replied after a minute.

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*missing material*

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The Doctor removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes, fighting the urge to hit the computer monitor in front of him. He knew it wouldn’t do any good, and Tosh had already had words with him twice about his habits of percussive maintenance. But he was frustrated, and felt like hitting *something*. As a compromise, he kicked the desk, then put his glasses back on, hoping childishly that the data in front of him would have changed. It hadn’t, of course, and he kicked the desk again.

“Any luck?”

He looked up as Jack approached, shirt wrinkled and eyes still bleary from napping. Under any other circumstances, he’d find the Captain’s state amusing. As it was, he saw it as a sign of the man’s own desperation that he hadn’t even stopped to change shirts. “No,” he admitted.

Jack sighed, rubbing his eyes. “How is she?”

“I don’t know,” he was forced to admit. “She disappeared again about twenty minutes ago.” Jack tensed, and he knew the man was as unhappy about that as he was. Every disappearance was another time

they were left wondering if they'd see her again. "I sent Barbara down to get some sleep."

Jack sat down in the other chair and stared at the board they'd started. Ideas, half-formed equations, and printed graphs of temporospatial activity littered its surface. "How long does she have?" he asked.

The Doctor was silent for a few moments. "Jack—"

"How long?" Jack insisted.

He sighed. "A week. Maybe. If we're lucky."

"And if we're not?" He was silent, and Jack looked over at him. "It's bad, isn't it?"

"Two days," he admitted. "If the progression continues unchanged, she'll lose her mind entirely in forty-two hours, and her body will be consumed in forty-nine."

"Forty-two hours." Jack rubbed his eyes again. "Doctor—you said you think this started because she looked into the heart of the Tardis."

"I can't imagine where else she could have gotten a piece of the Vortex inside her." He sighed. "Only... this time I don't know how to fix it. It's a part of her. I can't just remove it—that would kill her even faster."

"Right." Jack nodded. "So—what if the Tardis has to fix this too?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Jack began slowly. "You said this started because she looked into the Tardis. You looked into her, too, to give the power back, right? And when Margaret looked into her, she was reverted to an egg." He paused. "So—what if she has to look into her again, to fix this?"

The Doctor spent a moment untangling Jack's pronouns, then sat silently while he struggled with his instincts and his fear of losing Rose. "If we're wrong, it would kill her," he said finally. "It could even tear the universe apart."

"And if we're not wrong, and we do nothing?" He made no

reply, and Jack nodded. “That’s what I thought.”

“I’m not going to stop looking yet,” he said.

“No.” Jack went back to his own work, sorting through instrument readings and scribbling on a notepad. “I didn’t expect you to.”

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*missing material*

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He rubbed eyes that had long since grown weary, and stared at the screen in front of him. The equations stubbornly refused to balance, and he sighed.

“We’re running out of time, aren’t we,” Jack said quietly from across the room.

“Any luck?” he asked the other man, trying to ignore the count-down in his head. She’d already held out longer than he’d believed possible. Now if she’d just stay in this universe and hang on long enough for them to find a solution. . .

“No.” Jack shook his head. “Nothing.”

Barbara entered the room, shoulders drooping wearily. He swallowed tightly, and forced himself to ask. “How is she?”

She shook her head, and his hearts constricted painfully. “She’s still alive,” she said, and he breathed again. “But she’s stopped responding. Owen says he thinks she’s slipping into a coma.” She sank into a chair, leaning her head back and tilting it so she could still see him. “I’m sorry, Doctor. You tried.”

Jack frowned at his scratch pad. “What about putting her in the zero room, Doctor? It might buy her an hour or two.”

He rubbed his head, combing his fingers through his hair. An hour or two. Would it make a difference? Or would he just prolong the inevitable for a little longer? In his hearts, he knew the answer. They’d exhausted all their resources, and they would never be able to reinvent enough Time Lord technology even with an extra two hours. “No,” he said.

Jack deflated. “Doctor—”

“It’s time, Jack,” he said, interrupting the man and standing. “We’ll need a chair to prop her up in. Can you find one and meet me in the console room?”

Jack stared at him for a moment, then rose, nodding. “See you there,” he said, striding out.

“Come on, Barbara,” he said to his companion, pulling her back to her feet. “Time to go collect Rose.”

He steeled himself before entering the medical bay, but was still unprepared for the sight of Rose lying motionless on the table, surrounded by gear and sensors. A steady beeping tracked her heart-rate—too fast, he could tell immediately.

“She’s going,” Owen said, looking up as the Doctor stopped still in the entrance for a second. He gestured to the screen tracking her brain waves. Even as the Doctor watched, the lines grew slowly more erratic, beginning to flatten out. “If you lot are going to do something, it had better be real fucking soon.”

He forced himself to take a breath through the pain searing between his hearts. Rose was dying in front of him, and all he had to offer her was a one-in-a-million shot in the dark. “Help me unhook her,” he said, beginning to peel the sensor wires from her skin. *Oh, Rose, I never should have come back to ask you again. I should have left you with your great lump and your beans on toast.* He removed the last wire as Owen pulled the IV line out, and hefted her in his arms, cradling her as gently as he could. She stirred, muttering against his shirt, and he whispered in her ear as he carried her through the Hub to the Tardis. “Shh, Rose,” he told her. “Almost there. This is almost over, I promise.” *Either way, at least this will end for her.*

Barbara went ahead of him, opening the doors for him, and they found Jack waiting in the console room with a rolling executive chair with a huge back and thick arms. Barbara shut the doors nearly in Owen’s face as Jack rolled the chair down the ramp to meet them. “Will this do?” he asked.

The Doctor nodded. “It’s perfect,” he said past the lump in

his throat. Barbara steadied the chair as he eased Rose into it, Jack helping him arrange her in a sitting position.

She moaned quietly as they wheeled her to sit in front of the console, small golden flickers beginning to play over her skin. The Doctor's chest felt like he had been kicked by an equine; this was it. The Vortex was beginning to claim her body.

He knelt before her and eased her eyes open, his breath catching as he realized her pupils were entirely filled by golden fire. "Hang on," he exhorted her softly. "Almost there, Rose. Hang on for me, please."

He herded the other two around the console before reaching for the control. "Don't look into it," he warned them again, and pulled the lever.

Golden light flooded out, bathing Rose and making the streamers of energy growing over her skin almost invisible. He heard Jack gasp beside him as she suddenly sat up, head turning to look fully into the console. "Well, the universe hasn't ended yet," the man said beside him, a note of cautious optimism in his voice.

"Give it time," he said tensely, eyes fixed on Rose's face. His hearts lifted as a smile crept over her features—maybe this would work after all.

"That's a good sign, isn't it?" asked Barbara nervously.

"Probably," Jack replied, sounding as tense as the Doctor felt, but with an underlying air of hope. He himself was beginning to feel a sense of tired euphoria—if the universe hadn't torn apart yet, chances were very good that it wasn't going to. And Rose—Rose was *sitting up* and *smiling*, both very good signs. Maybe, just maybe, this would turn out all right yet.

She nodded, apparently replying to something only she could hear, then lifted her head. Her eyes found his, and his hearts soared as familiar hazel eyes, the centers that had been fired golden now darkened to their proper black, locked on his—

—only to plummet as those hazel eyes rolled slowly up and she slumped over.

The panel was closing of its own accord as he practically leapt over the console in his haste to get to her. “Rose!” He heard Jack echoing him, the other man knocking the chair out of the way as the Doctor caught her limp body and eased it to the decking. “Rose!”

His fingers fumbled frantically for his screwdriver as Jack’s searched for her pulse. A flick of his thumb and he was scanning her head, his hearts seeming to stop as the readings registered in his mind. No pulse. No breathing. No brain activity.

“No,” he breathed, tossing the screwdriver aside. There was no time to get her to the infirmary. He’d have to make do. He heard the screwdriver clatter and roll a little away, but he was already bending over her, starting chest compressions, clinging to that frantic thread of hope. Jack tilted her head back and began breathing for her. “One, two, three, four, five,” he counted as he pushed hard on her ribs. “Come on, Rose, don’t leave me now!”

He paused after a few repetitions, fumbling for her pulse, but her artery was still against his fingers. “Please, Rose,” he begged, starting compressions again. “Please don’t leave me.”

There was a slow, desultory sparkle of huon energy across her body, and he was suddenly collapsing to the decking. Next to him, Jack caught himself as she simply disappeared from under them. *The energy ran out*, he realized in a moment of detachment, staring at the grille under his fingers. *She returned to the other universe when the energy in her body ran out.*

His chest froze as the implication penetrated. *She’s dead. She’s well and truly dead. My Rose is gone.* A wave of despair welled up, filling his soul and threatening to stop his hearts, and with a slight sigh he surrendered to it.

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Jack caught himself as Rose vanished silently, his hands suddenly holding nothing but empty air. After a moment, he pushed himself up, leaning tiredly on the silent console. *Well*, he thought numbly. *That’s that.* It felt odd, having no body to tag and stash in a drawer.

His eyes sought out Barbara first, standing back a little and watching them. She gazed back at him, a silent question in her eyes, and he swallowed hard and shook his head slowly. She slumped, leaning against a column. He could hear her breathing hitching softly, and realized she was weeping. They had all worked so hard to save Rose, and she'd wormed her way into everyone's hearts—even Owen's.

He turned to look at the man who'd worked harder than any of them, still kneeling on the deck plating, eyes staring sightlessly at the spot where Rose's body had lain. He was forcibly reminded of the same man combing shaking fingers through a pile of ashes on the Gamestation. The body he wore was different, the surroundings much less hostile (a pity, he thought with a small, detached portion of his mind; he could really use someone to shoot right now) but the catatonia, the expression of despair, the staring, sightless eyes—all those were the same.

"Doctor?" he asked, gently touching the man's shoulder. He got no reaction, and after a few heartbeats he left the Doctor there for the moment, heading outside to break the news to his team.

He sent them home, refusing Ianto's offer to stay as kindly as he could. Later, he knew, he'd seek out the comfort the young man was offering, but tonight was for Rose and the Doctor and those who loved them best.

When he re-entered the Tardis, he found Barbara sitting in the abandoned chair, watching the Doctor. The man was still kneeling where Jack had left him, expression unchanged except for the addition of tear-tracks on his cheeks.

"Has he moved?" he asked Barbara quietly.

She shook her head. "I spoke to him, after you left, but he didn't respond to me, either."

Another tear fell from the Doctor's cheek to slip through the grating and hiss softly on something below. Jack bent over the man, but saw no recognition in the brown eyes. He wasn't even sure the Time Lord was aware he was there.

The uncharacteristic quiet of the Tardis was getting to him, and he wondered if it was her way of mourning Rose too. “Come on,” he said to Barbara. “Help me get him up. I sent the others home; we’ll have the Hub to ourselves.”

They each got a hand under the Doctor’s shoulders and lifted; he came with them readily but showed no sign that he knew he was moving. When Jack released him, he remained standing, but made no effort to move on his own.

He headed out first and opened the doors wide; Barbara wrapped an arm around the Doctor’s shoulders and guided him out into the Hub. They brought him, walking slowly, to the ratty old couch under the Torchwood sign. There they released him, and he sank down onto it, the first independent movement either of them had seen him make. They waited, glancing at each other periodically, but he showed no other signs of awareness.

After a minute, Jack sighed. “I’m going to make tea,” he told Barbara quietly. Ianto would probably be mad at him—he hated Jack messing about in what he thought of as *his* kitchen—but right now Jack couldn’t bring himself to care.

“Okay,” she responded, sinking down in a chair herself. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

The sight of the pink mug he’d bought Rose, upside-down in the drainer, almost undid him, and he spent a minute while the tea steeped just holding it to his chest. Mechanically he set out their three mugs and added enough sugar to each to choke a horse; he knew the Doctor liked it that way, and figured he and Barbara could use the calories. He touched the pink mug lightly again before picking up the tray with hands that were, he thought, amazingly steady, and headed back to the lounge.

When he returned, he found Barbara crying softly. She immediately wiped her eyes and took several deep breaths, but he set the tray down on the low table and pulled her into a hug. “Go ahead and cry,” he told her quietly. “Just because I don’t doesn’t mean you shouldn’t.

It's nothing to be ashamed of."

She put her head down on his shoulder and sobbed, slowly soaking his shirt. He stroked her head, staring over her salt-and-pepper curls at the Doctor, still staring sightlessly at the ground.

When her sobs trailed off into hiccups, he reached over and picked up one of the mugs, offering it to her. She accepted it, sitting back and sniffing slightly. "Thanks," she told him hoarsely. "Sorry for getting you wet."

"It'll dry," he told her, rubbing her shoulder and giving her a small smile. Turning back to the Doctor, he picked up another mug. "Doctor," he said clearly. "Have some tea." When he pushed the mug into the other man's hands, they wrapped around it and held it, but the man made no attempt to drink. After a moment, Jack shrugged to himself and picked up his own mug. It had cooled off enough to drink without discomfort, and he took a large swig.

"The first time I met her," Barbara said suddenly, "I had no earthly idea who she was. I saw her—" She stopped, voice choking off, but swallowed and continued before Jack could say anything. "I saw her in the marketplace on Balastron, while he was off looking for some part." Her eyes focused on something in the distance. "She came up to me and warned me not to buy the dress I was looking at. 'If you want one,' she said to me, 'there's a cheaper place about two streets down'. The manager was furious with her, but I thanked her and left." She looked over at Jack. "It wasn't until I met her here that I remembered."

He took another long swig of his tea. "When I met her," he said quietly, "I was a con man. I'd lured what I thought were two Time Agents to Earth in 1941 with a bit of space junk." He paused, staring at the Doctor, seeing leather and a sharp nose for just a moment. "She ended up hanging from a barrage balloon in the middle of a German air raid wearing a Union Jack shirt, and I rescued her." He closed his eyes, remembering the feel of her in his arms as they danced, and felt the sting of tears against his eyelids. "I... it's a long story, but I ended up traveling with them for a while."

She smiled. “I did wonder how they knew you.” She looked over at the Doctor. “Doctor, aren’t you going to drink your tea?” Jack was surprised when the alien lifted the mug and took a sip before lowering it again and resuming the exact same posture. “I was like that when Ger died,” she said to Jack quietly. “Of course, I was in hospital at the time. They thought I had brain damage because I just wouldn’t respond to them.”

“I’m worried about him,” Jack admitted in return. “He thought he’d lost her once before, and he just . . . shut down. It took having to keep the rest of us alive to snap him out of it.”

“Give him time,” she said quietly. “He’ll come out of it eventually.”

*I hope,* Jack thought to himself.

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He had thought, when he had said goodbye to Rose on the Norwegian beach, that the universe was cold and cruel for giving him no time to grieve. Not a minute had passed before there was Donna, yelling at him, demanding he *do something, Martian Boy*. He’d helped her, of course, but in his hearts he’d railed at the unfair, unkind nature of the universe, throwing something like that at him so soon. All he’d wanted was a couple of hours of peace and quiet to properly mourn the woman he’d loved; was that really so much to ask?

Now he knew the universe hadn’t been being cruel. It had been kind.

Because the universe had listened, hadn’t it? He’d been given a second chance (or was that third? Fourth?) and he’d bungled it, as he always did. And now Rose wasn’t just gone, or lost, or impossible to reach, but dead, right and truly *dead*. There’d be no teary goodbyes this time, no parting kisses, no last words via hologram. But the universe had listened, all right, and given him what he’d wanted. He had nothing to do, no crises to solve, no one to rescue or save or even give a ride home to. Nothing to do but mourn. And oh, it was sheer torture.

A single phrase repeated in his mind, a refrain drumming in his mental ears until it seemed his very hearts were beating it out. *Rose is dead. Rose is dead. Rose is dead. . .*

Peripherally, he was aware of sitting on a couch, of being handed tea. He ignored it, holding it only because it was there. No amount of tannins and free-radicals would fix things this time. He knew his companions were there; heard them talking, but the words flowed past him meaninglessly. All he could see was Rose's body lying before him, and all he could hear was the refrain and the silence she'd left in her wake. Even the Tardis was quiet in his mind, and it echoed painfully. *Alone again. Perhaps this is my destiny. Death, loss, and loneliness. Perhaps he deserved it. Rose is dead.*

Barbara was saying something about his tea, and to placate her he found the energy to raise his mug and drink. *Rose is dead. Rose is dead.*

It hurt. Oh, how it hurt. He found himself wondering what sort of dangerous adventures he could find, and whether the pain would lessen with regeneration or whether it would be better to simply refuse to regenerate. He was almost at the end of his lives, anyway; it was no great loss. Given his past record, the universe might even run better without him. It was only fitting, after all. *Rose is dead.*

After a while, he took another sip of tea because it was there and that was what one did with tea. It was cold (when had that happened?) and he set it down. He was so tired. It would be so nice if he could put his head down and forget. Just for a little while. Or not. Forever would be nice, too. *Rose is dead.*

Slowly he slipped sideways until he was lying on the couch, closing his eyes. It made no difference, really. All he could see was Rose, either way. *Rose is dead.*

The transition from waking to dreaming, when it came, was seamless.

In the chair beside Jack, Barbara yawned. It was now well past midnight, and like him, she'd been pushing her body as hard as it could go. Unlike him, she was not perpetually young.

"Go to bed," he said, startling her; she jumped and sat upright again.

"I'll be all right."

"You've been sleeping as little as I have." He reached over and took her mug from her. "Go to bed. I'll keep an eye on him."

She stretched, climbing out of the chair with obviously painful movements. "You sure?"

He nodded. "Go on. I'll wake you when I run out of energy, or if we need you."

That did it; she nodded and limped off in the direction of the Tardis. He watched her until she vanished through the doors, then settled back into the same position, eyes fixed on the Doctor's face.

Almost an hour later, the Doctor moved, taking a sip of tea, then pausing as if it had startled him. Jack leaned forwards, but all the other man did was set the mug down. He didn't quite manage to get it square on the table, and Jack rescued it before it could fall. "Doctor?" he asked. "Do you need anything?"

There was no answer. He wasn't sure he'd been expecting one.

The Doctor moved again, then, closing his eyes and simply falling over sideways, hands curling to his chest. For a moment, Jack panicked—who knew what a Time Lord could do to his own biology, if he wanted to hard enough—and shot to his feet. But the steady rise and fall of the man's chest continued and he realized the alien was merely sleeping. Gently he lifted the Doctor's feet to rest on the couch, too; lying slumped over like that could not be comfortable, even if one had a highly-evolved spine. Removing his coat, he draped it over the Doctor's body, tucking it around the man as best he could.

"Rose!"

He paused, startled, but the Doctor's eyes were still closed. "Doctor?"

“No. . . Rose, don’t leave me, please.” The Doctor’s head twitched, and one arm reached out. “Please come back.”

Jack knelt next to him and took the reaching hand, wishing with all his might that he could answer the Doctor’s plea. The hand closed around his for a moment, but then shook him off, sensing even in sleep that his hand wasn’t the one it wanted to hold.

If the Doctor had been still and silent when awake, asleep he was anything but. Jack eventually pushed himself up and returned to his seat, realizing the alien had enough presence of sleeping mind not to roll off the narrow couch. He had been utterly unable to soothe the twitchings and flailings, and his voice only triggered more pleas for Rose to return.

He felt completely helpless, and after a half-hour of desperate begging for a dead woman, even watching from across the lounge space was too much. A few keystrokes on a computer keyed his earpiece into a nearby pickup. Listening to the Doctor was hard enough, but it was better than watching him, too; the instant that was done he headed up the back way to the deserted Plass. He’d know something had gone wrong if the earpiece went silent.

He was too tired to climb onto the roof of the Millennium Centre as he sometimes did, but he found a low wall that would do. Tipping his head up, he looked up at the stars, picking out ones he’d visited and ones he’d meant to visit. Aloud he named the ones he’d wished he’d taken Rose to.

In his earpiece, the Doctor called out repeatedly, and he added his own voice, here where no-one was around to hear him. “Oh, Rose,” he told the stars. “I’m so sorry. I miss you already.”

He watched the faint reflected light of the International Space Station make its pass overhead. Humanity’s first, baby steps towards the stars. They amazed him, these twenty-first century humans, something he’d learned from the Doctor—and Rose, a twenty-first century human herself, with her constant sense of wonder at things he’d forgotten were beautiful.

Gone, now. And oh, how he missed her. ISS slipped into the Earth's shadow, and for a moment, he imagined the universe missed her too.

Motion across the plaza caught his eye, and he turned, expecting to find Gwen or Ianto come to check on them. Instead, he saw a familiar form, head turning at his movement the way his had turned at hers, dark blonde hair reflecting the light from the street lamps. For a moment he froze, and then he realized what must have happened. *She's crossed her timeline. God, I have to keep her out of the Hub. With the Doctor like he is—it's a paradox waiting to happen.*

Still, there was no reason he couldn't enjoy this last, unexpected chance to be with her, as long as he was very careful. He hopped down off the wall and walked rapidly towards her, slipping himself into the mentality of a seasoned Time Agent, constructing a fantasy where nothing was wrong, martialing excuses for why they couldn't go inside. He saw her recognize him and change course, grinning and breaking into a run, and he automatically held out his arms.

She took a last step, jumping into them and wrapping her arms around his neck like she'd last done in feudal Japan. "Jack," she said into his ear.

Wait. Wrapped her arms around. . . . He froze, pulling back ever so slightly, heart hammering. She'd said she didn't dare hug him lest she pull him back with her. She must not know that yet, which meant in her timeline. . . . But when he'd met her that time, she'd asked him questions like she'd just met him. *Oh, God, did I just cause a paradox? Or am I about to get pulled into another universe?*

"It's me," she said, releasing him and looking earnestly into his face. His thoughts whirled, and all he could do was blink at her. "God, Jack, I'm sorry. How long have I been gone? I cut it as close as I dared—"

"What do you mean?" he found the voice to ask.

"Jack," she said, and reached into her shirt, pulling out a familiar lanyard. And there, on the end, was the high-powered transmitter the

Doctor had hung around her neck only a few days before. “It’s me.”

“Oh, God,” he said, and held her to him as tightly as he dared, closing his eyes and rocking her slightly. “Oh, God, Rose.” He didn’t know, didn’t *care* how, it was Rose. Their Rose.

“How long?” she asked, worriedly. “And—the Doctor—”

“Seven, eight hours,” he answered her, face buried in her hair. He inhaled, smelling unfamiliar shampoo, but under it the clear scent of Rose Tyler. Suddenly giddy, he laughed in sheer delight and swung her around, making her exclaim as her feet left the ground. “Rose,” he said on another laugh, and kissed her thoroughly.

“Jack,” she said when he stopped, hanging onto him for dear life. “Jack—is. . . is he. . .”

In his ear, the Doctor let out a cry like a wounded kitten. “Rose,” the man pleaded, voice despairing. “Oh, God, no. . . please don’t leave me alone. . .”

“He took it hard,” he said finally, setting her down and watching her face contort in pain. “He’s downstairs, asleep on the couch.” Her eyes widened and she glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the entrance to the Hub. “Come on,” he said, taking her hand and pulling him after him into a run.

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The Tardis had warned her that she’d change. Apparently this was one of the alterations.

When she’d leapt into Jack’s arms, she’d immediately felt disbelief and sorrow, and instantly she’d known (even as she’d blinked in surprise—empathy? Interesting) that she’d hit the right time frame. Now through his hand she could feel worry leaking through his happiness at her return. She looked up at him as he pulled her along, and wondered *how* badly the Doctor had taken her disappearance.

They went down the back way, Rose having insisted that she didn’t want to wake up the Doctor with the door alarm. She stopped abruptly near the bottom, gesturing Jack to silence, as she heard the Doctor’s voice.

“Rose. . . please Rose. . . .” She’d never heard him sound like that, not even as she fell into the Void. “Don’t leave me, please.” She tiptoed forwards until she could see him, finding him lying on the couch just as Jack had said. As he watched, he stirred restlessly, one hand reaching out. “Rose!”

“Oh, God,” she mouthed soundlessly, then turned back to Jack. When he’d said ‘bad’, she hadn’t pictured *this*. “Has he been like this long?” she whispered.

“Since he fell asleep,” Jack admitted, then went to go around her.

She caught his sleeve, tugging him back. “Let me.”

He leaned against the railing, watching her; she turned back to the Doctor and took a deep breath. Walking as quietly as she could, she made her way down the stairs and over to kneel by him. She realized when she got closer that he was covered by Jack’s coat, and looked up with a slight smile to find Jack watching them with a worried frown; at her look he quirked his mouth in what could almost be a smile.

She turned back to the Doctor, heart aching as he moaned in his sleep. His hand reached out again, almost hitting her in the face; she avoided it before catching it in both of hers and drawing it under her chin.

The moment she touched it, she could feel him, ever so much stronger than Jack had been, and she swayed slightly, steadying herself on the couch. Even asleep, his mind resonated with overwhelming grief and loss, and she wondered if he was also dreaming of his dead planet.

“Doctor,” she said quietly, squeezing his hand and reaching up to touch his face. “Doctor, wake up.”

She startled back as he shot to a sitting position, Jack’s coat falling to the ground. “Rose!” He blinked twice, staring straight ahead, then squeezed his eyes shut, his back slumping. The torrent of grief that flowed down his arm and into hers made her heart pound painfully.

“I’m here,” she answered him quietly, and she felt his hand go rigid as his entire body froze. There was a moment of painful hope,

and slowly, looking as if it would kill him to have it dashed, he turned to look at her. “Miss me?”

She stroked his hand and smiled up at him, and he reached trembling fingers out to touch her face. “Rose?” She could barely hear the word, he breathed it so quietly. “It can’t be,” he told her, voice shaking. “Unless—” He searched her face. “You can’t be. . . .”

She squeezed his fingers between both her hands and tucked his hand back under her chin. His eyes tracked down to her hands, and she felt the disbelief and a sense of both hope and hopelessness—like Jack, she realized, he didn’t know what to believe. “It’s me,” she said, her breath stirring the small hairs on the back of his hand. “Honestly, it’s me.”

He lurched towards her, and she stood, wincing at the pain in her knee as she pulled him upright. “Rose?” he asked again, his free hand coming up to cup her chin before running through her hair.

“Mhmm,” she answered him, smiling up at him, her heart threatening to break at the naked hope in his voice. “I’m so, so sorry, Doctor. I got back here as fast as I could—I’m not very accurate; I didn’t dare cut the timing any closer.”

He stared at her for a moment longer, eyes going to the transmitter hung around her neck, and then he was pulling her into a hug so tight she wondered for a moment how she was going to breathe. Then she forgot all mere physical worries as joy exploded from him, a joy so incandescent she was surprised it wasn’t a visible aura in the air. “Rose,” he said into her hair, his left hand resting on her back but the right creeping up to cradle her head against his shoulder. “Oh, Rose.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist, feeling him shudder slightly as she did, a brief flash of pain making her own breathing skip before the joy pouring into her redoubled. He stood stock still for a double handful of seconds, pressing his hand flat against her back just under her left shoulderblade, before he took a shaky breath in, and she realized he was feeling her heartbeat against his palm. “I’m here,” she said again, leaning her head on his shoulder.

He just stood there, holding her, for sixty-seven seconds (this time sense thing would take some getting used to, she thought) before he spoke again. “I thought...I thought you were dead.” His voice cracked on the last word, and she squeezed her arms around him lightly.

“Technically speaking,” she told him after a few seconds, heart soaring as he stroked her hair with gentle fingers, “I did die.”

She felt the double heartbeat against her chest skip a beat and quicken. “You what?” He pulled back enough to look her in the face, and she squeezed him again to reassure him she was really there. “What?”

“We had to. . . .” She frowned. “Well, essentially, put my brain through a regeneration. Replace the whole thing with a brain that could cope. And my nerves, and some other stuff.” He stared at her, and she couldn’t stop her mouth twitching at his expression of utter shock. “That meant we had to shut the whole thing down long enough to do it safely.” She rubbed his back, looking up at him apologetically. “We. . . weren’t exactly in a position to explain it to you, and it wasn’t until I woke up that I realized what you probably thought. I am *so sorry*.”

He pulled her against him again, speaking into her hair. “It’s all right, Rose.” She felt him draw in another shaky breath and let it out again. “I’m just. . . I’m glad you’re here.”

She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder in a gesture that had become habit during the long months of no hugging. “I’m glad I am, too.”

He was silent for another forty-nine seconds. “We?”

“Me and the Tardis, yeah.”

“Rose, how did you get—” He broke off, then started again. “You’re trapped here, aren’t you.”

She shook her head, her forehead rubbing against his chin. “Don’t think so.” She shrugged. “Can’t be sure until I try, I suppose.”

He pulled back, frowning down at her. “You—but that’s—”

“Impossible?” She looked up at him. “Getting back here was

supposed to be impossible. Let's worry about one impossibility at a time, yeah?"

He stared at her, and then, finally, a smile crept across his face. "Quite right," he said, and she smiled back.

"Is that a smile?" she teased him, and it broke into a grin. "I think that's a smile."

"Yep," he told her, popping the 'p', and she knew everything would be all right.

"Not to break this up," Jack's voice said, and they both started, turning to look at him as he made his way down the staircase towards them, face creased in a wide grin. "Because you two are absolutely adorable, just so you know. But—would someone mind explaining to the poor confused human what happened?"

"Rose came back," the Doctor said, sounding immensely satisfied.

"I know that," Jack said patiently, as Rose smacked the Doctor lightly. "I meant—what did you and the Tardis *do*, Rose?"

Rose sighed lightly. "Well." She pulled out of the Doctor's arms long enough to sit down, and he dropped down next to her, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her against him again. She stuck her tongue out at Jack's smirk, then went on. "I'm afraid my memory of the last week or so I was here is a bit fuzzy, so forgive me if I'm telling you stuff you already worked out, yeah?"

Jack pulled a chair up opposite her and sat down, putting one foot up on the table. "I don't think we really figured out anything new that week, did we, Doctor? Mostly we just ran down dead ends."

She felt the Doctor's breath catch, and gently squeezed his knee. "Yep," he said quietly, his arm tightening around her shoulders.

"Okay." She frowned, marshaling her thoughts. "When I looked into the Tardis... I wanted two things. I wanted you two safe, and I wanted to stay with the Doctor forever." She felt his breath catch again, and turned to smile up at him. "So when I looked into the Heart of the Tardis, she did her best to help with both. Only, 'cause the walls

between universes were closed, we couldn't see this future coming."

"Okay," Jack said slowly. "So... she left a little bit of the Vortex inside you? What was it supposed to do? Keep you alive longer?"

"Not quite," she said, blushing a little. "Way it was supposed to work, it would have tied me to her. Sort of made me... kind of like a part of her, like the Doctor's hand you've got. When I died, what would've happened is I'd have gotten kind of sucked into her." The Doctor inhaled sharply, and she looked up at him worriedly.

"You became part of the Tardis?" he asked her. "Just because..."

"I would have, yeah," she answered. "For you."

The Doctor stared at her until Jack spoke again. "Okay," he said once more. "So you were supposed to end up part of the Tardis. But then?"

"But she could only see futures for *this* world," she said patiently, "so she couldn't see me ending up stuck in the other universe. So when that happened, there I was with a little bit of the Tardis inside me, only it wasn't connected to the Tardis anymore."

She felt the Doctor go rigid and looked up at him again. "That would..." His voice apparently failed. "You... that's how... but..."

She turned back to Jack when it became clear the Doctor was entirely incoherent. "So... it acted kind of like taking a cutting of a plant. The bit of Tardis inside me grew, and turned into sort of a real TARDIS. Except I'm not a TARDIS, or I wasn't, and I didn't have any of the controls and things that TARDISES are supposed to have."

"So you acted like a TARDIS without a stabilization circuit," he finished for her. "Of course." Then he frowned. "But—why'd you always return? Shouldn't you have just sort of... drifted?"

The Doctor's arm tightened on her shoulders, and she squeezed his knee again to soothe his distress. "Well, when the Tardis travels, she sort of... picks up her whole timeline and moves it. I didn't know how to do that, so I was kind of leaving a bit of it behind. That's why I kept getting dragged back." She looked up at the Doctor. "She showed

me how to do it proper like, but it's harder than she makes it look, you know? I'll never make fun of your driving again. I wound up on the Mercury space station in the 24th century, and it took me a week to build up enough energy to get back here properly."

His mouth twitched, and she grinned. "I'd wondered why you were so skinny," he murmured.

"Oi," she said in protest, and the skin around his eyes crinkled. "Anyway—so that's that."

"So—" Jack yawned, cutting himself off. "Sorry."

She shoved at his foot with one of hers. "Go to bed, you. You look horrid."

"Gee, thanks," he told her, making a face. "You know how to make a guy feel good about himself."

She kicked him again. "You know I didn't mean it like that."

He yawned again, then stood up and retrieved his coat from the floor near the Doctor's feet. "If I leave you two alone in the Hub, do you promise not to break anything?" His pointed look at the Doctor made it obvious to whom he was talking.

"Oi," the Doctor protested. "I've fixed everything I've broken. Eventually. Mostly. Well—I promise I'll get around to the—"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Just until I've had some sleep, Doctor, please?"

"Oh, fine." The Doctor pulled Rose closer again, and Jack's eyes crinkled. "I'll be good."

"I bet you are." The Doctor turned pink, and Jack eyed him, a smile playing around his lips. "Ianto stocked up on marmalade day before yesterday," he said after a few seconds. "That and Rose should keep your fingers busy."

Rose turned bright red at the implication, and Jack snickered. "You never change," she told him in fond irritation. "Go on. Off to bed." She kicked at him again as he smirked at her. "Oi."

Still laughing, he took himself off, the sound echoing around the Hub even after he was out of sight.

“Where’s Barbara?” Rose asked after a minute, looking around.

The Doctor blinked. “Er—asleep, I think.” He rubbed the back of his head with the hand that wasn’t around her shoulders. “I was sort of—out of it, I’m afraid.”

“Do you think we ought to wake her up?” Rose asked seriously. “I should have asked Jack if he’d told his team, too.” She looked up at him, and he looked down at her, his expression faintly quizzical. “What if they’re worried, or upset?”

“Oh.” He rubbed his head again. “I hadn’t thought about that.” He tilted his head in thought. “Nah. Well. Not yet. We should probably at least let the sun rise first.”

“Oh.” She glanced around, looking for a clock. “Right. Yeah. In the morning, then.” She looked back up at him. “What about you? Do you need a nap?” He frowned slightly at her, and she clarified. “It didn’t look like it was particularly restful, earlier.”

His expression hollowed out, and the flash of pain she felt from him made her wish she hadn’t said anything. “Nah,” he said after a moment. “I’ll sleep later.”

“You sure?” she pressed.

“Absolutely, positively, completely sure.” He looked down at her with an expression that made her heart rate increase. “Rose?”

“Yes?” she replied, leaning her head against the long-fingered hand that had crept up to cup her ear.

It took him a few seconds to reply, and when he did, his voice was rough. “Thank you for coming back.”

“I promised you forever,” she said quietly, and felt his fingers twitch against her neck at the word. “That’s a promise I don’t intend to break.”

“Forever,” he whispered, and leaned slowly forwards. She could feel his nervousness and even without that she could feel his hand trembling, and she realized after a second that he was giving her time to pull away. So, instead, she leaned closer, turning her body into his. Her heart rate sped up as he paused, and for a half-second she was afraid

he was going to withdraw again. His brown eyes flicked back and forth over her face, making her wonder what he was looking for. “My Rose,” he breathed, and she couldn’t help the sudden smile spreading over her face.

But apparently that was the right reaction, because he tilted his head just a little further, and kissed her lightly.

It wasn’t like all the romance novels she’d read. There was no tongue action. His lips were cool against hers, not hot (of course—he was alien, cooler than she was; what had she been expecting?). He didn’t press or mash or nibble or any of the other cliched verbs she’d come to expect. It wasn’t searing, it wasn’t searching, and it certainly wasn’t passionate, not the way kisses on the telly were passionate.

But as she leaned up into it, her hands going of their own volition to wrap around his neck, she thought with a corner of her mind that it was so very *them*. It was gentle and uncertain and warm. It was, she thought, like a spark in a darkened room, like the first few drops of rain, or maybe like a kitten pouncing on a ball of string: it wasn’t fiery, or stormy, or fierce, but it hinted that it might be, someday, if they wanted. But what it most certainly was, and what she tried to pour back to him as much as it poured into her, was *loving*.

Slowly he pulled back, breathing just a little bit faster, his eyes finding hers again hesitantly. “My Doctor,” she told him, feeling her face crease in a smile.

He blinked, and then his face lit up with one of his wide, silly grins that made it impossible not to grin back. “Rose,” he said, and the grin became a little lopsided and uncertain. “I—you—was that—um—”

“You’re not making sense,” she told him, still grinning. “But yes, it was. I was. You were. We were.”

“You didn’t even hear the adjective,” he protested, but his grin widened again. “Maybe I was going to say...oh, I don’t know, ‘magenta’ or something.”

“You want to know if kissing me was *magenta*?” she asked him,

laughing. “Is that like being mauve?” His ears colored, and she giggled harder. “Your ears certainly are. Well, maybe they’re more...” She leaned back and forth, making a show of looking at them seriously. “Crimson. Or perhaps fuchsia.”

“My ears are *not* fuchsia,” he protested, still grinning sillily, but then he sobered. “So...you were all right with that?”

“More than all right,” she said, her grin transmuting into a gentle smile. “What about you?”

His ears lit up again, and this time his cheeks turned red too. “I’ve...um. I’ve wanted to do that for a while,” he admitted shyly. She grinned, and he tilted his head, looking at her curiously. “Would you mind if I did it again?”

“Go for it,” she told him, and he did.

————— *missing material* —————

“It’s been a long time since I did anything like this,” she admitted, putting her head down on his collarbone so she didn’t have to look at him.

“Me, too,” he said sheepishly, stroking her hair. “For all I know, this body is bollocks at it. Pun, er, not entirely intended.”

She laughed ruefully. “Nearly twelve years, for me.”

Time Lord, him; it didn’t take him very long to do the math in his head. He went very still, hand stopping on her head. “Oh, *Rose*. Please tell me you weren’t waiting for...” he trailed off, still unable to put voice to it.

“I wasn’t waiting for you,” she said, and felt a tremor run through him, both gladness and sorrow, and shame. “I was waiting for someone as good as you. Didn’t seem fair to... whoever... to be always comparing them and finding them wanting. I wanted someone I’d love on their own terms, not just... ‘cause they reminded me of you.”

There was a wash of some sweet emotion that felt like laughter and sunshine and running for your life, and he pulled her closer to him. “Oh, *Rose*,” he repeated, kissing the top of her head.

“Wait,” she said suddenly, making him pull back and look at her curiously. “You’ve never... this body...?”

“No,” he admitted, taking his hand off her hair to run it through his. “I, er... it’s been at least... let’s see... well, two bodies. Probably... a few hundred of your years? At least. It’s hard to tell.”

*Before the Time War*, she realized, a gentle smile growing involuntarily on her face. “Oh, *Doctor*,” she said, deliberately echoing him, and making an answering smile appear on his face. “But—” She frowned, something occurring to her. “What about Reinette?”

“Reinette?” he echoed, frowning back at her, doing that thing with his eyebrows that always made her heart skip. “What about Reinette?” He blinked a few times, and she could feel understanding dawn just as she opened her mouth to—well, put her foot in it, probably; she was just as glad he’d figured it out on his own. “Oh. *Oh*. You thought I... with Reinette... Oh.”

“You mean...” she trailed off, blushing and feeling rather small and stupid.

“Almost,” he admitted, blushing slightly himself and looking uncomfortable; she could feel his embarrassment like a soft prickling on her skin. “We didn’t actually... that is, I didn’t... she wanted... but I...”

She opened her mouth to say something, tell him he didn’t have to tell her, but he kept going without giving her a chance. “I almost did, Rose. She wanted it, and... yes, I loved her. She was bold, beautiful, brilliant, brave... all sorts of wonderful ‘b’ words.” Rose tried not to stiffen, tried not to let him feel how that hurt, but he was staring at the ceiling and she wasn’t sure he’d notice if she started to dance the samba right now. “And... oh, Rose, she reminded me so much of you. For just a few minutes, I could pretend... and that wasn’t fair to her.” He looked back down at her. “She didn’t mind. She said so. But... I couldn’t.”

She shook her head, making him tilt his curiously. “We’re a matched pair, we are. Listen to us.”

A broad smile grew across his face, and he pulled her close again. “A pair. I think I like that.”

“Doctor?” she asked after a moment, and he made a *Hm?* noise. “If... why’d you leave me for her?” He stiffened in the circle of her arms, and his face grew remote. “Cause... that’s what it felt like.”

“Oh.” His voice was small, and he pulled away from her. She let him go, but he caught her hand and pulled her after him, pulling her down to sit next to him on his bed. “Rose... you’re starting to sense time, right?”

She wrinkled her nose, making one corner of his mouth turn up in what could almost be a smile. “A little, yeah. It’s like... like... this immense tapestry. And if I get close enough, I can kind of... feel where it’s knotted, and where it’s smooth, and where there are holes.”

An expression of wonder had grown on his face as she talked, and she raised her eyebrows at him curiously. “TARDISES can’t talk,” he explained, one hand going to the side of her face again. “Not very well, anyway. Well, not in ways us little Time Lords understand. I knew they sensed time differently... but...” He shook his head. “You’re amazing. I don’t think I tell you that nearly enough.”

She smiled and rubbed against his hand like a cat. “Ta. But what does that have to do with Reinette?”

“For me...” he began slowly. “I can... to use your tapestry analogy, I’m in among the threads, I suppose. I can sort of... I can feel some of the effects, if I move this thread over here, or if someone snips that one short. I can feel the effects of... of threads that are nearer to me better.”

She tilted her head. “So... I see the holes, and you see how to patch them.”

He gave her a brilliant smile. “Rose... you are...” he shook his head. “Fantastic doesn’t cover it, you know that? But anyway. Where was I? Right. Threads.” He shifted like he wanted to get up and pace, but instead he took her hand, turning so he was facing her more. “I... Reinette was an important woman to history, Rose. She... I couldn’t

tell you all the effects I could feel if the clockwork droids had succeeded. The whole fabric of Earth history would have shifted.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “History was never my best subject,” she said a bit sheepishly. “I spent most of my time admiring the teacher’s butt and passing notes with Shareen. I’m not quite sure who she even was,” she admitted after a moment.

He laughed softly. “She was the power behind the French throne for years, Rose. She... well. She also made mistakes, and some of them were really important mistakes.” He took her other hand as well, staring at them and rubbing the backs with his thumbs. “But what mattered to me was... I’m not sure how; history is complicated enough when you look at it linearly. But... what I could feel was that if I didn’t do *something*, save her *somehow*... Rose, you’d never have been born.”

She stared at him. “I’d never have... What would have happened? Would I just have gone...” she pulled one of her hands out of his and made a popping gesture. “Fft? Or... Reapers?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “It’s possible that... you weren’t in your right time, you were with me. It’s possible you’d have survived. Time Lords... we sort of... bend time around us. But... I don’t know, Rose. I didn’t know. I couldn’t be sure.”

She could hear the echoes of his previous self in the way he stared at her, in the tone of his voice. *I could save the world, but lose you.* “Oh, Doctor.” She scooted closer to him on the bed, putting her head down on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry?” He stared at her. “For what? You’re not the one who leapt a horse through a one-way window and stranded you in a broken-down 51st century spaceship.”

“We’d have been fine,” she said. “You showed me how to work the emergency homing switch, remember?”

“That reminds me,” he said suddenly. “I need to re-program that so it goes to Cardiff.”

She laughed. “Where’s it set to now?”

“Your old flat,” he admitted. “A week after whenever we’d last left London.”

“I can just imagine us popping in on some poor old couple,” she said, laughing harder. “We’d give them a heart attack!”

“Can’t have that,” he told her. “No causing unnecessary heart attacks. It’s a new rule of mine. I’ll re-program it tomorrow.” She grinned at him and he smiled back before his expression suddenly grew solemn again. “Rose,” he said quietly. “I would have found a way back to you. If I had to wait, to live out those three thousand years, I would have found you. Even after... when everything I knew said it was impossible, I kept looking. I would have looked forever, for you.”

She stared at him, not sure what to say. *Thank you* seemed woefully inadequate. “Doctor,” she said unevenly.

He cupped her face in one of his long hands. “Rose,” he answered her. “Rose Tyler, I...” He put his thumb on her lips when she took a breath, and she stilled. “I love you.”

She couldn’t help the wide smile that grew across her face. He smoothed his thumb across her bottom lip, his own face stretching in a wide grin to match. “Now then,” he said before she could find words to reply. “I believe we were...” He tilted her head up and bent his own to hers, his hand slipping around her head to tangle in her hair as he pressed his lips to hers.

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She ran her hands down his chest and found the buttons of his suit, starting to work on getting them open. After a few more kisses, he returned the caress, sliding his palms over her shoulders and down her chest. She shivered as his hands paused before ghosting lightly over her breasts, then moved inwards to the buttons between them. “That’s harder than it looks,” he said as he paused to remove the now-unbuttoned jacket. “How did you get so good at it?”

“Not like that,” she said, hearing the faint note of jealousy in his voice. “Petey’s school requires they wear these little jackets, and he was always needing help buttoning them.”

“Oh,” he said, before getting distracted by the top button of her shirt.

She grinned at his expression of concentration, and then he'd gotten it open and was running his hands over the skin of her shoulders. “Mmm,” she hummed when he found a particularly sensitive spot on her left shoulder, then closed her eyes and leaned back into his supporting hand as he decided to see what it tasted like. “Ow!”

“Okay, less teeth. Right. Sorry,” he said, looking at her sideways.

“S'okay,” she responded, sitting back up and going back to work on his clothing. He returned to licking her neck, making her pause regularly and hum in delight. As he moved down to her shoulders, she fumbled for another button and realized she'd undone them all. “Oh. Ooh. I like that.”

He sucked on the spot he'd found again, grinning against her flesh as she moaned and started working on her own buttons. “I think you just like unbuttoning things,” he told her teasingly.

“Nah.” She undid her last button (and the one on her jeans, for good measure, making his eyes widen) and pulled him close for another kiss. “It's just sensible division of labor, 's all.”

“Ah, yes,” he said knowingly, in between nibbling at her lower lip. “Gains-to-trade. I see. Well. Let's see what I can find to trade back...”

“I'm sure you can find something,” she said, grinning at him as he discarded the now-unbuttoned clothing, leaving him in a tee and trousers. He stood for a moment to pull off the shoes, tossing them into a corner, before returning to sit next to her. She reached for him, running her hands under his shirt and around his waist before sliding them up his spine and pulling him to her for a kiss.

She was surprised when she felt a frisson of fear run through him at her touch. “What's wrong?” she asked, pulling back enough to look at his face. “I felt that.”

“I...” He was having trouble looking at her. “I'm, err...”

“You’re nervous,” she realized. “S’okay. Me too.”

“It’s... not just that,” he said, speaking to her right shoulder. “It’s... I want to ask you something, but...”

“You’re afraid of my answer?” she hazarded. He shrugged a little, and she frowned. “Afraid of my reaction?” She climbed further onto the bed, and scooted so she could wrap her arms all the way around him. “Doctor... I promise, whatever it is, I won’t get mad or upset or anything.”

“Promise?” he asked, sounding very unsure of himself, and she felt a swell of love in her chest for this amazing alien who was so old, and yet in some ways so young.

“I promise.”

He smoothed his hands down her sides, pulling her back enough that he could look her in the eyes. “It’s... you know I’m slightly telepathic.”

She nodded. “And... you said your species is...” She frowned. “Do you need a telepathic link to, uh...?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t need it. I can, uh, enjoy myself without one.” He looked away from her again, then glanced back, gazing at her from the corners of his eyes. “It’s... it’s just... more. With one.” He turned a light pink. “For you, too, I think. I don’t know. I’ve never... I mean...”

She put a finger on his lips, and he closed his mouth, looking at her worriedly. “What do we need to do?” she asked him.

He turned to face her again, hands cupping her shoulders before sliding up her neck to the base of her skull. She shivered at the touch, and a small smile returned to his lips. “I don’t think it’d be that hard,” he said thoughtfully. “I can almost—I think... Do you trust me?” he asked suddenly.

“Of course,” she told him, smiling.

“I remember... the Tardis, the translation, remember?” He frowned. “I don’t want you to feel I’ve... violated your mind, or anything.”

She gazed up at him. “Just tell me what you need me to do,” she said. “I trust you. With my mind, and everything else too.”

He smiled, then got an expression of concentration on his face as his fingers crept higher, cupping her ears and slipping along her temple. “Just... relax, and think of me.”

She ran a hand down his chest, and giggled as he shivered under her touch. “Not like that’s hard right now—*oh*.”

Suddenly she could feel her hand touching him, and the sensation of her hair under his fingers. She felt his amazement as he felt her wonder and joy, and then he dropped his hands and the link faded a little.

He laughed as she made a noise of disappointment. “It’ll strengthen again, as we... ah...”

“One of these days, we’ve got to teach you not to be embarrassed to talk about having sex,” she said to him before running her hands back under his shirt. Distantly she could feel his pleasure at being touched, and just a tinge of embarrassment at being touched so intimately. She drew back, and he made a slight sound before catching her hands in his.

“I... Rose, the Time Lords thought...” He paused, frowning, and she could feel his mind trying to organize a coherent explanation. “They thought of this sort of interaction—of sex, as being primitive and... dirty, I suppose would be your word for it.” She pulled back a little further, and he released one of her hands to cup her face. “I don’t think that,” he assured her solemnly. “But... it’s back there, in the back of my mind, that... that taboo.” He shook his head a little, looking frustrated. “I’m sorry it bothers you.”

“Oh, Doctor,” she said, reaching for him again, running her hand down the side of his face, then over his chest before laying it at the junction of thigh and torso. She felt him shiver under her hand, and in her mind she could feel his awareness of just how near her hand was to his groin. “It doesn’t bother me.” She slid the hand a few millimeters inwards, and he swallowed convulsively. “I just don’t want

to bother you.”

“Rose,” he replied, taking the hand off her head and stroking her chest, cupping one of her breasts in his long fingers. “You can bother me any time you’d like.”

She giggled, which turned into a gasp as he ran his thumb upwards over the nipple. A fascinated expression appeared on his face and he did it again, then again. “That reminds me, Doctor,” she said while she could still think in complete sentences. “Is there anything I should, you know, know about you?”

“Hm?” he said, sounding half distracted as he brought his other hand up to the other breast. “Know about me?” He flicked the other nipple, and she gasped again. “Mmm.”

She forced her brain to think about something other than his hands on hers and hers on him. “You’re an alien, to me anyway,” she said, and watched his eyes grow more focused. “And I’m an alien to you. Is there anything I should know, about your anatomy, about... I don’t know, things not to touch, or anything?”

He pulled back a little, dropping his hands to her sides, and smiling a little when she couldn’t stop the look of disappointment. “I... um.” He ran one hand through his hair, until she reached up and caught it. “There’s... it’s sort of a weird evolutionary holdover, I suppose.”

She tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“Um,” he said again, flushing red. “Where my... where a human would have... testicles, I don’t.”

“Okay,” she said after a moment. “No testicles. Check.”

“They’re, ah, internal,” he continued after a moment, tapping low on his torso. “My body temperature is lower than a human’s, so there’s no need for them to be external for cooling... well. You probably don’t care about that.” He blushed again. “Anyway... male Time Lords have... sort of... folds of skin there, instead. I suppose they’re a lot like testicles, without the... reproductive bits,” he added thoughtfully. “Anyway, they, ah, have to do with our time sense.”

Her eyebrows climbed, and she knew from his emotions that he could feel her amusement and disbelief. “You’ve got a time sensing organ where men—*human* men would keep their balls?”

“Pretty much,” he said in embarrassment.

“Should I avoid it, or...?”

“Er.” He blushed. “It... does feel good when...”

“Okay,” she said when he trailed off. “We’ll experiment, then.” He grinned, and she could feel him growing more aroused at the thought, which made her more aroused in turn. “Anything else?”

“Well...” He tucked his head against his chest. “There is one... sort of... it’s not... I mean, it’s not like the...”

“Doctor,” she said, feeling amused, and he looked back up at her. “You’re not making sense.”

He took a deep breath and she felt him gathering his courage. “Gallifreyan women aren’t fertile until they’ve climaxed,” he said distantly. “The more orgasms they reach, the more likely that conception will occur.” She could tell from the feeling of his embarrassment that he needed to retreat into the intellectual, and didn’t say anything. “So male Gallifreyans... we’re wired so that the orgasm of a partner is... well, I don’t want to say *necessary*, because it isn’t, but it... *assists* in our own pleasure.”

She contemplated this new information. “So you can’t, uh, wank or anything?”

“No,” he said, turning even redder. “No, we can... masturbate. But it’s... not very good. And with a partner, the more...” His eyes focused on her at last. “The more times you climax before I do, the better it’ll be for me.”

Her eyes went wide. “Oh.” She could feel her nipples tightening at the thought, and could feel wetness against her inner thighs.

His eyes went wide a moment later, and she realized he’d caught the thought. “There’s... uh, a few more... but... oh, I’ll show you when we get there,” he murmured, and reached for her with both hands. This time he slipped them inside the unbuttoned shirt and ran

his thumbs over her nipples, then hooked them into the cups of her bra and tried running the fingernails directly over them.

She arched involuntarily against his hands, grabbing for his shoulders to keep from overbalancing. “Mmm,” she said incoherently, and then a disappointed “oh” as he removed his hands. Looking at her intently, he slid her shirt off, then reached around her, fumbling with the bra clasp. “Here, let me,” she said, reaching behind her and unhooking it.

He slipped the straps off her arms, then held the bra up, looking curiously at the clasp. “Ah!” he said, seemingly enlightened. “I see. Hooks.”

“Yup,” she replied, amused.

“Sensible,” he pronounced it seriously, then set the garment aside, attention caught by her breasts. “Beautiful.”

She giggled a little, and he smiled at her. Scooting closer to her, he slid so that he was sitting sideways against her crotch, sending a shiver through both of them, before pushing her backwards until she was lying on the bed. “There,” he said in satisfaction. “Much harder to fall over like that.” She giggled again, and felt his answering amusement at her amusement. Then he lay down next to her and she forgot why she was laughing in a rush of arousal as he pushed himself up on his elbow and leaned over her.

Now that both of her hands were free and she didn’t need to worry about stability issues, she was free to run her hands all over the parts of him she could reach. She discovered that he loved it when she ran her hands over his back, and that his navel was slightly ticklish. In turn, he discovered that the outside of her breasts were ticklish, but that she loved it when he sucked on the skin just underneath her right nipple.

He leaned closer, kissing his way from the nearer breast to the far breast, and she shivered as his tee brushed against the side of her breast as he leaned over her. After a few moments, he pulled back, looking her in the eyes intently for a moment before reaching for his

hem.

Her hands drifted to his torso of their own accord as he pulled his tee off in one swift movement before lying back down next to her. “Oh,” she said, slightly surprised. “You really have no chest hair.”

“Nope,” he said, slight amusement drifting through them. “Not the way human males do, anyway—there’s a bit, but...” His eyes went unfocused for a moment as she ran her hands up and down his torso. “Not this body, anyway. Not much hair, us, generally. *Oh.*”

She’d found his nipples with her thumbs, and was returning the favor he’d so recently been giving her, flicking her thumbs over them lightly. His head went back, and his eyes defocused for a moment, and she seized the opportunity. “Ah,” she said, “But do you have hair...” Slipping her fingers under his waistband, she brushed the fingernails lightly along the flesh underneath them.

“N... no,” he managed to get out, as arousal and desire flooded the link between them. “R... rose...”

“Hm?” She curled her fingers forwards, brushing against something warm and hard before removing them from his trousers.

“Do much... more of that,” he said unevenly, rolling closer to her, “and... I don’t know what’ll happen, but...”

“Good,” she said, startling him. “Because whatever it is, I want it too.”

He looked down at her with eyes that had gone wide, and slowly a smile crept across his face. “Really,” he breathed, dipping down so his lips ghosted across her nipple as he spoke.

“Oh...” She managed to remember there had been a question involved. “Yes, really. *Oh!*”

He took the nipple between his lips, grazing over it with his teeth before flicking it with his tongue as he sucked on it. His free hand drifted lower, sliding over her stomach before settling on the waistband of her jeans. “Would... would you mind,” he said against her breast, “if I took these off?”

“Course not,” she said, arching as he tugged lightly on them.

To her mild surprise, he pulled both jeans and knickers off together, sliding them down to her knees before apparently becoming confused as to how to get them the rest of the way off. She sat up and worked the legs off over her feet, tossing them into the corner on top of his shoes. “There,” she said, smiling at him. “No more jeans.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her lightly back down before lying down next to her. He put his hand back on her right breast, teasing the nipple gently before sliding his hand slowly down her stomach. “You have so much hair,” he marveled as he approached the mound of fluffy pubic hair, sliding his fingers into it and combing through it. “It’s so springy!”

She giggled and smiled at him when he looked up at her in mild surprise. “It tickles a little,” she said and pulled him back up for a long, slow kiss. She broke it off only when his hand slipped lower and her head flew back involuntarily.

“Hm,” he said, then went on after a moment, “I could feel that. . . that felt good.” He explored with light touches, until she realized she was spreading her legs and arching into his touch. “Ah—you like that,” he said with satisfaction, running one fingertip over the top of her slowly-swelling clitoris.

“Mmm, yes,” she managed to say, arching into the touch until her hips left the bed. “Doctor, please—”

He rested his hand on her thigh, gazing at her seriously until she whimpered, just wanting him to hurry up and *touch*. “You want this,” he said in a low voice, and the amazement and wonder she could feel in him cleared her head a little.

“Yes, I do,” she answered him. “I want. . . I want you to touch me, to hold me, to fill me. . . I want you, Doctor.”

His smile grew into one of his sillier grins. “Well, then,” he said, and turned his attention back to her vulva. Walking his fingers inward, he rested them on her clitoris for a moment before flicking each fingertip over it in turn, making her arch off the bed and make a strangled noise in the back of her throat. She watched his face, smiling

and concentrated by turns, feeling both the touch on her skin and the echoes of her skin touching his as he placed his thumb on her clitoris and stroked it gently before sliding his first and middle fingers slowly between the folds of her inner lips. “So wet,” he murmured. “Smells. . . salty.” He dipped his head and licked curiously, and she let out a moan. “Mmm.” He slid his torso back up her body, kissing her gently before ducking his head and sucking her nipple into his mouth. She gasped, and as his tongue (and she could *feel* it against his lips, feel her rough nipple against it as she felt the texture against her nipple. . . and oh, yes, *there*. . .) reached out to touch the hard nipple, he slid his fingers lower, dipping them just inside her.

“Oh!” she gasped, arching into the touch, and he responded by slipping his middle finger further into her, exploring the textures and fleshy corners of her vagina. She could feel the warm heat against his fingers, feel how the skin of his fingers slid against the rough, nubbly skin of the first inch or so of her vagina. “Please,” she begged him, and he slid the finger further in, slipping it into her until she could feel (through him) the soft firmness of her cervix against his finger.

Her head flew up as he abruptly switched breasts, laying half over her as his mouth closed on the left breast, sucking that nipple into his mouth and nipping it lightly with his teeth. He scooted closer to her, resting his right hand lightly against her until he could pinch the abandoned right nipple between thumb and forefinger. He gave each nipple several simultaneous flicks with thumb or tongue, and then, just as she was getting ready to beg, began to move his finger inside her.

He began by exploring her, feeling around and into the corners and nooks and crannies, making a mental catalog (she could feel him doing it) of all the places that made her tense, the places that made her moan, and the places that made her arch into him. Once he had thoroughly mapped her in his mind, he began rubbing and curling his finger inside her, making her fight to keep her eyes open. Her mouth flew open and she gasped as he started sucking and licking her nipple in time with his strokes inside her, winding her tighter and tighter until all

she could think of was his finger inside her and his mouth and hand on her breasts. Dimly she was aware of knotting her hands in the sheets and of making incoherent little sounds, but all of her attention was focused on the spot inside her that seemed to be working itself into a tense little knot. When he began to lightly stroke her clitoris with his thumb, she thought she might have screamed, but she wasn't sure.

Then, simultaneously, he bit her nipple, pinched the other with his fingers, and gave an especially strong stroke inside her with his finger, and she exploded. Instantly he stopped moving and she wanted to cry, clutching at his shoulders as he slowly pulled his finger out from inside her and took his mouth off her nipple.

He sat back, watching her with a satisfied look in his eyes as she panted, breasts heaving, and raised his hand to his mouth. Slowly, watching her as he did so, he licked all the fluid off his hand, sucking on the digits in turn. "Mmm," he said after a moment. "I think I like that."

"Good," she managed, rolling over towards him. He readily went with her as she pulled him down next to her, propping himself back up on his elbow and running his free hand over her shoulder and arm. "C'mere," she whispered, and kissed him.

She could taste herself in his mouth through him, and taste herself on her own lips, and she surprised herself and him by growling. Sitting unsteadily up, she reached for his trouser fly, echoing his motions earlier as she undid it and pulled the rest of his clothes off him, although unlike him, she was not baffled by the problem of getting them over his heels. Instead, she took the opportunity to divest him of his socks as well, and tossed the whole lot on top of her clothes.

He lay back on the sheets, watching her, and she could feel his curiosity, his arousal, and a slight tinge of fear. She sat back on her heels and just ran her gaze over him, down from his face to his toes and back up again. After a few passes, she could feel him relaxing as she found nothing too strange to cope with, and it was only then that she crawled back next to him.

“All right?” he asked her gently, raising a hand to cup her shoulderblade.

“Better than all right,” she reassured him, smiling. “Tell me if you don’t like anything, yeah?”

“I don’t think,” he said as she put a hand on his stomach, “that I’ll need to—eep!”

She’d found his navel and tickled it gently. “You were saying?”

“Well, I take that back,” he said, grinning at her. “Except that I know very well you know that I know that you know what I’m feeling.”

She paused, tilting her head as she worked that one out, and he chuckled. In retaliation, she tickled him again, making his stomach muscles tense, and also making his penis twitch upwards. Curiously, she reached for it, sliding the flat of her hand slowly down its length before curling her hand around it and brushing her fingers back up.

He made a noise somewhere between a choke and a moan, and she could feel her own stroking through their link, as well as feel the way he fought the urge to arch, to flip her over and. . . “There’s a few things that are different about me,” he said in a surprisingly coherent voice as she paused.

“Oh?” she asked, tilting her head and peering at the organ in question curiously.

“Yup,” he said, popping the ‘p’ as he propped his head up on one arm and brought the other around to curl over her fingers. “The top. . . oh, a little less than half, three-sevenths, maybe? Feel there?” He directed her hand on him, and she nodded as she felt a difference in the texture. “That’s muscle, the top bits. Not like humans; only the bottom half’s held erect with blood.” He grinned at her expression, and then concentrated. “Lets me do. . . this.”

She gasped and then giggled as he made the tip—just the tip!—move in a circle, then back and forth. “That’s a pretty flexible penis you got there,” she said, grinning at him with just the tip of her tongue sticking out.

“Yup,” he said again, smiling up at her. “One more thing.”

He gently pulled back what would, on a human, be the foreskin, and showed her a series of nubbins ringing his tip. “These are both very sensitive, and a little mobile.” He concentrated, and she giggled as they moved in small circles. “Not much conscious control over them,” he said, breathing a little heavily. “But I didn’t want you to get scared if you felt them move.”

“Ta,” she told him, wrinkling her nose at him and grinning. “If you’re done showing off...?”

“Oh, no,” he said in a voice that made her blood rush south again. “I’m nowhere near done with that, Rose Tyler.” Then he broke out with a broad grin and crossed his arms behind his head, leaning back on them. “But you go ahead, explore.” For a moment she thought he’d say something else, but then he closed his mouth and relaxed, just smiling at her.

She took a deep breath and looked at him for another moment, feeling his emotions in the back of her head. She could feel him feeling her fear, and felt him reach out with wordless assurance—and a touch of *oh good, not just me*, she realized with a bit of a giggle. Reassured, she reached out again and explored around his penis first, touching the smooth skin with fingers that were at first hesitant, but then grew firmer as she felt his arousal build at the touch. When that didn’t hurt (felt good, indeed, a feeling that made her own stomach grow tense with want) she moved her fingers lower, to what he’d told her was his time-sensing organ.

“Gentle,” he warned her on a gasp, and she reached out a single finger and touched it to the ruckled skin. It reminded her more than a little of her own inner lips, all bumps and folds and soft, hairless skin. When the simple touch made him gasp, she tried brushing the surface ever so lightly with a finger. His entire body shuddered, and she could feel as his innate sense of time stuttered and grew fuzzy in the wake of her finger. Two fingers, dragged lightly the other direction, made him let out a moan. Worried about overloading his senses, she continued the motion, stroking the length of his penis firmly with her

fingers before wrapping her hand around him and rubbing her thumb in a circular motion over the nubbins at his tip.

He cried out, a word in a language the Tardis wouldn't translate, but inside his head, she could feel the shape of the word, all soft and gentle but also hard with want and desire. She grinned at him and stroked down along his length, and he moaned the same word on a long exhale. She removed her hand, gratified as he arched towards it unconsciously, then moved her fingers back down and repeated her original motion, stroking the skin of his time organ (and she really had to get him to tell her its proper name) before continuing up his penis to the tip. This time his moan had no words, and she could feel his pleasure like an explosion in her own groin.

There she paused for a moment, hesitating. Mickey and Jimmy had both insisted that she suck them, but Jimmy had had this habit of ramming into the back of her mouth, and she'd hated it, hated the way it made her gag, hated the way he loved it when she gagged. Should she? She was sure he'd like it, but—

There was movement under her hand, and she realized he'd propped himself up on his elbows and was looking at her. "Rose," he said gently. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. I don't *want* you to do anything you don't want to."

"You sure?" she asked, feeling unsure and more than a little embarrassed.

"I'm sure," he reassured her, reaching out and wrapping his hand around her knee. "Remind me to ask you about this Jimmy later, okay?"

"Okay," she said, biting her lip and trying to recapture the mood. He smiled at her and tweaked her breast, and she gasped a little. *Right. Mood found*, she thought, and smiled back at him as she stroked her hand back down to the base of his penis again. His eyes darkened as the pupils dilated, and he laid back down with a small gasp. She could feel him fighting to remain still, and she traced all five fingers over the folds of his time organ (*really* needed to find out its name) before cupping it

in her hand and blowing on it, then rubbing small circles over it on her way back up.

He moaned and bucked as she wrapped her fingers around him again. “R—rose,” he said unevenly, “if you—I don’t know how long I can keep from. . .”

She paused, feeling him fighting in his mind. A human male would be feeling an urge to thrust into her hand, to pump against her, but she realized (now that she was paying attention) that wasn’t what he was feeling. He was fighting an urge to flip over, push her down, and use his fingers to. . . *oh*.

Slowly she traced her fingers lightly up his length to his tip, then rubbed her thumb in circles around the nubbins under his foreskin. They moved under her fingers as he bucked again, arms twitching and fisting in the covers. “R. . . Rose,” he said again.

She rubbed him slowly again, and while his mind was too distracted to notice she was moving, she quickly flung her leg over him so that she was kneeling straddling him. She knee-walked forwards, then lowered herself so that he was just brushing her vulva.

His eyes flew wide open, and he said something in what she suspected was his native language. In his head, it was shaped with want and need and desire and the urge to fill and stroke and—she bucked against him as he slid his hand around her wrist to rub cool fingers against her clitoris, feeling the surge of pleasure as the motion rubbed his tip against her. His other hand came up to grasp her hip, and she half-closed her eyes to better concentrate on the feeling to both of them as she deliberately rubbed him against her.

He twitched against her, and his hand reflexively gripped her thigh as he fought with his instincts. Pushing his hand away from her vulva gently, she used her free hand to spread her inner lips before moving him to point at the opening to her vagina, the tip brushing her lightly. He threw back his head and moaned, but also moved his hand to catch hers where she was holding him. “Rose,” he said breathlessly, and she could feel the indecision in him. “Are you—”

Rather than answer him verbally, she concentrated on what she was feeling as she sank carefully down onto him, adjusting the angle as he began to penetrate her. She felt his mind clear, and he moved his hand from her hip, gently pushing her hand off him. With the other he cupped the mound of her pubic hair, inner wrist facing her, and used the tip of his middle finger to rub at her clitoris.

Her knees went wobbly, and he grinned at her as she collapsed down onto her hands over him. “Rose,” he said hoarsely. “Let me do the work. That knee’s still not healed.”

She realized she was feeling pain in it, and saw him grin as he realized she’d only just felt it. “Okay,” she responded, equally breathless. “Do you want me to move, or—?”

He shook his head and grinned more broadly at her. “Nope. This gives me both hands free.” He moved the hand that was cupping her pubic bone, bringing another finger into range. She gasped and threw her head back as he pinched her clitoris between them, and he took the opportunity to slide part-way into her, shifting his other hand back to rest on her hip and steady her as he moved.

Slowly he pulled back out, until his tip was barely parting her inner lips, and she heard herself whimper. Then he began to push back into her, moving so slowly that her arms began to tremble and she fought the urge to thrust down onto him. He moaned, and she could feel the sensation of her muscles clamping down around the sensitive tip of his penis as he slowly entered her.

He rocked back and forth under her, penetrating her a little further each time, but moving so slowly she thought she would never be able to remain still. Finally she felt soft skin against her buttocks and soft curls against her thighs and stomach, and a pressure deep inside and on her tip (*her* tip? no, his), and realized he was entirely within her, entirely filling her. She blinked eyes open she hadn’t realized she’d closed to find him watching her, an unfamiliar expression on his face.

“Rose,” he said unevenly, pulling all the way out again and

thrusting back into her slightly more rapidly, then repeating the motion.

“Doctor,” she responded, falling to her elbows as her joints gave out with the strength of the sensations from both their nerves. He smiled and leaned up far enough to kiss her, only ending the kiss when she cried out as he pushed into her again. “Doctor!”

She became aware of his fingers drawing soft patterns on her clitoris, and the slow tightening of her gut and inner muscles as he wound her back up, tighter and tighter, until she thought she might break. “Rose,” he whispered in her ear, and then he began to use that marvelous muscle of his, rubbing spirals into her walls as he thrust into her and curling against that spot inside her that made her gasp as he pulled back out. “Rose,” he whispered again. “Come for me, Rose.”

She wanted to tell him that she was trying, but couldn’t find any words. She could feel herself wrapped around him, squeezing tighter and tighter, and could feel the tightness in her groin (or was it his? was there a difference?) as he thrust into her again. And then he did something with his fingers, or maybe it was with his penis inside her, and she exploded, crying out his name and clenching around him as she came. One final thrust—and *oh* the feeling of her clenching on his penis, the feeling of being buried deep inside her—and he was crying out too, saying her name over and over. “Rose! Oh, Rose. *Rose.*”

He continued to thrust until their convulsions stopped, then took her hips and eased her down until she was lying on top of him. She shifted knees that she hadn’t realized had started to burn (had she been thrusting? she had thought that was him) and let her weight rest on his hips and chest.

“Well,” he said, combing fingers through her hair where it was resting on his chest. “That was. . .”

She tilted her head to look up at him and grinned. “Fantastic,” they said together. His smile widened until they were grinning at each other like madmen. “Yes,” she said. “It was.”

“Thank you,” he told her after a moment, smile sliding off his

face as he regarded her with an intensity she could feel in her bones. “Thank you,” he repeated.

She slid her hands up to cup his shoulders, as close as she could get to a hug with him on the bottom and both their weight on him. “Anytime,” she told him, rubbing her cheek against his chest.

He spread his hands along her spine, running them slowly up and down. “No, I mean it,” he insisted quietly. “I... I’ve never... shared that with anyone.”

She blinked at him. “You’ve never... this was your first...?”

“No,” he said, blushing a little. “No. But I’ve never done that with... with the link in place.” His hands stilled on her back. “There’s never been anyone I wanted to... to share it with.”

“Oh,” she said, regarding him with no little wonder. “Doctor?”

“Hmm?” he murmured, watching her with a small smile on his lips.

“I love you.”

His hands stilled again, then wrapped around her in a gentle hug. “I love you, too.”

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They lay there quietly for perhaps a minute before Rose could feel the Doctor’s mind starting to gear back up to speed again. Her mouth quirked, and she started counting the seconds until—

“I wonder why humans are hairier than Gallifreyans? I suppose it could just be more time to evolve. Well—I say *evolve*, but really it was more like breeding.”

Rose couldn’t honestly recall the last time he’d brought up his species’ habits (breeding or otherwise) on his own. “Breeding?”

“My people gave up natural reproduction a long time ago.” He ran a hand down her back. “Thought it was too random and messy, from what I gather. Although, I’m starting to wonder if the real reason was that if they didn’t, they’d never get anything done.”

“I think I’ll take that as a compliment,” she decided, putting her hand on his chest and propping her chin up on it so she could watch his face.

He grinned at her. “Oh, yes. Definitely. Anyway, you’d be surprised how fast you can get a species to change when you select for certain traits. Or maybe you wouldn’t. I suppose it was only the last two centuries for you that saw the explosion of selective breeding of livestock, after all.”

She contemplated this for a bit. “So—your people bred you to be hairless? Like... like a sphinx cat?”

“No,” he said slowly. “I don’t think so. Wouldn’t put it past them, but I don’t think they did. Probably a side-effect of breeding for something else—linked genes, you know, like floppy ears and trainability.”

“What?” She raised her head to stare at him.

“Oh. Has that study not been done yet? I can’t remember when you lot got around to it.” He frowned. “Maybe that was the turn of the twenty-first century, not the twentieth. Anyway, someone decided to try breeding foxes, selecting only on how fast they could learn tasks, and discovered that after a few generations, they also got floppy ears.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hmm. So maybe the lack of hair is linked to—oh, I don’t know, the time sense or something.” He considered this seriously, tucking his chin against his chest and staring at her forehead. “Can’t exactly go back and check the records, can I?”

She pressed her cheek against his chest, hearing the regular thumps of his hearts in her ear, and wished she knew what to say to make the ache in his voice go away.

“On the other hand,” he said after a moment, “I suppose it’s not like it really matters all that much.” He stroked her hair. “You all right?” he asked suddenly.

“Better than all right,” she reassured him again. “Although—what’s s’posed to happen to the link, now?”

He frowned a little. “Should fade, I should think.” He slid a hand up to rest lightly on her head. “I . . . could break it now. If you wanted.”

She blinked at him, trying to figure out if he wanted her to say yes or no. He moved his fingers towards her temple, but she caught the flash of disappointment he tried to hide from her. “No,” she said quickly, and his fingers hesitated before caressing her cheek. “It’s . . .”

He frowned again, peering down at her when she hesitated. “What?”

“It’s not all that different from what I normally feel when I touch you,” she admitted. “Except that I get physical sensations too.”

“It’s not?” Now it was his turn to blink at her in surprise. “Rose, sometime when we both have the time, we should run a few tests on you.” She knew he felt her tense, and he amended quickly, “I mean tests like . . . trials. Games. Can you correctly pick the card I’m holding, that sort of thing.” He traced her hairline with a finger. “I’ve never . . . it’s been eons, quite literally, since TARDISEs developed like this. I just want to keep some sort of . . . of an eye on what’s going on with you.”

“Oh.” She relaxed against him, and felt his stomach muscles relax under her too. “Okay.”

They stayed like that, just holding each other, for several lazy minutes, before another biological need made itself felt. Groaning, Rose pushed herself up and off of him, feeling him finally slip from within her. He let her go, but trailed his fingers down her arms as she moved away. “Sorry,” she said, a bit embarrassed. “I, er, need to use the loo.”

“Oh.” He pushed himself up to a sitting position. “There’s one—”

“—through there.” She pointed. “I’ll just be right back.”

When she returned, he was sitting on the edge of the bed lacing up his shoes again. “I’m hungry,” he told her, looking up with a smile when she paused in the doorway. He had reclaimed his trousers and socks, but had yet to put anything on his torso, and she just leaned

against the wall and watched him with a smile. He blushed a little, but finished tying his shoe and stood up, walking over to her and holding out his arms. She walked into them and put her head down on his shoulder as he held her. "I bet you are, too," he said in her ear.

"Mmm." Her stomach rumbled, and they both laughed. "I could do with a little something." She leaned against him for another moment before pulling away and going to sort out her own clothes. "It's not yet six in the evening. We might be able to talk Jack into showing us a good curry place."

He paused, his tee dangling from his arms. "Curry?"

She nodded, pausing to fasten her bra before replying verbally. "There's this great curry place on my way home from work, and I usually stop in there every time I actually get off work on time." He stopped, standing completely frozen; she pulled her jeans back on and fastened them before she noticed he wasn't moving and quickly replayed what she'd said in her head. "Oh, Doctor." She walked over and took the front of his shirt from his still hands, buttoning it with careful fingers. "I'm not going to desert you for Torchwood."

He watched her hands, his brown eyes distant. "It's okay to want that, Rose," he said quietly. "You've built a life for yourself, a wonderful, fantastic life. You shouldn't abandon it all because..." He trailed off, running a hand through his hair.

"Yes, I have," she told him, and felt him flinch under her fingers. "I have a job I love, a house with carpets and doors and windows, and a Siamese cat named Cassandra." He pulled back, tugging his shirt out of her fingers and doing up the last buttons himself before turning away to pick up his jacket. She let him go for the moment, trying to figure out exactly what to say. "But, Doctor..."

"It's all right," he said to the far wall. "I understand."

"No," she told him, "I don't think you do." She walked around in front of him, and he wasn't quite quick enough to get the look of pain off his face. "Do you know why I have a cat, Doctor?"

He shook his head mutely, his eyes watching her with a look she

hadn't seen on his face since he'd regenerated.

She closed the distance between them and put a hand on his chest. The anguish that trickled up her arm made her want to cry. "Because she lets me hold her in the middle of the night when it's all too much, when I want *so badly* to tell you something but you're not there, or when I wake up from a dream of the Tardis and it isn't real. She sits with me and listens to all the daft little stories that bore everybody else to tears, and she never tells me I'm being silly for still missing you." She could feel his chest shuddering under her hand as he breathed in. "Yes, we'll have to figure out something, at least until I can train a replacement." At the word 'we', she felt him flinch, and moved closer. "But I love you, Doctor, and you'd have to throw me out an airlock to get rid of me."

Something in his face melted, and his arms crept forwards like he wanted to hug her but couldn't quite bring himself to touch her. "No airlocks. Can't have that," he told her, and the hitch in his voice betrayed his attempt to make his tone light.

She moved the last few inches, wrapping her arms about him and putting her head down on his shoulder. Slowly, almost tentatively, he wrapped his arms around her in return. "I meant it, Doctor," she said to his collarbone. "Forever."

Something wet fell on her head, and she realized after she felt his chest hitch again that he was crying. "Rose," he said into her hair, "I don't deserve you."

"No, you don't," she said, and felt him flinch again. "But I don't deserve you, either."

"Course not," he said, so quietly she wondered if he realized he was speaking aloud. "You deserve someone better."

She pulled back, and he let her go instantly, averting his eyes as she raised hers to his face. There were tear tracks on his cheeks, and he sniffed quietly as she looked at him. "Doctor," she said quietly, but forcefully, and reached for his face.

His eyes finally met hers, and then widened as she slipped her

fingers into place at his temples. “Rose, what are you—”

If she could feel his feelings, maybe she could make him feel hers. She gathered together every scrap of love she felt for him, the delight that bubbled up in her when she watched him bouncing around, the joy she’d felt when he kissed her. For a moment, she just basked in the warm glow of the feelings inside her, and then took them and mentally shoved them down her arms into him.

He gasped and went rigid, and for a moment she was terrified that she’d hurt him accidentally. His eyes fluttered shut, and he reached for her, pulling her against him with a strength that made the breath whuff out of her. “Rose,” he said into her hair, and she could feel more tears trembling behind his voice. “Oh, Rose.”

“My Doctor,” she said, and knew the immediate crisis was averted when she felt him smile and his chest hitched in what could almost have been a chuckle. “I mean it, you know. Forever.”

“Forever,” he whispered into her hair.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” she said after a moment. “With the—the—emotions thing?”

“No.” He shook his head. “You just surprised me, that’s all.” He rested his cheek against her head, and she could feel him concentrating. Suddenly there was a rush of feelings, joy and laughter and wonder and an aching need that left her breathless. There was a pause, and before she’d had the opportunity to catch her breath, there was a cascade of love that poured into her, filling the lonely corners of her soul and casting light into the dark places where she kept her doubts. “I love you, Rose Tyler,” he said finally, his voice rough.

“I love you too, Doctor,” she whispered, and he tilted her head up with one hand. He kissed tears she didn’t remember crying off her face, and then lightly kissed her lips.

They stood, trading kisses and basking in the glow of shared love, until her stomach rumbled again. They broke off, both chuckling, and the Doctor said, “I did promise food.”

“Yup,” she said, grinning up at him, and her heart lightened

when he grinned back. “And I mean to hold you to it, too, mister.”

They found her shoes and wandered out of the Tardis hand-in-hand, finding Jack bent over one of the computers, frowning at it as he typed.

“Hello, Jack,” the Doctor said.

“Hello,” Jack replied, looking up. For a moment, he looked distracted, and then his eyes sharpened as Rose headed over to peer at his screen. “I know that kind of walk. Congratulations, you two.”

She turned bright red, and a quick glance at the Doctor proved he was blushing, too. “Er, thanks.”

He stood up and hugged her. “I’m glad for you, love. And it’s about time, too.” Then, being Jack, he tilted her head up and snogged her thoroughly.

“Hey!” the Doctor protested.

“Oh, fine,” said Jack, and releasing Rose, he walked over and snogged the Doctor too.

She giggled, watching the Doctor’s hands flail before settling on Jack’s waist, and tried to ignore the small reignition of lust in her belly as she watched them. “Boys,” she said finally, and watched them break apart, Jack looking satisfied and the Doctor looking... thoroughly snogged.

“Yes, Rose?” Jack said in his best sultry voice. She smacked him on the arm. “Ow!”

“We were hoping you could show us a good place to get—” She smacked him again as he waggled his eyebrows at her mid-sentence. “Curry, you oversexed lump.”

“Lump, now, is it?” Jack pouted, then in a mood change almost as rapid as the Doctor’s could be, he sobered. “I can’t. There’s something weird going on with the Rift.”

She instantly straightened, the grin falling off her face as she mentally changed gears into the Director for Alien Relations, Torchwood Institute. Beside her, she could feel the Doctor doing a similar mental transition. “What’s going on?” he said, voice all business.

“It’s been weird ever since Rose came back,” Jack said, sitting back down and pointing at the screen. The Doctor walked around Jack’s chair to peer over his shoulder, frowning and glancing between the graphs. “Then about... eighty-three minutes ago, we had a minor Rift-quake—see, where it spikes, here and there? And then a big one about fifty-six minutes ago. That’s these huge peaks here and here, and this wobble here. It’s been rumbling ever since, and we’re worried it’s building up to something huge.”

She frowned, her nascent time-sense alerting her to something about those precise minutes. She tilted her head, looking over at the Doctor as she tried to chase it down, and then—she stiffened as she realized what it was, and saw him straighten. They looked at each other, and turned bright red. “Er,” she said.

“Um,” said the Doctor.

“What?” asked Jack, looking between them in confusion. Luckily, he was a bright man, and his eyes widened before either of them could say anything but “um” again. “*Oh.*” He raised an eyebrow at the Doctor. “You mean this was all caused by your orgasm?”

“Actually,” the Doctor said, rubbing at the back of his head, “I think I’m not the one to blame.”

They both looked at Rose, who felt her face burning. “Heh,” Jack said in obvious amusement. “Rose Tyler, who knew?” He shook his head. “Now that brings a whole new meaning to ‘making the universe move’. I think I’m jealous.”

She blushed harder, but couldn’t keep from grinning widely. It slid off, however, as the potential consequences occurred to her, and she sat down on the edge of the desk to steady herself. “It didn’t, uh, do any damage, did it?”

Jack shook his head. “No. So far we haven’t even found anyone who fell through it, and it doesn’t seem to have affected the physical world at all.” He pointed to the graphs. “In fact, it went *less* physical if anything.” He looked back at her, and a grin stole across his face. “Maybe we should get you off every time it starts acting up, if that’ll

get it to quit shaking things around.”

She smacked him lightly. “I am not a Rift Manipulator, Jack.”

“No?” He pulled a disappointed face, but the corners of his lips twitched. “Aww. You’re no fun.” The Doctor chuckled and said something under his breath, making Rose blush again. “Well, now that we know what happened, I should call the team off. They’re out taking readings and trying to figure out what on earth could have caused that quake.”

He stood up and wandered away from the computer, touching his earpiece. “Gwen. Yes, we figured it out. Turned out to be Rose’s fault, apparently. No, just—” He broke off when Rose gave him a glare. “I’ll explain later. Yes, Tosh can keep taking her readings if she wants to, but—no, I don’t think that’s necessary. Yes. We were going to go for curry, and I wanted to invite you lot—yes. Okay. Twenty minutes.” He keyed off the earpiece again and turned back to them. “They’ll be here in twenty minutes—I hope you don’t mind I invited them. Least I can do for sending them out in the rain on a wild goose chase.”

The Doctor looked at Rose, who nodded. “It’s fine by me,” she responded. “I’m sorry we worried you.” Jack looked at her for a moment, and she grinned and blushed. “Okay, I’m not, but I’m still sorry you were worried.”

He laughed. “It’s okay, Rosie.” He walked back over and cupped her face, smoothing away the frown she hadn’t realized had appeared. “I’m happy for you, love. Really.”

“Really?” she asked him, feeling childish even as she said it.

“Really really,” he assured her. “Even if it did give us a bit of a scare.”

“What’s this?”

They looked over, discovering that the Doctor had wandered off and started poking around. They looked at each other with mutual expressions of ‘not again’, and Rose giggled. “It’s the remains of a glove we found,” Jack answered, his voice going slightly more serious. “Tosh was taking it apart to see if we could recover any of the technology.”

“Hm.” The Doctor frowned, pulling out his screwdriver and scanning the pile of metal parts on the table. “Hmm.”

“That’s not a happy noise,” Rose observed. “What’s wrong, Doctor?”

“Hm?” He looked up, switching the screwdriver off. “Nothing.” They both stared at him disbelievingly, and he shifted from one foot to the other. “Well. When I say nothing, I mean I’m not certain. Not really. I mean—”

“Doctor,” Jack said.

He rubbed the back of his head. “No, really, Jack. I thought I might recognize it, but—what did you do to it, anyway? It’s a mess.”

“Shot it,” Jack said succinctly.

“What’d you do that for?” the Doctor asked, frowning, then cut Jack off before he could reply. “Oh. You used it, didn’t you?”

Jack nodded tensely. “Long story.” He paused. “Not me, personally, though.”

The Doctor relaxed slightly. “I’d like to look at it later, if you don’t mind.” He put his hands back in his pockets and wandered back over to them, absently wrapping an arm around Rose’s shoulders as she leaned her head against his side. Jack gave them a look that she couldn’t quite interpret, but then it vanished as the Doctor said, “Jack, how’d you build this place?”

“Well,” Jack said, drawing the word out in a passable imitation of the Doctor. “It all started back when I joined Torchwood. . . .”

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*missing material*

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The problem with living in the Tardis, or with popping about times in general, was that it gave Rose jet lag. The Doctor, the lucky bastard that he was, didn’t need nearly as much sleep as she; he was still bouncing around the console room like. . . . She couldn’t think of an appropriate comparison; the only one that came to mind was the hyperactive ferret from Mickey’s favorite comic. She had wondered,

once, back when she'd first been traveling with him, if his species even had circadian rhythms.

She reached out a leg the next time he bounced past her, and he bobbed to a halt, staring at it in confusion. "Rose," he said bemusedly. "Your leg is in front of me."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," she said dryly. He peered at her, mouth starting to crinkle up in a smile. "Come here."

He amenably turned ninety degrees and walked up her leg to stand in front of her. She wrapped her calves around his thighs, mouth twitching as he swallowed, and pulled him down for a kiss.

"Not that I'm complaining, mind," he said, wrapping his arms around her and pausing mid-sentence to kiss her again. "But what brought this on?"

"You've adjusted the same dial six times, now," Rose told him. "I don't think the world is going to end if you don't adjust it a seventh right this instant."

"How do you know?" he asked her. "After all, remember that time, with Mickey, and the button?"

She grinned. "Because I happen to know that dial controls the humidity in the interior of the ship."

"Well." He drew the word out, ruffling the hair at the nape of his neck with one hand. The other was still stroking little designs on her shoulder. "All right. Yeah. So the world probably won't end. You never know, though. We might get mold in the kitchen."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "In the next five minutes? Quick-growing mold you've got here. Does the Tardis know what you've been contaminating her with?"

He grinned down at her, then leaned over, resting his forearms on the seat behind her, and kissed her again. "Point taken."

"Actually," she said after a moment, "I was thinking of going to bed." As if on cue, she yawned. "I think I have jet lag. Tardis lag. Time lag. Something lag."

He grinned again and pulled her up, putting a hand on her back

to steady her as she yawned widely. “Bedtime for pink little humans, then.”

“Yep,” she told him, rubbing her eyes sleepily, popping the ‘p’ in a deliberate imitation of him. He smiled fondly down at her, and she smiled back up at him. “I’m just going to say good night to Jack and the team, and then I’ll head down.”

She wandered out of the Tardis, yawning widely. Behind her the Doctor went back to poking around the console, although with somewhat less manic energy and somewhat more purpose. Gwen looked up as she exited the doors, smiling.

“Hi, Gwen,” Rose said to her.

“Hello, Rose.” Gwen’s Welsh vowels never ceased to fascinate Rose. “It’s a bit odd, having people living here. Besides Jack and Myfanwy, of course.” She smiled more widely. “Thank you for the curry, by the bye.”

“Not a problem,” Rose responded brightly. “I was just heading ‘round to say goodnight to everyone.” She yawned again, leaning a little on Gwen’s desk. “I’ve got a bit of universe lag, I think.” She glanced around. “Anyone else in?”

Gwen nodded. “I hate flying. I’ve only done it a few times, but it always makes me so tired afterwards.” She smiled again and patted Rose on the arm. “Everyone else but Jack’s gone home, even Ianto. Sleep well, Rose. I’m sure I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Gwen,” she replied, turning away to mount the stairs to Jack’s office.

He looked up as she poked her nose in the door. “Hello, you.” He put down the file he was reading and stood up, heading over towards her.

“Hi, Jack,” she responded with a grin, entering and holding out her arms for a hug. He obliged readily, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and putting his head down on hers. “I’m just getting ready to go to bed, and figured I’d come say good night.”

“Going to bed?” She knew she shouldn’t have phrased it that

way, not to Jack. “Alone?” She could hear the humor in his voice, and smacked his butt lightly. “Ooh. Is that an invitation?”

“You,” she said, laughing, “are completely incorrigible.”

“That’s me,” he agreed readily. “You’re just so incorriging.” She groaned at the awful pun, and he laughed. “Sleep well, Rose,” he said more seriously. “Hope I’ll see you in the morning.”

“If the Doctor takes us off without letting me say goodbye,” she told him, “I’ll throttle him, and then I’ll come back myself.” She leaned against him. “We’ll probably be around for a few more days, I think. Unless you’re getting sick of us. We could park somewhere else.”

“Nah,” he reassured her. “How could I get sick of two of my favorite people? Well, when that alien of yours isn’t taking apart my Hub, anyway.”

She snickered. “I try to keep him busy.”

“I bet you do.” Again, with the innuendo; this time she smacked him on the side. “I feel so unappreciated sometimes.”

“Then you aren’t spending enough time with Ianto,” she retorted, and he chuckled again. “Good night, Jack. See you in the morning.”

“Night,” he responded, giving her a quick squeeze before letting go of her.

She headed back into the Tardis, pausing in mild surprise at the empty console room before continuing into the back and down the corridors towards her room. She paused again briefly at the door to the Doctor’s room. *Should I...?* She even raised her hand to knock, but after a few seconds she lowered it and continued next door to her room.

She and the Tardis were working on redecorating, and so she was never quite sure what it would look like when she walked in. Today the pink-and-white furniture she’d had a decade ago (or a few months ago, depending on your point of view) had been replaced by pale, slightly reddish wood. She took a moment to rub her hand over the nearby chest of drawers, admiring the finish and wondering where the Tardis

had picked them up.

Something moved in the interior of the room, and she jumped about a foot, letting out an undignified squeak before she realized the source was sitting calmly on her bed, dressed in pyjamas.

“Sorry,” he said apologetically. “I didn’t mean to startle you.” He stood up, wrapping his dressing gown tightly around him.

“I just wasn’t expecting you,” she responded. Walking over, she tugged lightly on the lapels of the gown, pulling him to her for a hug. “This isn’t Howard’s,” she realized after a moment.

“No.” He shook his head. “I had to buy some for...it’s sort of a long story. Barbara could probably tell it better than me; my memory’s a little shaky of parts of it.” She pulled back and looked at him worriedly; his memory was usually impeccable, at least for recent events. “Like I said, a long story.” He ran his hand through his hair, and she realized he was nervous. “Anyway, I didn’t like the idea of wearing something your mum’s boyfriend had worn, not to bed with—” He cut himself off rapidly, looking away from her.

“Did you want to stay?” she asked gently.

He ran his hand through his hair again, this time tugging a little. “Well. Only if you don’t mind.”

“It’s okay. I just didn’t think you slept much.” She hugged him again, and he hugged her back. “You sure it won’t get irritating? I’m not very interesting while I’m asleep.”

“That’s all right,” he said, not quite meeting her eyes. “I’ve got some sleep to catch up on too.”

She narrowed her eyes, taking a good look at him, and noticed that the shadows under his eyes hadn’t cleared up, as she’d been expecting; if anything, they’d got deeper. “Doctor,” she said slowly. “What’s wrong?”

“What makes you think anything—” She cut him off with a look she’d learned from her mum, and he shifted. Leaking out from him was some emotion she couldn’t put a name to, anxiety and something more, something a little like embarrassment but not quite. He looked away

from her again. “Nightmares,” he blurted out.

She reached up, cupping his face and tilting his head down, and finally he met her eyes. “You’ve been having nightmares?”

“Have been for a while,” he admitted. “They’re worse now, though.”

“You sure I’m going to help?” she asked him, frowning. “I mean, I’ll be there—but I’ll be asleep too, you realize.”

He looked at her for a long moment, his eyebrows slowly drawing together and up. “But I’ll be able to see you,” he said quietly. “I can hear your heart beating and your breathing.” He took a shaky breath, and pulled away a little. “That’s—I haven’t been able—I keep seeing you lying there, d . . . disappearing, and . . . and I wake up worried it’s all been . . .”

She closed her eyes and leaned against his chest. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry, Doctor.”

He shrugged a little, but she noticed his hand crept up to its new favorite location, pressing on her ribs over her heart. “I’ll get over it. Eventually. If you don’t want me here—”

“No,” she interrupted him, and she caught the flash of hurt as he misinterpreted it—*of course*. “I . . .” She swallowed. “I don’t mind at all.” Anything further she’d been planning to say was cut off by an enormous yawn. “Come on,” she said through the tail end of it. “I think it’s time for bed.”

She pulled away, turning first to her dresser. She took out her usual warm-weather sleepwear of a sleeveless top and light pajama shorts, then hesitated. *He’s seen me naked*, she chastised herself. *Why am I worrying about changing in front of him?* She compromised by facing away from him while she quickly pulled off first her shirt and jeans, then unfastened her bra and set it on the dresser top. She then pulled on the sleepwear, and only then did she turn back to face him.

He was still standing where she had left him, watching her, his cheeks lightly red. She met his gaze and he blushed harder, glancing away. She grinned to herself, then, turning to the bed, she frowned.

“Okay. Logistical question. Left or right?”

“Eh?” He sounded startled.

“Do you want the left side or the right side?” She looked up at him, mouth quirking. “I mean, I suppose we could try top and bottom, but I think it’d be hard to breathe under the duvet. Or we could try diagonals, but that’d be lumpy, don’t you think?”

“I think,” he said, a grin stealing over his face, “that you have been around me too long, Rose Tyler. You’re starting to babble.”

She giggled. “Am not.”

“Are too,” he insisted, leaning forwards and giving the words a little sing-song intonation.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “So, left or right?”

He blinked a few times. “We could flip a coin.”

“Okay, I can see I’m going to have to be the practical one,” she said with an exaggerated sigh. “Right. Since in all likelihood I’ll sleep longer, you can take left. ’S nearer the door.”

“Right. Okay. Left it is.” He sat down gingerly on her bed, lifting the new, light blue duvet nervously.

She walked around the bed and crawled onto the other side, starting to partition the pillows into two piles. “You’ve never slept with anyone else, have you? I mean, in the same bed and everything.”

She glanced over to find him turning a bit pink. “Not really,” he admitted. “I mean, I’ve shared a bed before, a couple of times actually, but I don’t think I ever really slept. And then there were the communal sleeping pits on Alpha Seven Delta Dot Three Xi Iota—not very imaginative with their naming, I’m afraid, but they made up for it with their sociological experimentation. And the time—”

“S’okay, Doctor,” she said, cutting him off and reaching over to put a hand on his knee. He looked over with a worried expression. “Come here.”

Obligingly, he crawled across the covers towards her, stopping at about the halfway point of the bed. She held up the duvet, and he slipped under it, leaning on his elbow and still looking up at her with

that worried, almost scared look on his face. She crawled under the covers herself, lying down next to him; after a moment he lay down as well.

“It’s okay, Doctor,” she said softly. “This is new to both of us. We’ll figure it out, yeah? Together.”

He just nodded, eyes still fixed to her face. After a moment, she rolled onto her side and wrapped her arms around him, snuggling against him and putting her head down over his left heart.

“Rose,” he said quietly, wrapping his left arm around her and rubbing her arm and back gently.

“Mmm?” She tilted her head to look up at him, a little alarmed by the feelings running through him.

He hesitated, and she could feel his indecision. “Rose,” he said again, more slowly. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me too,” she replied, equally softly, rubbing his chest with her left hand and snuggling closer.

“Because. . .” He hesitated again, opening and closing his mouth several times without saying anything. “I was so lost without you.” He looked down at her, and the pain running through him brought tears to her eyes. “I. . . I’m not sure I’d have chosen to regenerate again, without you. If I’d needed to.”

She looked up at him, remembering a difference face, seemingly perfectly at home with the idea that he might blow himself up with the transmitter. “I’m glad you didn’t need to,” she said simply. She blinked, and a tear ran down her cheek to soak into his pajama top.

He reached over and wiped another tear off the side of her nose. “Why are you crying?” he asked, sounding bemused.

“Because I. . .” She frowned up at him. “Because the thought of a whole multiverse without you hurts, Doctor.” She sniffed slightly, rubbing her cheek against his chest. “Because you hurt, and I can feel it, and it makes me hurt that you hurt.”

“Oh.” He blinked at her. “Rose?”

“Hm?”

“I’m sorry.”

She rubbed her cheek against his chest. “Don’t be. I chose this.” She looked up at him again. “I chose you, and that means all of you. Even the unhappy bits.”

His eyes squeezed shut, and he ran his hand up her back to hold her tightly to him. “Rose. . . I love you.”

She smiled and rubbed his chest again. “I love you, too.” She yawned again. “D’you want me to move?”

After a moment, he shook his head. “You’re warm,” he said, and she could feel a trickle of amusement as the earlier hurt started to fade into the background. He moved a bit, adjusting the pillow under his head with the arm that wasn’t wrapped around her shoulders, and then settled back himself. “Good night, Rose.”

“G’night, Doctor.” She wiggled a little, wrapping a leg around his and settling her cheek more comfortably against his chest. “Sleep well.”

If he replied, she didn’t hear it.

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He lay there, holding her, for several minutes after her breathing slowed and evened out into the rhythms of sleep.

He hadn’t been lying to her; he did need to catch up on sleep. Rather a lot of it, actually. If he were entirely honest, he hadn’t slept since the night she’d di. . . disappeared. The memories of those eight hours were seared into his mind, right next to the moment Gallifrey exploded; it felt like every time he closed his eyes, he saw one of the two. He could probably do with as much as eight hours of sleep, if not all at once; he’d been carrying a sleep debt even before. . . *that* from working to save her.

He held her a little closer and mentally asked the Tardis to turn down the lights. She obliged, and he closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. Rose was here, a warm, living weight against his left side. Her heart beat steadily, rhythmically, against his

chest and under his hand on her back. Her lungs filled and emptied leisurely, stirring the soft, downy hairs on his upper chest and neck. She was here, and alive, and (astonishingly) his. His lips curled into a smile, and he opened his eyes again to look down at her hair on his shoulder as he reached into his mind. The constant song of the Tardis echoed in the lonely space of his mind, as it always had, but now she was accompanied by a second, soft, sleepy voice. Rose. The emptiness was twice as full, all because she loved him. Life was *fantastic*.

“I love you,” he murmured into her sleeping ear, smiling as her hand tightened a little on his pajama top. *Good night, Rose Tyler.*

He closed his eyes again and let himself fall into sleep.

Several hours later, he awoke as Rose rolled over, disentangling herself from him to hug a pillow on her other side. Almost immediately, he missed her warmth, and pulled the duvet a little higher. He considered getting up, but his eyelids were still heavy; perhaps he needed more sleep than he'd thought.

*I probably won't really sleep again,* he argued with himself, trying to convince himself to get up. Unlike Rose, who was capable of being woken several times before she was unable to return to sleep, once he was awakened he usually stayed awake. *I should do something useful.* But he was warm, and Rose was fast asleep next to him, and he let himself drift back into a half-sleep, floating lazily in the space between memory and dream.

When the first screams sounded in his mind, he at first assumed it was the familiar nightmare, returned now that he had banished the more recent additions. In his mind, he was running towards the sounds, leaving the sunny field of his dream behind. He was in a city, now; all around him he could hear screaming and crying. In the distance, something fired; a sound he knew all too well: Dalek. His hearts sped up and his breathing came faster as he ran towards it, seeing with sick recognition the signs for a local hospital. He loaded his gun as he ran, ignoring the sounds of marching Cybermen from his left, hoping Mickey had been right about the new ammunition, or this was going to be a

very short-lived rescue—

*Wait—what? Mickey? What?*

He started awake, blinking in the near-darkness. Rose's bedside clock glowed red, telling him he had been dreaming for another two hours.

“No!” He diverted his attention instantly at the muffled cry from his companion. She muttered again, sounding distressed; he caught only one intelligible word. *Dalek*.

It had been her dream, then; he'd just gotten pulled in. He wondered if the Tardis normally put a telepathic damper around her room, the way she did around his; he'd have noticed if she'd had nightmares like this before, otherwise. If they were strong enough to pull him in, sleeping next to her, they were certainly strong enough for him to have noticed when awake. He could feel her dream, even now, blood and fire and a Dalek, surrounded by the bodies of children, and hoped with both his hearts that this was an isolated occurrence, just fragments of memory and a stressful week knitting together in her mind.

She cried out again, jerking in her sleep, and he shook himself. Whatever the cause, whatever the frequency, Rose was having a nightmare, a bad one, and here he was just lying around doing nothing. “Rose,” he said gently, reaching out to touch her shoulder. “Rose, wake up.”

She shot upright, pulling out of his grasp. “Pete! Oh my God, Pete, they're after the hospital!”

“Rose,” he said again, sitting up himself. “Rose, it's just a dream. You're all right. Everyone's safe.”

She blinked and then turned to look at him, raising a hand to rub her face. “I—Doctor. Oh, God. I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?” His eyes caught the way her hand trembled as she straightened the duvet around her.

“No,” he replied, stretching the truth. “I was just lying here when you cried out.”

“I'm sorry,” she repeated, rubbing her face again and lying down

slowly, staring up at the ceiling. “I’m really sorry.”

“Rose,” he said firmly, and she turned her head to look at him. He lay back down himself, and held out his arm. “Come here.”

She glanced between his arm and face several times, and he could read the hesitation in her expression. Still, after a few seconds, she scooted over until she lay against his side again. He wrapped his arm around her, and could feel the tension in her muscles, and her heart pounded rapidly against his chest. Softly, gently, he stroked her back, doing his best to project caring and concern. His worries could wait for the morning.

Gradually her breathing slowed and some of the tension faded, and only then did he speak again. “Sleep, Rose,” he whispered into her ear. “I’m right here. Whatever you dreamed about, it isn’t here. I am. It’s safe. Go back to sleep.”

She didn’t reply, but her arms tightened around him, and then the rest of the tension drained from her body. Her heartbeat grew slower, gradually returning to a more normal pace, and he held her close. Her limbs twitched slightly, but her eyes remained closed and her breathing even, and he realized she slept.

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*missing material*

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“Rose.”

She turned from where she was standing, buttering a piece of toast. “Good morning, Doctor.”

He hadn’t put on his jacket, she noticed, spotting it slung over one of the kitchen chairs, and she smiled at him as he crossed the kitchen to stand beside her, picking up the kettle and filling it from the sink. The Tardis kitchen was wood and steel this week; Rose wondered if the ship was planning to make everything steel in a few weeks, or whether this was the ship’s intended end product. One could never tell with her.

It took her a moment to realize what was missing: the Doctor’s normal non-stop stream of morning chatter. She loved hearing his

voice in the morning, but that wasn't why the silence made her tense up. With this version of the Doctor, quiet had always been a bad sign.

She finished preparing her own toast, and hesitated with her hand on the loaf. "D'you want toast?" Time was, she'd have popped a slice in for him without asking. Of course, back when she was still nineteen, she wouldn't have thought twice about eating it if he didn't want it. *Although—he is right; this temporal whatsis does take an awful lot of energy, and I've been losing weight. Maybe he's right that I'm getting skinny.* He was still hesitating, and she popped another slice into the toaster just as he began to open his mouth. "What the hell," she said, and he closed it again. "I'll eat it if you won't."

"Ta," he said after a pause. "How much sugar?"

"Two," she responded, and he smiled briefly at her before he turned away to dig out the sugar.

She got down the bananas, peeling one and beginning to slice it with motions that were fluid and very nearly second-nature, even after a decade. It occurred to her after a moment that he might not take his toast the same way anymore, but she shrugged to herself—she'd eat it, if he didn't. The toaster dinged, and she spread peanut butter on the browned slice before adding the banana and transferring it back onto the now-vacated banana plate.

They finished the toast and tea preparations nearly concurrently; Rose took her mug from him, and he his plate of toast from her, in an exchange that had once been familiar and commonplace—their own variety of domestic, she'd used to think.

They settled, one on either side of the table, currently a sturdy, wooden affair that looked almost medieval. One never knew, on the Tardis; it could just as easily be from a revival of the style in the year 3126 and picked up cheap a century later. It would be very like her to do. Not that Rose had any idea how many times the style had gone into or out of fashion, nor when.

The tea was just right, and she curled her hands around the half-familiar pink-and-purple mug. She'd stolen it from her mother after the

encounter with the Sycorax, a time in her life when she'd needed to have something familiar, something from her childhood. Turning it around in her hands, enjoying the warmth of the mug, she wondered if anyone had used it since she'd been on board, or if it had gone into a cupboard somewhere to be pulled out again when she'd turned back up.

The Doctor was eating the toast she'd made, although his movements were mechanical. He seemed to be paying great attention to the grain of the wood, but she'd noticed the quick glances up at her when he thought she was looking elsewhere, and she tensed further. Had she done something wrong? Was he upset at her for something?

"So," she said, just as he finally opened his mouth. She paused interrogatively, waiting for him to say something, but he shook his head and waved a hand at her. Finally she said, "You're awfully quiet this morning."

"Hm? Quiet?" His brows drew together. "Oh. Yes. Quiet. I suppose I am. Being quiet. Although, obviously, not at the moment. In fact, the very utterance 'I'm being quiet' is sort of an oxymoron, isn't it? Self-contradictory, like the famous 'all Spartans are liars'. Of course, that's only self-contradictory if you're a Spartan, which I'm not, and for a very narrow sense of the word 'lie'. I can say 'all Spartans are liars' without a contradiction at all. But I can't say 'I'm being quiet' without making it false. How fascinating, don't you think?"

She let him wind down, watching him indulgently. Maybe he wasn't upset at her, after all, but something else. Had something happened in the night while she was asleep? Maybe he'd wandered off and something bad had happened. "What's wrong?" she asked quietly when he fell silent again.

"What makes you think anything is wrong?" he countered, although his hands tightened on his mug.

She smiled, trying to reassure him. "When you're upset, you do one of two things: you go all quiet, or you babble. You've done both." She reached out a hand, touching his arm. "Besides, even without doing this—" He flinched back, and she withdrew— "you're broadcasting."

“I am?” He frowned again. “Oh. I am. Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” she said gently. “Just... please tell me, Doctor. Is it me? If you’re having second thoughts—if you want me to, leave, or—”

“You were broadcasting,” he blurted out halfway through her stumbling sentence.

She stared at him blankly. “What?”

“Last night.” He looked down, fiddling with his teaspoon. “You had a bad dream. Well, several bad dreams.”

“Oh. Oh God.” She remembered the nightmares, and now that he’d mentioned it, she remembered being woken from them. She’d been broadcasting? Oh, Lord. “Did I... are you all right?”

“What? Me? I’m fine.” He waved off her concern. “Rose... I saw... a little of your dreams.” He paused, and she felt herself turn pale as her heart started to pound. Finally he looked back up at her, his face tense. “Rose—they weren’t—were they... real?”

She played with the handle of her mug, unable to look him in the face except for short glances. “I’ll explain,” she said unhappily. “You won’t like it, though.”

“Don’t worry about me.” He sounded as unhappy as she felt. “Rose...” She glanced back up in time to see him swallow heavily. “Did I see... *Daleks*?”

She sighed deeply, pushing herself up from the table and putting her mug in what passed for a dishwasher on the Tardis before leaning against the counter and replying, still facing away from him. “Yes.” She turned back around to find him watching her, one eyebrow drawn down in a frown, one eyebrow pushed up in query. “Remember... how I told you, we’ve got a lot of rifts?”

He nodded. “Ten known ones, wasn’t it? I don’t...” He trailed off, his eyes going wide.

“Turns out, rifts don’t just lead to other times and places,” she said quietly. “Turns out, stuff can get through from the Void too. Particularly if it’s already been manipulating the Rift, or if it’s got

friends on this—that side.”

“Oh, Rose.” He looked sick. “I should have guessed—I should. . . I’m so sorry, Rose.”

“At first it was just the Cybermen,” she went on after a moment, staring at the floor tiles. “We didn’t really notice, the first year, because we were already having trouble getting rid of the damn things—miss even one, leave it alive with its emotional inhibitor intact where it can get to technology, and in six months, you’ve got a whole new conversion unit online and running.” She could hear the jadedness in her own voice, and tried to calm herself down.

He swallowed hard, looking at her with those wide brown eyes, some painful emotion glittering at the backs of them, and she wondered if she should omit the Urban Wars. A year and a half of tracking down any and every rumor, of watching the executions of thousands of forcibly-converted people who’d done nothing wrong but be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They’d tried leaving them alone at first, but. . . . She didn’t like to remember how that had ended. Six months, after the Cybermen had worked out how to protect their emotional inhibitors, of blowing up whole factories, people still inside, because there were hundreds of Cybermen inside and there was no way to get their victims out before they were converted too, because they all knew by then that it would hurt less to go up in an explosion now. No, all that could wait, and so she skipped ahead.

“When we got the first call about a new kind of robot, we all thought the Cybermen had gotten inventive again. It happened, sometimes, especially with some of the early conversions—something extra would survive the process, or. . . . Anyway, when we got there—” She swallowed, remembering Matthew, getting shot right beside her as they’d cleared the doorway. “It turned out to be a Dalek. And that wasn’t the first. Or the last.”

She edited again—if he asked for the whole story, she’d tell him, but right now he was looking horrified enough. “The war lasted another three years.” Horrible undersimplification, but he didn’t need to know

that. “We’ve mostly got them under control, now.” And she was *not* telling him how, not if he didn’t ask.

“Alien relations,” he said slowly, turning his mug around and around in his hands. “You. . . *deal* with the aliens who refuse to coexist peacefully, you said.”

“Yes.” She leaned back on the counter so he couldn’t see her hands trembling.

“Does that include Daleks?” His voice was horribly even, a tone she’d only ever heard him use when he was trying very, very hard to control his temper. Her heart started to pound harder, and she hoped he couldn’t hear it.

“Yes.”

“So then. . .” He put down the mug of tea. “The dreams. Those were real events.”

“Yes.” Her face felt frozen, and she was starting to have trouble breathing. He sounded so cold.

“Including the school.”

“Yes.” It came out in a whisper. Two hundred children dead, because they had no other way to stop a Dalek.

He just stared at her silently, until she wanted to scream at him to say or do something. Finally, just to break the tableau, she crossed back to the table, intending to sit down again. He flinched back at her approach, and she tried to conceal the stab of pain as, instead of sitting, she picked up her plate and went to put it in the washer too.

“I’m sorry,” she said finally when the silence became unbearable. “I’m really sorry, Doctor.”

“All those children,” he said distantly, and it was her turn to flinch. “Oh, Rose. What *happened?*”

She took a deep breath, leaning on the sink and focusing on the drain to keep her thoughts centered and the memories at a safe distance. “It was early in the war,” she began, and thought she heard an intake of breath behind her. “We didn’t have portable weapons that would work on Daleks yet.” God knew, they’d tried everything.

“Nothing short of a missile strike would even slow them down. We’d finally rigged up long-range missiles that would work, but they... well, you know how much it takes to stop a Dalek.”

“Yes,” he said quietly behind her, and she finally turned back around. His eyes fixed on her face as she looked at him, his expression frozen and distant, and she turned partly away again to look at the door.

“One... we don’t know where it appeared, but it... it got into an urban area. Got into a school.” It was all she could do to tell the story; she knew her sentences were disjointed, but it felt like she was forcing each one through a brick wall. “Ignored the children, mostly, but... the school was surrounded by high-density housing. We thought it was probably headed to a local manufacturing facility.” She remembered the Dalek that had actually made it to a manufacturing plant while they had been trying to evacuate the site, remembered the panic when they had realized this one was headed to a similar one. “The school... we didn’t have the time to evacuate a large enough area of the housing, or the plant. It was... two hundred children, or several thousand adults. So. I made the call.” She closed her eyes again, remembering her voice saying the words. “I was the one who called for the missile strike. I gave them the coordinates. I blew them up.”

There was dead silence. She opened her eyes to find him still staring at her. “How... how many...?”

“Two hundred eleven children, six teachers, and three parents.” Her voice sounded calm to her ears, but her heart was beating wildly, and she was amazed that she wasn’t trembling visibly. He just continued to stare, and she turned around, unable to bear his gaze anymore. The silence dragged out painfully.

Finally she lost it. “What should I have done, Doctor? What do you want me to have done? If I’d have waited, we’d have lost thousands! Maybe millions, if it had got to the plant!” Her voice broke, and she said on a sob, “I made the only choice I could.”

There still was only silence.

She turned again, finally, to find him with his head in his hands. He seemed to be shaking, and she had a moment of panic. *I shouldn't have yelled, it's not his fault, he's not to blame.* “Doctor?” She took a step towards him, and he flinched. Suddenly, she could *feel* him, in her head, without even touching him. Distress, hurt, disappointment. Disgust, like a tangible sensation on her skin. Hatred, thick and black. Rage, so strong her own breathing quickened. But mostly, a cold anger that made her shiver with its intensity. She stopped, suddenly afraid. Back when she'd first known him, she'd thought *she'd* never be the target of the Oncoming Storm. But, she'd been innocent then. “Doctor?” Her voice wavered audibly, and she winced.

He was quiet, still shaking, and somehow she found the courage to take another step towards him. “Doctor? Are you—”

His head came up, and the expression on his face made her freeze. “Get out,” he said coldly. “Go. Now.”

She stepped backwards, still staring at him, unable to believe her ears. “You—”

“Get out,” he shouted at her, knocking over his chair as he stood, waving his arms at her in emphasis. “Leave! *Leave!*”

She swallowed hard, heart plummeting as the rage and anger spiked in her mind. She'd never really been *afraid* of him. Afraid of what he'd do, once or twice. Afraid for him, all the time. But now, here, seeing him like this, she trembled and knew how his enemies felt.

Two quick, fearful steps back took her out the door, which closed silently in her face.

*He hates me.* The thought was numb, and she wanted to collapse against the door and start crying. *I should have known. I should never have come back.*

The tears started as she made her way shakily through the corridors. For a moment she considered going and packing, but she thought about him coming on her as she did, and she started to shake. She stumbled into the control room, catching her hip painfully on one of the railings, and paused. She couldn't just leave, not like that. But she

also knew she couldn't face him again, not alone.

*A note. I'll leave him a note.* It was the work of moments to locate the pad of yellow sticky-notes he kept around, and she found a pen jammed into one of the corners of the console. She stuck the note, hastily penned to keep from getting tear-stains on it, right in the middle of the console screen where he couldn't miss it, then took off her Tardis key on its chain and looped that around the edge of the screen. *There.*

She stumbled out of the Tardis into the Hub, unable to see straight as she started to sob in earnest. She tried to find her way to the stairs, hoping that no one would see her or stop her, but instead she ran into something soft and somewhat scratchy.

“Rose?” a familiar voice said in her ear.

“Oh, God,” she said, sobbing, and flung herself into the arms of a somewhat startled Jack Harkness.

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The Doctor finished his morning ablutions, paused to gaze at himself in the mirror for a moment (Skin: still bad, but the soap Barbara had suggested helped. Sideburns: still there, now neatly trimmed. Hair: fairly tame, as his hair went, thanks to the recent combing, although that wouldn't last long, and sadly still not ginger. All fairly normal; no sudden changes overnight, not that he'd expected any, really. . . ), grinned at his reflection, and went back into the bedroom. To his surprise and mild disappointment, it was empty.

He didn't bother putting on his jacket; instead he simply threw it over one arm and went in search of his missing little yellow human.

She was, as he had suspected, in the kitchen, currently engaged in making toast. He stood and watched her for a minute, enjoying the sight of her, still in her pajama bottoms, puttering about his kitchen. *His kitchen.* She was here, really *here*. Life couldn't be better.

Well, really, it could. Those nightmares of hers, for example. He couldn't shake the worry, once more shoved to the front of his mind by

the thought, that they'd been real. That something had gone wrong, and he'd managed to send a Dalek back with her. That somehow, somewhere, they'd found a way to this other universe, where he wasn't there to protect her. The thought of her, alone with a Dalek, made his hearts pound; two of his worst nightmares, except that in this one he wasn't even there with her.

"Rose," he said finally, slinging his jacket over a chair. She hadn't filled the kettle yet, he saw, and went over to do that.

She turned around at the sound of his voice, watching him cross the kitchen with a smile on her face. "Good morning, Doctor," she said, voice still rough from sleep.

He filled the kettle and started it heating, debating with himself whether or not to ask her about her nightmare. On the one hand, it was bothering him, not knowing whether it was real or not. On the other—

"D'you want toast?"

The question startled him, breaking his train of thought. Food. Toast. Did he want toast? Food, in general, was a good thing to consume in the morning. He'd always liked her toast, the way she made it with bananas. Bananas were also good in the morning. His stomach was uncertain about this prospect; it was human enough to be affected by his upset over her nightmare, but he thought it would accept toast and banana. Probably.

"What the hell," she said just as he opened his mouth. "I'll eat it if you won't."

Well, that was one solution to the problem. If he proved too unsettled to eat, she'd consume it; good. No wasting a perfectly good banana, that way. Bananas were too good to go to waste just because he was upset. "Ta," he told her. The water was nearly ready, and he got out their mugs. "How much sugar?"

"Two," she told him, and he smiled. Some things didn't change that much in a decade, apparently.

He prepared the tea, adding just the right amount of sugar to

both mugs before pouring milk into each. Pausing with the milk still in his hands, he enjoyed the sight of the milk swirling around the hot tea, mixing slowly; he'd always liked fluid dynamics. Simple equations, but such a complex result. It was beautiful.

The tea was done just a few moments before she finished the toast, and they exchanged consumables before going to sit down. The Tardis had evidently retrieved the table she'd picked up while he was busy stopping that Sontaran (Lanks? Liks? Something like that), back in the Middle Ages, that time when when he'd first met Sarah-Jane. He wondered, not for the first time, whether the Tardis copied the things she picked up, or whether she simply *stole* them, and if so, what the original owners had thought when their table had vanished.

The thought of Rose's nightmares floated back to the top of his mind, and he stole quick glances at her, trying to catch her unguarded. He really had no idea what had happened to her during those ten years, he realized, and for the first time he wondered if there was a reason she hadn't been forthcoming. What had happened to her, when he'd practically flung her into another universe? He regretted, now, not searching harder for a way to get her back, or at least a way to check up on her.

And he really should ask her about her nightmares, not just sit here worrying about them. Maybe it was as simple as sleeping back on the Tardis. He hoped so. He opened his mouth—

“So,” she said, and he waved at her to continue when she paused and looked at him questioningly. “You're awfully quiet this morning.”

“Hm? Quiet?” Oh. Right. “Oh. Yes. Quiet.” There were, occasionally, times when he wished Rose didn't know him quite so well. “I suppose I am. Being quiet. Although, obviously, not at the moment. In fact, the very utterance ‘I'm being quiet’ is sort of an oxymoron, isn't it? Self-contradictory, like the famous ‘all Spartans are liars’. Of course, that's only self-contradictory if you're a Spartan, which I'm not, and for a very narrow sense of the word ‘lie’. *I* can say ‘all Spartans are liars’ without a contradiction at all. But I can't say ‘I'm being quiet’ without

making it false. How fascinating, don't you think?" He paused, waiting for her to reply, trying to figure out how to direct the conversation back to nightmares without being obvious about it.

She was watching him with a small smile on her face, and he waited patiently for her reply. Instead, however, she looked at him for a moment more and said, "What's wrong?"

"What makes you think anything is wrong?" It wasn't that something was *wrong*, really. Just...worried. Worried wasn't *wrong*. Not really.

She smiled at him. "When you're upset, you do one of two things: you go all quiet, or you babble." *Really?* He hoped it wasn't that obvious to everyone else. He'd have to work on that. "You've done both. Besides, even without doing this—" She put a hand on his arm, and he realized if she did that, she'd feel how worried he was. Scared, even. He flinched involuntarily, and she withdrew the hand. "You're broadcasting."

"I am?" He poked around his shields, and realized it was true. "Oh. I am. Sorry." *Oh...dear.* Something about what they'd shared (and the memory of *that* was nearly enough to dispell the worry, at least until he looked back at her and noticed the dark patches under her eyes) had eroded his mental walls where she was concerned. Was eroding. That could be bad. That could be very bad.

"It's all right," she told him, and he wanted to shake his head. It was *not* all right. His people weren't very telepathic, but they *were* strong-minded. Unfortunately, there was a difference, and it mattered. With that residual bond in place...he could overwhelm her, so very easily. He needed to teach her how to build her own walls, before he did something unforgivable by accident. "Just...please, tell me, Doctor. Is it me?" He stared at her blankly. "If you're having second thoughts—if you want me to leave, or—"

Was that what she thought? He hurried to dispell that idea, speaking before he had thought it through. "You were broadcasting."

"What?" She looked confused.

“Last night,” he clarified, then looked down, trying to control his fear. Surely there was a simple explanation. He hadn’t really locked her away with a Dalek. Again. “You had a bad dream. Well. Several bad dreams.”

“Oh.” She sounded horrified, and he looked back up, frowning slightly. “Oh God.” He swallowed—were the dreams that bad? He felt fear begin to grow in his stomach. “Did I . . .” She trailed off, then started again. “Are you all right?”

Was *he* all right? “What, me? I’m fine.” He waved a hand. Really, why was she concerned about him? He was worried about *her*. “Rose. . . .” He stared at his plate as he tried to figure out how to say it without upsetting her. “I saw—a little of your dreams.” Pausing again, he looked back up at her, and forced out the question. “Rose. . . they weren’t. . . were they—real?”

She looked back down at her mug, and his hearts sped up. Oh no. No. “I’ll explain,” she said finally, and he felt himself tense. “You won’t like it, though.”

He couldn’t think of a single thing involving the words ‘Rose’ and ‘Dalek’ together that he *would* like. “Don’t worry about me. Rose. . . .” He swallowed, and again had to force the question out. “Did I see. . . *Daleks*?”

She sighed and pushed herself up, turning away from him, and he swallowed again. *Oh no*. What had he done? Had he accidentally sent the Dalek through with her? How many children had he killed through his stupidity? What had it done to *her*? She put her mug in the Tardis dishwasher and leaned against the counter. Her entire back radiated tension, and he wanted to go to her, but couldn’t manage to move from his chair. “Yes”, she said, and his hands clenched on his mug, his knuckles going white. Would she even accept comfort from him? Whatever had happened, it was his fault.

Finally she turned back around, and he waited, feeling like his stomach had crawled up his throat and taken up residence in his mouth. “Remember how I told you we’ve got a lot of rifts?”

He nodded, uncertain where she was going. “Ten known ones, wasn’t it? I don’t. . . .” Of course. Rifts. Through time and space. The Void ship had made one, coming through; if there was one pre-existing, then maybe. . . he could barely think the thought, and felt his eyes go wide. Oh Rassilon and the Council. What had he done?

Her voice was surprisingly steady, given how fast her heart was pounding; he could see the pulse at her neck, and just about hear it if he concentrated. “Turns out, rifts don’t just lead to other times and places. Turns out, stuff can get through from the Void too. Particularly if it’s already been manipulating the Rift, or if it’s got friends on this—” She shook her head, and corrected herself. “That side.”

“Oh, God,” he said, absolutely horrified. A part of him made a note to make sure that Jack had weapons to fight any Daleks or Cybermen that came back through, but most of him was caught in the expression on her face. The tense lines around her eyes, the hollowness around her cheekbones, the pull to her mouth. . . he knew that expression. He’d seen it in the mirror, a hundred times, a thousand times—mostly before he’d regenerated. He cursed himself for not *thinking*. “I should have guessed—I should. . . .” There were so many things he should have done. “I’m so sorry, Rose.”

She stared at the floor, and he could see the muscle in her jaw jump. His mind was already spinning, imagining all the horrible things a Dalek could do on a planet with no one to stop it. Frankly, he realized after a moment, his hearts seeming to stop in his chest, she should be dead. They all should be dead. “At first it was just the Cybermen,” she began, so quietly he nearly missed it. “We didn’t really notice, the first year, because we were already having trouble getting rid of the damn things—miss even one, leave it alive with its emotional inhibitor intact where it can get to technology, and in six months, you’ve got a whole new conversion unit online and running.” Oh, he could imagine. The pain in her voice made his whole chest ache, and he wished he could go back and change what he’d done. Go back and warn himself. Do something, anything to take that look off her face. Unfortunately,

some things would cause a paradox even for a Time Lord.

“When we got the first call about a new kind of robot, we all thought the Cybermen had gotten inventive again. It happened, sometimes, especially with some of the early conversions—something extra would survive the process, or. . . . Anyway, when we got there—” She swallowed, and he wondered what she was leaving out. “It turned out to be a Dalek. And that wasn’t the first. Or the last.”

Oh, God. Oh, Baal. Whole pantheons he didn’t believe in, and he’d sacrifice to any of them, all of them, if he could undo this. His fault. She’d had to clean up from his inadequacies, her and her universe, and it was all his fault.

“The war lasted another three years. We’ve mostly got them under control now.” A war. Another Time War—even if it wasn’t fought in Time itself—on his conscience. How many dead, because he hadn’t bloody *checked* to make sure all the rifts in their universe were sealed? How many dead, because he hadn’t been careful enough to wipe all the Daleks out the last time? How many had she had to watch die? How many had she had to kill? All his fault.

“Alien relations,” he said slowly, a horrified realization coming to him. “You. . . *deal* with the aliens who refuse to coexist peacefully, you said.”

“Yes.”

He tried very, very hard to keep his voice even, to keep the horror out of it. It would not help her if he fell apart now. “Does that include Daleks?”

“Yes.”

So it had been *her* job to clean up after him. Again. Which meant. . . which meant. . . what had she had to do, what had she seen? He wanted to go back, find one of the weapons he had in storage, and destroy the Void ship before it ever opened. So the weapon would kill him too. So? Or, he wanted to go back, before she’d even met him, and throw himself into a supernova. He’d do anything, give anything, to take that note of pain out of her voice. “So, then.” He put down his

mug before he could drop it. “The dreams. Those were real events.” His voice sounded distant, even to his own ears.

“Yes.”

“Including the school.” The school he’d seen, with the Dalek rolling towards the huddled children.

“Yes,” she whispered, and in that moment he hated himself more than he ever had.

Children, innocent human children, probably dead. Who was he trying to fool? Of course they were dead. Daleks didn’t discriminate. Might as well have been by his hands. He stared at her, feeling the memories crowd up to the surface: other children, dying under Dalek fire, children with blue skin and children with wings and children that didn’t have skin at all. How many children would he kill before he finally, *finally* died himself? He would have been better off dying in the War himself. They should have chosen someone else to be their pawn, to be the universe’s surviving champion. He was useless, less than useless. Worse than useless.

She approached him, and he flinched back, afraid that if she touched him, his mental walls would crumble, and he’d hurt her worse than he already had. She paused, and he wondered if she was angry at him, but then she picked up her plate and went to put it in the washer with her mug, and he put his elbows back on the table. “I’m sorry,” she said, still facing the washer. “I’m really sorry, Doctor.”

Sorry? He was the one who should be sorry. “All those children,” he said, imagining their faces in his mind. “Oh, Rose.” She should never have had to watch that. “What happened?”

She leaned on the sink, still facing away from him; he wanted to go and comfort her but was afraid to go near her. “It was early in the war,” she said slowly, and he flinched again. The war. Another Time War, in another *universe*, on his conscience. How many universes would he have to ruin before Fate called in her markers?

“We didn’t have portable weapons that would work on Daleks yet.” Yet? *Yet?* He stared at her back—that implied they’d managed

to find ones that did work, eventually. “Nothing short of a missile strike would even slow them down. We’d finally rigged up long-range missiles that would work, but they. . . well, you know how much it takes to stop a Dalek.”

Oh, did he ever. He was shocked they’d managed that much, frankly, even with their technology a step ahead of this universe. “Yes,” he said, trying to keep his voice even. A missile. Oh, *Rose*. He remembered the devastation of the last Time War, remembered the planets laid waste just to slow the Daleks down. Oh, *Rose*. *Please tell me. . .* She turned back around, and his chest constricted painfully at the look on her face.

She turned a little away, facing the door, but even in profile the pain was still writ clearly on her face and his hearts ached a little harder. “One. . . we don’t know where it appeared, but it. . . it got into an urban area. Got into a school. Ignored the children, mostly, but. . . the school was surrounded by high-density housing. We thought it was probably headed to a local manufacturing facility.” She paused, clearly remembering something, something horrible by her expression, and he felt like someone had reached into his chest and was squeezing his hearts in their fists. He knew what happened if even a single Dalek got the run of a suitable facility. Much like Cybermen, they had two primary drives: Replicate, and exterminate. Unlike Cybermen, they were happy to clone themselves. “The school. . . we didn’t have the time to evacuate a large enough area of the housing, or the plant.” He could see the decision coming, had made it himself, too many times to count, and hated himself for forcing it on her. He felt the old anger rising, the cold fury at the Daleks for their very existence that made such decisions necessary. “It was. . . two hundred children, or several thousand adults. So. I made the call.” She closed her eyes again, and he tensed. “I was the one who called for the missile strike. I gave them the coordinates. I blew them up.”

For several seconds, all he could do was stare at her, struggling with his own memories. He could hear his own voice saying ‘I killed

them, Rose', his then-Northern accent thick with memories. Now she had her own, and he would give or do anything to take them from her, to undo it. She was in pain, and he couldn't help her, because it was his fault. Her eyes opened, and he heard himself say, "How... how many...?"

"Two hundred eleven children, six teachers, and three parents." He heard the false calm in her voice, and could almost—no, he *could* feel her anguish like a tangible thing in the air. He realized his barriers, the mental walls he kept around him, were crumbling, and frantically he tried to get them back up again. The last thing she needed was his memories, too. She turned around, and he breathed more easily for a moment, the eye contact broken, the residual link between them fading again.

"What should I have done, Doctor?" Her voice was angry, and he felt the answering anger stir again in his own hearts. *Damn* the Daleks, *damn* them and their creators and all their senseless destruction. *Damn* them twice and thrice, a hundred times for what they'd done to his Rose. "What do you want me to have done? If I'd have waited, we'd have lost thousands! Maybe millions, if it had got to the plant!" He swallowed hard as her voice broke and she sobbed out, "I made the only choice I could."

Of course she had. He lowered his head into his hands. Of course. It was the only choice possible. How many times had he made it? How many times had he cursed himself, cursed the universe, cursed everybody and everything for making him choose?

Could she ever forgive him? Could he ever forgive himself? He suspected the answer was *no*, and he squeezed his eyes shut. How many lives did he have to ruin or cut short or destroy completely before he learned he was a damn poor champion for the universe?

Children. Children, dead, because of him. He could see bombs going off, explosions throwing Daleks high into the air, the stinking smell of burned flesh and bone and Dalek casings as they landed on the corpses of the children they'd slaughtered. The memories were welling

up again, and he realized in a burst of panic that he was on the edge of a flashback. A flashback, with his barriers nearly gone. A flashback, with Rose connected to him. *Oh, no.* He fought, terrified, but the terror fed back into the rage and hatred and he was drowning in memories and—god, Rose, he had to control himself—

“Doctor?”

He flinched away. Couldn't let her touch him—if she did, if she made even that minutely stronger link—

“Doctor?” Her voice quivered, and he took a shaky breath. He was scaring her, and he hated himself for it, and that only made it worse. Control, he had to control himself—she was a brand-new telepath; the only other TARDIS alive in the world; he would *kill* himself, literally just throw himself into a star, if he hurt her mind—

“Doctor—are you—”

He knew he was about to lose it, knew he had to get her *out of there* before he hurt her irreparably. The Tardis could shield, but not with her in the room. “Get out,” he said, trying to speak clearly enough for her to understand. “Go. Now.” *Please. Before I hurt you, or kill you by accident—or worse—*

She took a step back, staring at him, but it wasn't enough, she was still in the room. Out. He had to get her out. “Get out,” he repeated, standing up, afraid to touch her but needing to get her to leave. “Leave!” He waved his arms at her in emphasis. “*Leave!*”

Now he'd frightened her, and he hated himself, hated the Daleks, hated the universe for putting him in this position, but mostly hated himself for being so broken that she wasn't even safe alone with him. He raged, raged at his failure, raged at his inability to protect her from himself.

And then she was out the door, and the Tardis threw up the shielding, and he let go, into fire and pain and rage and an endless, endless sea of self-hatred and disgust and memories.

He was still shaking from the flashbacks when he unlocked the kitchen door and made his way unsteadily up the corridor to the console room. His memory was a little foggy, but he thought he remembered shouting at Rose. Shouting at her, right after she'd told him her nightmares about the Daleks, about a war. He just hoped he hadn't said anything unforgiveable in his haste to get her out of the room to safety.

The console room was empty, and his shoulders fell a little. Out of sheer habit, he circled the console, tweaking and adjusting the internal settings in the constant dance of keeping their living habitat as comfortable as possible. There was a low pressure system moving into Britain which would be coming over them the next day, bringing the threat of cold rain; he tweaked the internal pressure and heat up a bit and the humidity down to compensate, and made a mental note to make sure he cleaned out the mud trap by the front doors.

He circled around, back to where he'd come in, and only then did he reach for the monitor and keyboard, intending to find Rose and go make sure she was all right.

He never got that far.

Looped around one corner of the monitor was a chain, and on it a single key. He reached a shaking finger to touch it, and he knew—this was Rose's key. Not that she really needed one, anymore; he had the suspicion that the Tardis would open to her touch no matter what he told the ship. But he recognized the symbolism. *Oh, Rassilon. What did I say? What have I done?*

His eyes moved along the chain, and fell on the yellow sticky note stuck to the surface of the monitor. No chance he'd have missed it, even if he hadn't noticed it was the only one in English. He scanned it, automatically, and had to catch himself on the edge of the console.

*Good bye, Doctor, it read in an untidy scrawl. Thank you for everything. Here's your key back. Have a fantastic life, yeah?*

It was signed simply *Rose*.

He pulled it off the monitor with fingers that shook so hard he could barely hold it, then restuck it to one side before unlooping the

chain with its attached key. It still felt like Rose, in his hand—she'd carried it nearly every day for over a decade, after all, lying against her skin, and it still resonated like she did. It warmed under his fingers, this tiny bit of metal that might be all he had left of her.

Abruptly, he turned and sat down on the jump seat, bowing his head and holding the key to his lips. *Rose. Oh, Rose, what did I say that made you this angry? What can I do to fix it now? Will you let me, if I try?*

*Should I fix it?* He swallowed. It hadn't escaped him that the vast majority of the dangers in her life were his fault. He was one of them, after all. *I could so easily have damaged her mind irreparably this morning. I'm not safe for her to be around.*

*But if I don't teach her to protect herself, who will?* asked a small, petulant voice, but he recognized the sound of an excuse. *There are plenty of telepaths out there, most of whom don't have time bombs in their heads,* he argued back. *I'll tell Jack to make sure she gets training. He'll do a better job finding a teacher than I will.*

There was the sound of a key in the lock, and his hearts leapt for a moment before he remembered—he was holding Rose's key. Barbara, returned from buying milk, or some other domestic errand?

He put on his best 'everything is fine' expression and went to the console, fiddling needlessly with the humidity controls, even as one hand curled so tightly around Rose's key that it cut into his palm.

Two sets of feet sounded on the grille. "You go get your things," Jack's voice said, and his head came up. Jack was staring at him with an expression of cold anger on his face, and it should have worried him—would have, except that Rose was beside him. Rose. "I want a word with him."

Rose nodded, turning and brushing past him, past the console and into the depths of the ship, never looking up enough for him to see her face. He looked after her for a moment, wanting to call out after her, but not knowing what to say.

"I would punch you if I thought it would do anything but hurt

my hand.” He swallowed at the chill in Jack’s voice, looking back up at the ex-Time Agent. Jack was standing not two feet away, deliberately crowding his space; he tried stepping back but the other man followed. “If I hear of you treating her like that again—treating any of your companions like that again—I will, you understand?”

He probably deserved it, too. No, he knew he did. “I understand,” he said quietly. Not that he could hurt any more than he already did; he almost thought he would welcome a purely physical injury to take his attention away from the ache in his chest.

“Good.” Jack’s stance shifted slightly, backing down on the aggression a notch, and he felt his own spine relax a touch in response. “She’s getting her things together. I will be right outside. If you try to leave with her inside, I will come back in here and stop you. If she’s not out in thirty minutes, I will come back in here and find her. If she so much as yells, I will come back in here and kill you. Understand?”

“Yes.” He hadn’t misunderstood the note, then. Rose was leaving him. He felt like one of his hearts had stopped, and clenched his fist tighter around her key.

He was peripherally aware of Jack pausing, then walking down the ramp and back out the doors, but most of his awareness was swept up in two things: the mountain of anguish that threatened to fall on him, and the sense of timelines bending and snapping as his future with Rose at his side fell slowly away. He scrabbled after it desperately, feeling one timeline after another fray and come apart under his mental fingers.

*I’ve really screwed it this time*, he realized, and wished more than anything that he could take the Tardis back three hours and prevent himself from ever getting out of bed. He even set the coordinates, pausing with his hand on the dematerialization switch. Being eaten by a Reaper didn’t hurt that much, but he couldn’t do that to Rose. And anyway, Jack would stop him.

There was a faint sound, and he raised his head to see Rose, now wearing jeans and lugging her old backpack, framed briefly in the

doorway that led to the rest of the ship. Her gaze turned away as he looked up, and his hearts clenched again. This was it.

She shouldered the backpack and started to walk past him, and he realized in that moment that he'd do anything, *anything* to avoid seeing her walk out the doors and out of his life.

"Rose," he said desperately, stretching out his hand, and she paused, one hand on the railing leading down the ramp. "Rose—" He scrambled for some excuse, some delay. "Give me your phone." She hesitated, not moving forwards but not moving to give it to him, either. "Please?" he added, hearing the pleading in his voice.

That did it, apparently; she turned around, still not looking at him, and dug her phone out of one pocket. He started to come forwards to take it from her, but she tossed it at him before he could take more than a step. He nearly fumbled it, having forgotten he still held her key in his hand, but managed to catch it with the other hand.

He stuffed the key into his pocket (now with a faint line of his blood down one side—had he been clenching his fist that hard? He must have been) and pulled the back off, using his screwdriver to take it quickly apart. The card was harder to get to in this version, and he didn't have a replacement handy, but luckily it fit into the slot in the Tardis console. A quick moment of work, and it was reprogrammed and the circuitry altered; the screws all went back in and the back went on, and he realized his moment of delay was over.

"Rose." He walked over to her and held out the phone, forcing her to reach for it, to draw just those few inches closer to him. "If you need anything, want anything—just call, and I'll come. Anytime. Anywhere. *Anything*." His voice nearly broke on the last word, and he swallowed hard.

She paused in the act of putting the phone away, finally looking up at him, a faint expression of startlement partly overwriting the pain on her face. He swallowed again, barely keeping himself from reaching for her, reminding himself that this time *he* was the one who had put that expression there. It hurt. "Like you'd really come," she said after

a moment, the cynicism strong in her voice.

He flinched back. “What?” He blinked several times, unable to form a cohesive sentence, too taken aback. “Rose—of course I’d come.” She stared at him, the confusion a little stronger, and he said, more forcefully, “I’d do anything for you. *Anything.*”

It was her turn to blink at him. This time, the confusion was the primary emotion in her voice as she said, haltingly, “But—but you—you hate me.”

“Hate you?” He heard his voice go up nearly an octave. “*Hate* you?” He shook his head, trying to imagine what he could have said to make her think that, trying to imagine a world in which it was even possible. “I don’t hate you. I couldn’t.”

“What?” Now there was definite confusion. “But—I could *feel* it. Feel how angry you were at me. Feel how much you hated me. You threw me out of the Tardis!”

“I *what?*” He stared at her, feeling equally confused, and then revelation struck. “Oh. *Oh.* Oh, God, Rose. No.”

“...No?” she repeated, staring back at him with what could almost be hope.

He hoped it was hope. “Rose...” Where to start? What could he say to explain? “Do—are you familiar with the term ‘flashbacks’?”

She nodded slowly. “A lot of my team had them, after the war. I have them, sometimes.” He could see realization dawn, and the phone slipped out of her fingers to hit the decking with a clang. “You were having a flashback.”

He nodded. “I—I was afraid I’d hurt you.” He turned halfway away, staring at the console. “I don’t even remember what I said, but—I’m sorry. Whatever it was. I just wanted you to leave the room, before—”

A hand landed on his arm, and he heard her gasp. Looking over at her again, his hearts leapt to see an expression of concern on her face. “Doctor?”

“Yes?” He couldn’t keep his voice from wavering slightly.

“You. . . don’t hate me.”

“No.” He shook his head.

“You aren’t angry at me.”

He turned back to face her, and she swallowed hard, staring at him with an expression caught between fear and the tiniest glimmer of hope. “No. I’m not angry at you, Rose.”

“Not even though I—” Her voice caught, and she tried again. “Even though I—during the war—”

He forestalled her, cutting her off. “How could I, Rose?” She frowned at him, and he shook his head. “I had to make that kind of choice, too.” His voice fell until he wasn’t sure she could hear it, but he couldn’t seem to raise it. “I know what it’s like, having to choose between horrible and worse.”

She studied his face for a moment. “Doctor?”

“Yes?” He gazed back at her.

“Do you want me to leave?” Her voice broke again, and she cleared it before continuing. “I will, if you want me to—”

“No,” he said, cutting her off again. “No. I don’t want you to leave.” He took a shaky breath in, and took the plunge. “Please stay, Rose. Please don’t go. Please.”

She took an equally shaky breath. “I—Doctor—”

He seized her hand as she started to pull away, willing in that moment to do anything, anything he had to, in order to keep her there. “Please, Rose. I love you. I’ll do anything.”

Her face lit up in a sudden smile, and he blinked at her in confusion. “Doctor,” she said gently, pulling away again. This time he let her go, feeling like his hearts were breaking into tiny pieces. “I was just going to put down my backpack, that’s all.”

“You were—” He paused, watching as she supported the backpack on one hip, swinging it off her shoulders. “You’re—You mean—”

“Yes.” She dropped the backpack, ignoring it as it rolled across the grating to fetch up against the console with a clank. “If you want me. . . I’m staying.”

“Rose.” He took a half-step towards her, feeling like he was about to start flying, and wondered if he should check the internal gravitics. “Rose—”

She turned, walking hesitantly towards him, then giving him a tentative hug. Automatically, his arms went around her as she leaned against him, and he felt himself shiver at the feeling of her back in his arms. “I’m so sorry,” she said into his shoulder as he held her, closing his eyes and just breathing in her scent. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“I know,” he said, his voice muffled by her hair. “I—it’s all my fault, Rose—all of it. The Daleks—I should have guessed—I should have known—”

“Doctor.” She pulled back a little, then said more forcefully, “Doctor.”

He paused. “Yes, Rose?”

“Cut it out.” He blinked, and she smiled up at him. “We can talk some other time about who should have known or done what.” He opened his mouth to say something, but she put her finger across it, and he closed it again. “Right now, I don’t want to think about that. I’m just glad I’m here, and you’re here, and we’re still—we’re—here together—because I love you too.” His hearts sang at those four words, and she smiled again. “So quit blaming yourself for a second and kiss me, yeah?”

She stood on her tiptoes, stretching up to him, and after a moment he tilted his head down and did as she asked.

Halfway through the kiss, he could feel his barriers crumbling again, but he couldn’t bring himself to care, because all he could feel was her. She sang through his mind, a brilliant golden presence, and he could feel her, feel the fading hurt (and oh, he knew that would haunt him in the small hours of the night, when she slept and he was alone) but also feel the joy and love and sheer happiness that she felt, and it made him want to jump around and do silly things, say silly things, just to hear her laugh.

Instead, he caught her up in his arms again, whirling her around

with sheer happiness at her presence, at her existence in his life. She held his neck a little more tightly, and exclaimed as her foot collided with something on the console. He couldn't even bring himself to worry about it—they were still alive, ergo, it wasn't anything important. "Doctor!" she cried out as her foot hit something else, sounding startled, but she was laughing even as she did.

They both froze, Rose's feet falling to the decking again, as the door burst open. Jack came barreling in, half-crouching, gun already drawn. "Rose!" His voice was worried, but his expression was fierce and angry, and his thumb flicked the safety off as he brought the gun up. Automatically the Doctor released Rose, pushing her behind him and protecting her with his body as the other man spotted him and sighted the gun on him. He heard Rose make a small noise of distress, and realized he'd just shoved her into the side of the console. "Rose! Are you hurt?"

He remembered Jack's threat, and swallowed tightly. *He must think—he must have heard her. He thinks I've hurt her.* Slowly, he raised his hands. Jack's eyes focused on the right one, and the human's finger tightened on the trigger; too late, he remembered that he'd cut himself on her key.

He felt his hearts begin to beat faster again, his time sense begin gear up for a fight, and what passed for adrenaline in his system made time seem to slow down even further. He didn't care if Jack shot him—well, of course he did, but he *had* to make sure the man didn't hit Rose by mistake.

"Jack," her voice said from behind him. He felt her start to step around him, and panicked a little as he realized she was about to step straight into Jack's line of fire. He moved a little, blocking that direction of travel, and Jack's finger tightened further. "Jack, put that down."

"Rose?" Jack's finger relaxed slightly and the gun wavered, moving to point just barely off to the Doctor's left side. He was under no illusions—he knew the human could sight and fire faster than he

could do anything—but he breathed a little easier, knowing it also meant the gun was no longer pointing in Rose’s direction.

“I’m fine,” she replied, starting to sound a bit cross. “Really. Honestly.”

The gun moved a bit more, now pointing, unfortunately, at the console instead of him. He remained very still—he didn’t want to find out what might happen if Jack accidentally shot one of the control systems. “Rose,” he said calmly, and Jack’s gun twitched. “I want you to move to my right. Very slowly, please.”

Jack’s eyes flickered between his face and a point behind and to his right—Rose, he assumed; he could feel the ripples she was making in time as she stepped, slowly as he had requested, to his right. As soon as she was out from behind him, however, Jack’s gun swung back up to point at his left heart. “Men,” she said, now clearly exasperated. “Jack, put away the gun.”

“Not until I know you’re all right,” Jack insisted, although the Doctor noticed that his finger eased away from the trigger again.

“Rose,” he said even more calmly, watching Jack’s face. “I want you to keep going. Move away from me.” She stayed still, and he swallowed again. “Please.”

“All right.” He heard her sigh, and then she moved into his peripheral vision on his right-hand side. Her hands were on her hips, and his lips twitched just a bit. “See, Jack? All parts present and accounted for. I’m *fine*.”

The gun didn’t so much as quiver as Jack ran his eyes along her body, searching for something. “Then whose blood is that?” he asked, jerking his chin ever so slightly towards the Doctor’s right hand.

“What? What blood?” Rose sounded alarmed, and then both he and Jack twitched as she stepped in front of him. There was a half-second where Jack’s gun was pointing at her head, and the Doctor felt his eyes widen and his throat constrict, but then Jack’s gun shot up to cover the Doctor’s head instead and he breathed more easily.

“Rose,” he said carefully. “Please don’t do that. Please, just

stay back.” He returned his gaze to Jack’s face. “It’s mine. I cut myself.”

“You *cut yourself?*” For a moment, he thought Rose was going to completely ignore his instructions as she started to step towards him.

“Rose!” Jack involuntarily twitched towards her, clearly caught between continuing to cover the Doctor with his gun and getting Rose away from him. She caught the movement, and slowly she backed away, out of Jack’s line of fire. Jack let out a sigh, and he felt himself relax again as well.

“Jack,” she said carefully. “I’m fine. I’m not hurt. He didn’t do anything, I promise. Please put the gun down.” The gun wavered, and she took a deep breath in, obviously shaking. “Jack, you’re *scaring* me. *Please.*”

That worked; Jack’s shoulders finally relaxed, and he clicked the safety back on and put the gun back in his holster. The instant his hands were off it, the Doctor relaxed, and Rose shot towards Jack. The Doctor twitched as she moved, still coming down off the adrenaline high, and he saw Jack’s eyes crinkle just a bit.

He turned the movement into a step sideways, putting his hands in his pockets and leaning back against the console as Rose ran up to Jack, throwing her arms around him. He hugged her tightly, his face relieved, and the Doctor smiled to himself. He wasn’t sure he approved of the human’s reliance on guns, but it made him feel oddly better to know Jack was willing to point one at him for Rose’s sake.

“I’m fine, see?” Rose said after a moment, pulling away. “Honest, Jack.”

“I heard thumps, and then you yelled,” Jack responded, slightly defensively, cupping her face in his hands. “What was I supposed to think?”

“Oh, Jack.” She hugged him again, and this time Jack’s eyes met the Doctor’s over her head. They narrowed, and the Doctor simply gazed back openly. “It’s okay. We’re okay.”

Jack transferred his gaze to her, his face relaxing except for a

small, worried frown between his eyebrows. “Are you sure?”

She nodded, releasing him and holding onto his hands instead. “I’m sure.” She tapped her forehead with one hand, and Jack nodded. “He didn’t mean to hurt me, Jack.”

The Doctor couldn’t stop his wince, and caught Jack’s quick glance. He was sure Jack had heard that phrase—probably more than he had, over the years, but even he was familiar with it. “Rose, love,” Jack said gently, stroking her cheek again, “You know—if he hurts you again—”

“Jack,” she repeated, more forcefully. “I grew up on a council estate. I know about—about men who beat their women.” There was a slight pause there, a catch to her voice that made the Doctor’s hearts beat a little quicker, his face hardening and his fists clenching lightly. There was a story there; someone had hurt her. Jack’s eyes met his again, and he realized the other man had caught his tiny step forwards. Their gazes locked, and then Jack nodded and he knew the other man was beginning to believe Rose was telling the truth. “It’s not—it was just a stupid misunderstanding. Just one of those things that happen, yeah?”

The Doctor looked at Jack’s face, still frowning worriedly at Rose, and made a sudden decision. “I had a flashback,” he said, and watched Jack’s head snap back up, his expression turning startled. “I—I was afraid I’d hurt her, if she stayed in the room.” The frown returned, and he clarified, “She’s—she’s starting to develop telepathy. Empathy. I—it’s not safe for a telepath to be around me when I—when I lose control. Not without good shields.” Jack’s eyes widened, and he nodded. “I yelled at her, to get her to leave. And I’m sorry.” He put his hands back in his pockets, half-turning away again, intending to give Jack and Rose some privacy.

He looked back up as Jack released Rose’s hands and crossed quickly to him, unable to stop the flinch as the other man entered his personal space. Jack paused, then continued the motion, slowly reaching for him, but it wasn’t until the human’s arms closed around him

that he realized Jack was *hugging* him. After a moment, he hesitantly hugged back.

“You stupid, stupid alien,” Jack said, still holding him tightly, and he knew he was forgiven. “Why didn’t you think to tell us? You *know* I’ve been through at least one war. I would have understood.” He flinched at the word ‘war’, and Jack hugged him still tighter. “You should *tell* the people who love you these things.”

“I—” Why hadn’t he told them? “It’s been a long time since I had one that bad,” he admitted after a moment. “Since I regenerated, at least.” Jack pulled back slightly, looking into his face, and he looked back. “I didn’t—it’s perfectly safe for a non-telepath. You’d be fine. It just—it hadn’t occurred to me that with Rose—”

“Doctor,” Jack said patiently. “We still want to know these things.” He blinked at Jack, who smiled slightly, and a little sadly. “Stupid alien. We love you, you idiot. That means we care when you hurt.”

He couldn’t think of anything to say, and just stared at Jack. After a moment, the other man sighed and hugged him again. “If there’s anything—If you think of anything—just tell us, okay?” He stroked the Doctor’s cheek in a way that the Doctor thought he must have picked up from Rose, or perhaps she’d picked it up from him. “Don’t wait until it blows up in your face, again.”

He nodded, finally, and Jack released him, pausing to kiss Rose on his way out the door. After a moment, he stuck his head back in. “Barbara’s out running errands, by the way,” he said, grinning at the Doctor. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t come in. You two... make up.” He pulled his head back and closed the door firmly.

They stared after Jack for a few seconds in complete silence. Then Rose let loose a giggle, and he felt his lips start to curve, and before he really knew what was happening, they were both bent over laughing.

“Jack,” Rose managed to say, her tone fondly exasperated, before she dissolved into giggles again.

He leaned on the console, trying to catch his breath, and just watched Rose laugh for a moment. The sight made something loosen in his chest, somewhere between his two hearts, and once more he wondered if he should check the gravitics. Surely it couldn't be all him, this feeling of being rather abnormally light.

His gaze fell, then, on the dematerialization switch, and he abruptly sobered, remembering what he'd almost done. Hurrying around the console, he reset the coordinates, back to something safe—Balastron should do it. He didn't think he'd ever been there in. . . 3 apple 6 point 2 should do it.

“What are you doing?” He looked up to find Rose standing nearby, leaning on the consol and watching him a bit warily. “We can't just go swanning off—”

“Not swanning off,” he said, a bit hurt. “Resetting the coordinates, that's all. Didn't want anyone hitting the dematerialization switch by accident.”

“Why?” She frowned. “Where was it set? Were you going to—to go somewhere?”

He looked back up at her from where he was finishing setting the time coordinate. “No. Well. Yes. I mean—I was thinking about it. I didn't. Obviously. Would have been bad. Paradoxes, and all that.”

“What were you going to do?” She'd taken a step towards him, and was biting on her thumbnail.

He resisted the urge to pull it out of her mouth. She really did know him too well. “I was going to go back. Stop myself,” he admitted. Her eyes widened, and he added quickly, “I didn't. Again, obviously.”

“Go back when?” she asked after a moment.

“This morning,” he confessed. She openly stared at him, and he turned away, examining the coral over their heads. “Anyway. I didn't.”

Rose made a noise of distress and bent over the left-hand side of the ramp to retrieve something; he watched as she stood back up and he realized it was her phone. “Damn,” she said, examining it. “I cracked the screen. Pete's going to kill me; it was brand new.”

He crossed over to her and held out his hand. She looked at it bemusedly; he wriggled his fingers at the phone, and after a moment she handed it over. After examining it briefly, he pulled out a tube of Likwid Kristal FiksIt he'd picked up on Chamorongo Six (lovely people; sadly deficient orthographic skills); a squirt from the tube and a little work with the screwdriver, and the screen was repaired. While he was at it, he fixed the rest of its scratches, and—holding the screwdriver in his teeth while he worked—improved the speaker and microphone.

“There.” He handed it back. “Good as new. Better than, really.” He couldn't help a huge grin; he loved it when he was able to fix some small thing in her life.

She turned it over in her hands. “What'd you do to it?”

“Fixed it.” He put the screwdriver away.

“No, I mean, earlier.” She looked up at him. “You did something to its card.”

“Oh.” He held out his hand again, and she dropped the phone back into it. He flipped it open, and leaned over to show her the new options on its screen. “I made it into a superphone, like your last one. But better.” He flipped quickly through the contacts. “It's connected to the Tardis—as long as she can reach your phone, you can call anywhere. Anywhen, too, if you want. But see, here's my number—and this time, I put in the emergency pager.” He selected the contact out of the list, and pushed the send button; a few moments later a mauve light began to flash on the console, and a quiet alarm sounded. He reached over to the console, and turned off the alarm. “I promise, Rose,” he said, closing the phone and handing it back, “if you need me, I'll come.”

She stared at the phone, lying in her palm; he stuck his hands in his pockets and waited her out. “You meant it,” she said eventually.

“Yep.” He leaned back against the console, crossing his legs at the ankle, tapping the heel of one shoe against the toe of the other. “I mean it.”

She slowly put the phone back in her pocket. “I guess I should

go put my pack away.”

“Eventually,” he agreed. “Might be dangerous. Could go flying about the console room, if we hit turbulence. Now that would be an embarrassing way to regenerate. Hit in the head by a flying backpack.” She giggled, and he smiled a little, fiddling nervously with something plastic in one of his pockets. “I could...I could help. You unpack. If you wanted.”

She looked up at him in surprise. “All right.” Neither of them moved. “I’m really sorry,” she said suddenly. “I...I think I overreacted, this morning.”

He scuffed his foot against the decking. “I was terrified I’d hurt you,” he admitted. “You...I don’t think you know what that would do to me.”

“I was terrified you’d hate me,” she replied, and touched his arm, lightly, barely brushing the skin. “If...you found out what I’ve done.”

He looked sideways at her without turning his head. “I worry you’ll hate me, if you find out what I’ve done. What I did, during the Time War.”

Hesitantly, she wrapped her hand around his arm, and put her head down on his shoulder. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” she said after a few seconds.

He looked over at her dark blonde hair on his shoulder. “Rose?” he asked after a few seconds.

“Hm?” She shifted against his shoulder, and he freed his arm, wrapping it around her shoulders when she tried to draw away and pulling her close to him. She looked up into his face. “What is it?”

He took a deep breath, and then changed his mind. No, discussions of her developing telepathy could wait. “I have something that belongs to you,” he said after a moment.

“Hm?” she murmured again, cuddling into his side.

It took him a moment to recall what he’d said; the feeling of her warm human body under his arm was...nice. Really nice. “Not

that you really need it, anymore,” he said, and pulled out the key on its chain from his pocket, dangling it in front of her. He felt her take in a sharp breath. “But it’s yours. Will always be yours.”

She slowly reached out a hand, raising it until the key was resting in the cup of her hand, and he lowered the chain into it too. “What do you mean, I don’t need it?” she asked, sounding a little uncertain, as she stared at the key in her palm.

“Well.” He held her a little more tightly. “The Tardis—she thinks of me as... as, well, hers. I can’t lock myself out—well, when I say ‘can’t’, I mean not easily. I mean, not if she’s feeling well. And if she isn’t mad at me.” Rose giggled a little, and he smiled down at her. “I don’t think you could lock yourself out either. I think she thinks of you as hers as much as she does me.”

She looked up at him, then back down at the key, winking red-dishly even in the colored light of the console room. “It’s got blood on it,” she exclaimed after a moment. “Doctor? What happened?” She looked up at him. “This is from your hand, isn’t it? What’d you do?”

He held out his right hand for her inspection, keeping his other arm wrapped around her and watching her hair shift as she bent over the proffered hand. After a moment, she tucked the loose strands behind her ears, and he smiled at the familiar gesture. She grasped the hand with both of hers, tilting it towards the light; the touch was firm but gentle, and he reveled in the sensation of her hands on his.

“Looks nasty,” she said after a minute. “Shouldn’t you put something on it?” She looked up at him, a slight frown forming, and then back down at his hand. “What on earth did you cut yourself on? It’s all jagged.”

He looked away from her, feeling rather sheepish. “The key. It’s all right. I’ll run the dermal regenerator over it later.”

“The *key*?” she repeated, sounding rather bemused. “How on earth did you manage that? It’s not even sharp!”

“Sharp enough,” he muttered, “if you push hard enough.” He withdrew his arm around her, and would have moved away, but she

was still holding his hand.

There was silence from Rose, and after a few moments he glanced back at her. She was staring up at him, a rather odd expression on her face. “What?” he asked her.

A light blush appeared on her cheeks. “I was just thinking,” she said after a beat. “Sorry.”

“Thinking’s good,” he informed her. “Usually.” He paused. “What were you thinking about?”

“You.” He blushed this time, and she smiled a little. “You and me. How lucky I am, that sort of thing.”

“Lucky?” he repeated, staring at her, feeling confused.

“Lucky,” she confirmed. “There was a long time, Doctor, when I’d resigned myself to... to a one-sided love affair. I didn’t think you’d ever care for me as more than... a silly little ape who amused you sometimes.”

His breath caught, and he lifted his left arm to wrap it around her shoulders again. “Rose—”

“It’s all right,” she said, looking fixedly at his hand. “Like Sarah-Jane said to me—some things are worth getting your heart broken for.”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “They are.”

She glanced up at him, frowning again, and he looked back at her seriously. “I don’t—What are you talking about?”

He looked up at the ceiling. “Oh, nothing much. Just—she’s right. You know, things like... like falling in love with a silly little ape holding your hand—who refuses to even blame you for getting her killed. In Cardiff.”

He felt her intake of breath, and he couldn’t resist looking down at her. She was looking up at him, that same odd expression on her face. “Doctor?” she said after a minute.

“Hm?” he responded.

“What on earth did we wait this long for, then?”

He laughed, the sound only slightly painful. “I’m a coward,” he answered her. “Ow. What was that for?”

“You,” she said firmly, rubbing the spot she’d smacked, “are about the furthest thing from a coward I can think of.” She looked back up at him, her mouth quirking. “You just... *act* like one sometimes.”

He laughed again, more lightly this time, and pulled her against him, taking the opportunity to smell her hair. “I like the new shampoo,” he said after a minute. “I don’t know if I remembered to tell you that.”

“Hm,” she responded. “Don’t think you did. Ta.” She curled against him, finally releasing his right hand in order to wrap her right arm around him. “Doctor?”

“Hm?” He buried his nose in her hair and took another deep breath, then surreptitiously snuck out his tongue and tasted.

“I...” She paused, and then said, sounding dumbfounded, “Did you just lick my hair?”

“I... um... yes?” he said self-consciously. “Were you going to say something?”

She was silent for a moment, and then she started to giggle, burying her face in his jacket and hugging him tightly. “I love you,” she said after a minute.

He felt his face stretch in a huge grin. “I love you, too,” he responded quietly.

It took a minute for the giggles to subside, and then he looked down at her worriedly as she went suddenly tense. “Rose?” he asked. “Are... is...”

“I was just thinking,” she said, her tone entirely changed. Something about it made him tense, too, in an odd sort of anticipation. “Jack so kindly made sure that no one will wonder in on us.”

“Mm-hm,” he responded when she paused.

She took a deep breath, and then pressed even closer to him. He felt his hearts begin to speed up as they started working on the problem of pumping copious amounts of blood to something other than his brain. “I think,” she said, just a bit unevenly, tilting her head up to face him, “that we should consider taking advantage of this event.”

“Hmm,” he said, smiling at her. “I think...” He kissed her, then reached out and flipped a switch on the console. “I think you’re right. We should give it all due consideration.”

She looked over at the switch. “What’s that do?”

“Locks the doors from the inside,” he responded, and she laughed. “I—mm.” She’d pulled him down for a kiss, and he drew her against him, kissing her back with equal enthusiasm.

“What were you going to say?” she said, a bit breathlessly.

“Just that—” He kissed her again briefly. “I don’t think it really merits much consideration.”

“No?” She pulled back a bit, looking just a touch hurt.

“No,” he responded, holding her closer again. “It doesn’t. It’s so obviously a good idea—don’t you agree?” He couldn’t help the note of uncertainty, and was relieved when she laughed.

“I do agree,” she said, still laughing.

“Good,” he replied, then paused. “Er. When you said ‘advantage’—you did mean—”

“I mean,” she said, starting to unbutton his jacket, “that I want you to take me up against—no, on second thought, probably not up against the console; it’s got rather a lot of things that look very uncomfortable. On the jump seat, then. I want you to take me on the jump seat.”

The rest of the necessary blood rushed south in a grand exodus from his brain, and for a moment all he could manage to do was make incoherent noises at her while his hearts worked on getting enough blood pressure to run both. “I—I—”

She paused, looking at him with an expression of uncertainty. “Or... not?”

“The jump seat’s fine,” he said, a bit breathlessly, as his cranial blood pressure recovered. “The jump seat will be—mmm—wonderful. Anywhere’s wonderful.”

She snickered at him, then pushed his jacket off his arms (when *had* she finished undoing the buttons?) and threw it over the dema-

terialization switch. “Well, then.” First pulling his shirt out of his trousers, she ran her hands up his spine, grinning at him when he shivered a little. “Jump seat it is.”

“More practical, certainly,” he told her, his hands starting to wander down her torso, and tried to keep enough mental faculties about him while he figured out the logistics. If she sat on the edge, and he stood—that should just about work. Might have to lean, a little. Or if he knelt, then he could—he hadn’t really gotten to taste her properly, last time. This time he planned to correct this fault. “Mmm.”

She pulled back from the kiss and looked up at him expectantly. He just stood looking back, blinking a couple of times. “Um?” he finally queried.

He realized it wasn’t entirely coherent, but she must have understood, because she answered. “Aren’t you going to, you know. . . .” She made a gesture.

“Going to what?” He continued to stare at her. He knew he wasn’t at his best, thinking wise, but really, what did she expect with most of his blood being re-routed? “What did you want me to do?”

“The, uhm—link thing.” She gestured at her temple again, and enlightenment dawned just as her face started to fall. “Or—I mean, if you don’t want to, that’s—”

“No,” he said. “Or yes. Or—I mean—” She looked like she was trying to hide her disappointment, and he scrambled for words that would make sense. “I—wasn’t sure you’d want to.”

She stared at him. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“This morning,” he responded, looking away at the walkway around the room. “I—wasn’t sure you’d want—you’d be willing to—”

“Doctor.” He looked back down at her. “I do. I am. But if you don’t—”

“I do,” he said quickly, and slid his hands up from her waist to cup her chin. He took a deep breath, then moved them the last few inches to settle at her temple.

He slipped into her mind with ease, a sensation not unlike en-

tering her body. He felt her catch the comparison in his mind, which caused a bubble of amusement (and a little lust) to run through her, and he couldn't help smiling back at her.

*Hello*, she thought clearly at him.

*Hello*, he replied. She smiled at him again, and then—he stopped breathing for a moment as her emotions swelled up over him: a long slow warmth, like an afternoon sunbeam, a sort of giddy bounciness which reminded him strongly of himself, and overlaying it all, a soft blanket of lust and desire. He swallowed hard, reminded himself that even he needed to breathe occasionally, and turned his attention to making the connection between them.

He felt it settle into place, and then he took advantage of where his hands were and tilted her head for a long, slow kiss. “Mmm,” she hummed against him, and ran her hands back up his spine.

Her desire for his body was making it hard for him to think straight, so before he could change his mind he pulled up the hem of her shirt, tugging it gently upwards. He had only intended to pull it up enough to gain access to her breasts, but she ducked downwards and out of the shirt, leaving him holding it in mild bemusement. After a moment's pause, he folded it, tossed it over the railing, and reached for her again.

She stepped backwards, and he followed her, not quite able to look away from her breasts. The nipples contracted as he watched, visible through her bra, and through the link he could feel them growing more sensitive as she grew aroused. He could also feel her awareness of her body releasing its natural lubricants, and found it difficult to think of anything beyond touching her.

Finally she stopped and hopped up onto the seat, spreading her legs; when he paused in confusion, she reached out a hand, fisted it in his shirt, and drew him between them. All he had to do was lean forwards—he did, and they rubbed together through their respective clothing just as he'd thought they would.

“Mmm,” she said, sounding as incoherent as he felt, and then,

more articulately, “I want you, Doctor. Please.”

Rather than try to form a verbal reply (a skill he felt himself sadly lacking at that moment) he leaned further forwards and kissed her, still pressing against her, and then ran his hands down to her breasts. He stroked them through her bra, discovering that even through the padding (which he thought was surprisingly thick) all it took was the light scratch of a fingernail across her nipple to make her arch against him most nicely. He liked the way it felt to her when he did it, too, like a flare of desire running through her stomach to her groin.

“Please,” she said again, reaching between them to undo her fly. He swallowed, but instead of taking her invitation, he reached around her (making her breasts brush against his chest—and oh did that feel good) to undo her bra, this time able to work the hooks for himself. She slid it off, and he took it from her to toss on top of her shirt.

He took a moment just to look at her, not touching her, and noticed the way his gaze made her arousal build and her hands clench around the edge of the seat. She was slumped slightly, her back curving to meet the back of the seat while her hips perched on the edge, which made it a little more of a logistical problem to do what he wanted to do.

After a moment, he decided on the best method; leaning with his left hand on the back of the seat, he straddled her right leg and bent forwards and sideways to cup her left breast in his hand and lift it to his mouth. Almost immediately, she arched against him, and the logistical difficulties reduced in scope. Encouraged by this, he gave her what he could feel her wanting, and closed his lips around her nipple.

The little, almost startled noise she made went straight to his groin, and he sucked lightly on her nipple while he tried to regain some amount of mental faculty. The noises continued, however, and he realized after a moment that his hand had left her breast and was drifting lower, down to rub against her vulva through her jeans. The sensation was fantastic, if he did say so himself, and he thought the

way it made her entire focus narrow down to his hand and mouth was even better.

She arched against him again, making more little noises; experimentally, he swiped his tongue across her nipple, first the tip and then the rougher flat for comparison. “Please,” she said breathlessly in his ear, and then “Ah!” as he lightly bit her. “Please!”

He could feel what she wanted, but had no intention of giving it to her anytime soon. He might have... *danced* only a handful of times, but he was still good enough (and, more importantly, Gallifreyan enough) to want to prolong this a bit first. And besides, he’d promised himself that this time, he’d get to taste her. He let go of her left breast—pulling back slowly and letting the nipple pop out of his mouth, which made her jump a little and make another “Ah!” noise—and reached for the right.

Rather than sucking it into his mouth like he had the left, he started by licking the light flesh of her breast first, just gentle swipes with his tongue. The hormones she was giving off were strong on his taste buds, and he smiled at the way she mewed and arched under his mouth. Finally, when the sensation of wanting was so strong from her that he thought she’d take matters into her own hands (possibly literally) if he kept it up any longer, he reached out his tongue again and touched her nipple.

He was, once again, surprised by how good it felt to her, and she arched slightly to rub herself against his hand, still lazily tracing lightly up and down the seam at the crotch of her jeans. “Please,” she begged him again, and in response he lightly bit her nipple, making her choke off the end of the word.

Then, just as he’d closed his mouth around it, she retaliated. Without any warning that he could feel, she unclenched a hand from the edge of the seat, and, reaching between his legs, ran it firmly up the clothed shaft of his penis, sending his mind into a cloud of arousal and desire and need.

When he managed to regain lucidity, he found that her jeans and

knickers had been pulled down a few inches, and his hand had snuck into them. His fingers were lazily tracing the puffy edges of her inner lips, and he marveled at how slick they were. Curiously, he dipped the tip of his middle finger between them. It was soft and incredibly wet, and Rose threw back her head and made a noise rather like a very happy housecat.

He slowly withdrew his hand, making her whimper and reach for him, but he couldn't bring himself to delay any longer. Her shoes weren't terribly hard to untie and loosen, and he'd been paying attention the day before. In short order, her jeans, socks, and knickers joined her shirt and bra, folded neatly over the railing, and she was naked.

He took a moment to review that thought. Rose. Naked. On his jump seat. Looking at him like he had about ten seconds before she got up off the seat and jumped *him*.

If she could walk straight, anyway.

After a second, he recognized that as her thought, and smiled at her, just a little proud of himself. She smiled back, although he could feel her gathering herself to get up and come—take him. Before she decided to test her walking abilities, however, he stepped back to her, and she unconsciously spread her legs wider for him.

The sight was almost too much for him, and he decided he'd delayed *more* than long enough. He leaned over her again, licking her right nipple once more, but this time his hand went straight between her legs, where he started by stroking her inner lips again, lightly running his index finger up and down them. It made her shudder slightly under his tongue, and he felt her trying to decide the best way to get him to penetrate her.

In response, he ran his finger higher and circled it around her clitoris several times (and the sensation was enough to make his own nerves fire erratically) before moving his hand lower, sliding his middle finger between her inner lips and against the smooth, wet skin between them.

She cried out, a series of meaningless exclamations, then reached

for him again. Her hand didn't cup him again, as he was half expecting, but instead slid around his waist to settle in the small of his back. "Please," she asked, sounding astonishingly coherent. "Please. I want you inside me."

"Anything for you, Rose," he whispered against her breast, and did as she asked.

As his finger slid into her, she threw her head back again, and he could feel her struggling not to scratch his lower back with her fingernails as her hand reflexively tightened. He waited, entirely still, until her breathing evened out again and her hand relaxed, and then slowly, as slowly as he could manage, curled his finger in a stroking motion inside her.

————— *missing material* —————

Rose looked back at the Doctor, still trying to straighten his shirt; to her eyes, he looked adorably ruffled.

————— *missing material* —————

The Tyler family was just finishing a late Saturday breakfast when Jackie heard the sound of the impossible.

"Oh, my God," she said to Pete. "Do you hear that?"

He blinked, frowned, and then his eyes went wide as he nodded. "What is that?"

Jackie was already pushing back her chair. It might have been a decade, but the sound was unforgettable. "It's Rose," she said simply, and ran outside.

She got to the front stoop just in time to see the blue police box finish materializing on the lawn. She put her hand to her mouth—a decade, and it still looked the same. It sat quietly for a moment, and then the door opened.

The Doctor stepped out, his long coat catching the morning breeze, and Jackie thought uncharitably that he looked terrible. For

a moment, she feared what that might mean, all of the old fear (was *this* the time he came back bearing only Rose's body?) returning—but then he spotted her, his face lit up in the old grin, and her worry eased. *He wouldn't be looking like that if anything was wrong with Rose*, she thought, and started down the steps.

He stepped aside as the door opened again, looking back towards the person emerging. His grin softened, but his eyes lit up, and Jackie knew she'd remember the look on his face for the rest of her life. Her daughter stepped out of the Tardis, and she *knew*. Whatever had happened when Rose had returned, it had finally (and about time, from her perspective; how long could it take a bloke to get a clue?) gotten them together. Really together.

She'd worried, that long decade, about what would happen if Rose ever did find him again. About what would happen if they ever got together for real. She was a mother; worry was what she did, but it seemed somehow worse when the love of her daughter's life was a nine hundred year old alien who lived in a small wooden box (even if it *was* bigger on the inside). Would he take proper care of her with her life being so short? What would happen when she grew old? Would he love her the way a human would?

Looking at them looking at each other, looking at the expression on his face as he smiled down at Rose, she knew she didn't have to worry anymore.

He said something to Rose, and she said something back, and they grinned at each other and hugged. Jackie hung back, not wanting to intrude, but then the Doctor's eyes met hers over Rose's head, his grin widening, and she started to run again.

"Rose!" She held out her arms as she ran, watching as her daughter turned around and her eyes widened before her face lit up again. The Doctor stepped aside, and then her daughter was in her arms again, and all was right with the world.

"Mum!" Her daughter hugged her back, a sensation that still made her shiver. "Mum. I'm home."

“I can see that, love,” she said, taking a moment to just hold Rose tightly. With her daughter’s lifestyle, she knew every day could be their last together—even without the Doctor in her life; Torchwood was quite good enough at killing its employees, and she thanked God every Sunday that her husband and daughter were safe. And so she liked to take a few seconds, every day that she could, to just hold them. “And right quick, too. You just left yesterday.” She pulled back and looked at Rose. “How long’s it been for you, then?”

“A couple of weeks,” Rose admitted. “Guess we hit our target on the nose, then. I was trying for just after breakfast, though.”

“Not your fault we started eating late,” she said, smiling. Had the Doctor let Rose drive? That was new. “I see you brought home a friend,” she added, teasing.

Her daughter’s face lit up again. “Yep,” she said, popping the ‘p’ and sounding very much like the alien beaming at them from over Rose’s left shoulder. Her daughter glanced briefly back at him, and her grin turned mischevous. “He followed me home, mummy. Can I keep him?”

“Oi,” the Doctor protested, but his grin grew wider.

Jackie made a show of considering the idea. “Only if he’s house-trained. Otherwise he’ll have to sleep outside, you know.”

“*Oi*,” the Doctor said again. Rose laughed, a delighted, purely happy sound that made her heart lift. She hadn’t heard her daughter sound like that since before they’d come to this universe, and by the way the Doctor smiled at Rose, he was enjoying it just as much as she was. She wondered how long it had been for him, and realized that somewhere along the way, she’d started worrying about him too.

She let go of Rose, holding out her arms to the alien. “Doctor.”

He glanced at Rose, who was still snickering, but then he took a step forwards and hugged her, wrapping his long arms around her. She’d forgotten quite how tall he was. “Jackie,” he said.

She pulled back, scanning her eyes over him. She took in the dark circles under his eyes, the little pain lines around his eyes, the way

the smile didn't quite seem to fit his face anymore, and she wondered what had happened to him while Rose had been gone. Then his face creased in a wide grin again, and she could see the happy alien who had sat at their table and pulled crackers with them so many Christmases ago.

Before she could stop herself, she grabbed his face (the old ears were gone, alas; they'd have made good handles) and gave him a large, forceful kiss, right on the mouth.

He made a startled noise, staring at her when she pulled back like she'd gone completely barmy. "Jackie!" Behind her, she could hear Rose laughing again. "I—what was *that* for?"

"You fixed my daughter," she told him, and watched his eyes go sad and pained even as his lips quirked into a smile again.

"Well—I—" He glanced over her head in the direction of Rose. "I don't know if—I'm not sure I'd use the word 'fixed' quite like that—"

"I don't mean just that, although I'd kiss you just for that," she said, getting his attention back. "You *fixed* her, Doctor. She came here broken, and now she's not, and I—I know you're the reason."

She could just see Rose in her peripheral vision, and so was treated to her daughter's incredible blush. "Mum," her daughter started to protest.

"Quiet," she ordered, and Rose fell silent again, although Jackie could see her shifting from foot to foot in embarrassment, her cheeks still flaming. "I'm talking to your alien, not you." To the Doctor, she said, "I just want to say thank you."

His eyes softened, and he hugged her again. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, into her ear. "I never meant for any of this to happen."

"I know," she replied, equally softly. "But she's happy, yeah? That's all I ever wanted, really. You make her happy, Doctor. And I'm glad you're back."

"Me, too," he said, then released her and grinned manically. "So," he said, focusing past her. "Who's this, then?"

She turned to find her three younger children staring in fascina-

tion at their mother and older sister, but mostly at the stranger and his weird blue box. “These,” she said in satisfaction, “are Rose’s new siblings.”

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It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Rose’s driving. After all, she’d managed to land, completely instrument-less, within an hour of her intended destination last time. How often had *he* been able to say that? She was, in all probability, more accurate than he was.

It was more the *method* that made him nervous.

Oh, he knew, intellectually, that it was possible to fly a TARDIS entirely telepathically. In theory. He even knew Time Lords—had known Time Lords who had managed it for routine trips. He, on the other hand, was lucky if he could get the Tardis to turn off the lights.

The idea of trying to fly her across the Void without even *looking* at the instruments (never mind touching them) made his blood run cold and his right heart stutter painfully. The idea of a human trying it made him feel the need to sit down and put his head between his knees. The idea of *anyone* trying it with Rose on board was too horrible to contemplate.

He opened his eyes, raising his head just enough to look at her. She was still standing in the same place, eyes closed, hands relaxed by her side. He could *see* the instrumentation changing, and fought the panicked urge to get up and go to the console. Even as he looked, the Tardis reacted, far faster and more accurately than he could have flown her, and he closed his eyes again.

With his eyes closed, it was a different story. Rose and the Tardis filled his head, the beautiful song of two linked TARDISES flying through the universes in perfect harmony. It was a sound he hadn’t heard since long before the Time War, and it made his hearts lift, even as he swallowed hard at the complexity of what they were trying to do.

Listening to them, singing joyously as they rode the Vortex like a wave and wove the universes back together, he could believe the old

legend (passed on in the Academy dorms on dark, rainy nights) that the TARDISEs had created the Time Lords, not the other way around.

Their song reached a crescendo in his head, and they took what could only be described as a flying leap, soaring, free-falling through time and space and the Void between universes. He came to his feet, stomach crawling up his throat in panic—

Then, just as he was taking a step forwards, the Time Rotor re-engaged, and suddenly they were landing, a universe away (literally) from their starting point, and he had to trust his ship and his lover that they could get him back. Rose was laughing, a sound of sheer relief and pure delight, and he could feel her in his head, withdrawing her consciousness from the linkage between her and the Tardis, preparing to be human again.

His stomach still wedged in his throat, he went to the double doors and opened one, stepping out, setting his feet deliberately on the soil of another universe for the first time since Gallifrey had fallen. It was wonderful and terrifying all at once.

He was standing on the grass in front of a familiar mansion. For a moment, he saw darkness and marching metal forms, and then reality reasserted itself. The sun was out, shining on lawns and abandoned toys, scattered across the space in front of him. A pair of bikes leaned drunkenly against the front steps, and he marveled at the change that touch of domesticity made in the place. Then his eyes fell on Jackie, watching him warily from the stoop, and he smiled. She smiled back, still wary, and his smile grew; some things didn't change, apparently.

The door opened again, behind him, and he turned to watch Rose step out into her adopted universe again. She looked around, then looked up at him, and they grinned at one another. "You did it," he said proudly.

"We did it," she replied, and hugged him. His eyes met Jackie's, over Rose's head, and he could see the fear melting out of Rose's mother's face. He knew how she felt, and he smiled at her. She smiled back, then started towards them again.

He released Rose as Jackie came running up, arms held wide. “Rose!” she yelled, making him wince and rub his ear, and he stepped back to get out of the way.

Rose made an ‘oof’ noise as her mother grabbed her, but returned the hug with equal enthusiasm. “Mum,” she responded happily. “Mum, I’m home.”

He could see Jackie’s arms tighten around Rose. “I can see that, love,” she said, making him smirk. “And right quick, too. You just left yesterday.” She pulled back. “How long’s it been for you, then?” Ah, so Jackie hadn’t entirely forgotten the realities of time travel.

“A couple of weeks,” Rose replied. “Guess we hit our target on the nose, then.” She looked over her mother’s dressing gown. “I was trying for just after breakfast, though.”

“Not your fault we started eating late,” Jackie responded, and the Doctor was surprised. That leap had felt uncontrolled, but they’d still managed to land right when Rose had been aiming? Maybe he should let her drive more often. “I see you brought home a friend,” Jackie went on, her tone teasing.

“Yep,” Rose said, imitating his habit of popping the ‘p’. She glanced back at him, and he could see she was beaming as widely as he was, and then his eyes narrowed as she gave him a mischevous look before turning back to her mother. “He followed me home, mummy. Can I keep him?”

*Yes, please,* he thought, although he protested, “Oi,” just for form.

Jackie looked him up and down, the expression of mischief on her face just like her daughter’s. “Only if he’s house-trained,” she said finally. “Otherwise he’ll have to sleep outside, you know.”

“Oi!” he protested again.

He forgot his indignation as Rose laughed. It was a sound of sheer joy that made something ache in the space between his hearts. She was beautiful when she laughed. She was beautiful all the time, of course, but the look of delight on her face warmed him clear through.

Jackie was also watching Rose laugh, the look on her face happy but also a little sad at the same time, and wondered what she was thinking.

Just as he thought that, she turned to face him. “Doctor,” she said, and held out her arms.

He glanced over at Rose, whose laugh had turned into a snicker, and then stepped forwards and hugged her mother. He’d forgotten how short she was. In his memory, she seemed taller. “Jackie.”

He released her as she pulled back, and looked over her as she was doing to him. Her hair was starting to grey, or perhaps she’d just quit dyeing it; it was hard to tell. There were more lines on her face, and his hearts ached at how many of them were worry lines. She was starting to age, he realized, and he wondered how long it would be before Rose wanted to come back to stay with her.

He thought about the idea of Rose, living linearly, and tried to imagine living with her. It wasn’t as bad as he’d always thought it would be, and he felt himself smile. The worry lines on Jackie’s face eased and turned into laugh lines, and he smiled more widely at her.

Then, before he could stop her, she grabbed his face and kissed him.

“Mmph!” he protested, but she persisted, kissing him forcefully right on his lips. “Mmph!” Finally she pulled back, and he stared at her, reminded of Cassandra, and wondering if Jackie had suddenly been possessed too. She’d sounded so normal just a moment before. “Jackie! I—what was *that* for?”

She looked up at him, and a few of the pain lines returned. “You fixed my daughter,” she said simply.

She was giving him too much credit; he hadn’t really fixed anything. “Well—I—” He was glad as she was that Rose was better, but...she wasn’t even really *fixed*, even. “I don’t know if—I’m not sure I’d use the word *fixed* quite like that—”

She cut him off, looking up at him intently as she said “I don’t mean just that, although I’d kiss you just for that.” Once was enough for him, thank you; he hoped there wasn’t another in the offing. “You

*fixed* her, Doctor.” What was she on about? “She came here broken, and now she’s not, and I . . . I know you’re the reason.”

Oh. *Oh*. He could see Rose blush, rather fantastically actually, but he couldn’t help the smile that crossed his features. He wondered if he should mention how she’d fixed him, too. He really should warn Jackie, though, that Rose wasn’t nearly as fixed as she thought she was.

“Mum,” Rose protested.

“Quiet,” Jackie said firmly. “I’m talking to your alien, not you.” Rose’s alien. He thought he liked that, more than he’d expected. She turned her attention back to him, and went on, “I just want to say . . . thank you.”

*Oh*. Suddenly, he remembered Rose, as she’d been that first time he’d seen her step through the door into the Hub, and he looked over at her now, smiling at him, and marveled at the difference. Maybe she had been fixed, just not the way he was thinking of. He hugged Jackie again. Although, if she’d been broken, it was his fault to begin with. “I’m sorry,” he said into her ear, thinking of all the ways Rose’s life would have been easier without him in it. “I never meant for any of this to happen.”

“I know,” she said into his ear, and he took a painful breath in. “But she’s happy, yeah?” He looked over her shoulder at Rose, still blushing and shifting with embarrassment, and he smiled. He hoped she was; he tried his best to keep her that way. “That’s all I ever wanted, really,” Jackie went on, softly. “You make her happy, Doctor. And I’m glad you’re back.”

Watching Rose’s blush slowly fade, he realized that in a strange way, he had missed this odd set of people that made up a great deal of what passed for his family. “Me, too,” he said, then spotted some new little people watching them in fascination, and released Jackie. “So, who’s this then?”

Jackie and Rose both turned, and Jackie’s face lit up with pride. “These,” she said, “are Rose’s new siblings.”

The Doctor distrusted the twinkle in Rose's eye, but followed along behind her anyway. "We've got a child care centre in the basement of Building 3," she said as they walked. "Free for any children of employees, but we also take applications from other parents. Right now I think we have about a hundred and fifty children who attend regularly, of which about one hundred twenty are Torchwood children." They turned a corner and started walking through a long, straight tunnel; he couldn't help looking around curiously. "We're under the plaza right now. These tunnels let us get between buildings without having to leave the Torchwood secured area. Anyway, they're divided into age categories and then into groups, so's we can limit the number of children in any one group to about twenty. Right now there are two groups that are Petey's age; he's in the Red group."

He watched her as she talked, enjoying the bounce in her step and the smile on her face. "You love this," he commented when she paused.

"Yeah," she said, looking around at him. "It's... they're the future of this universe, yeah? I can feel it, in my bones. Right here, playing with bricks."

"No," he said quietly. "I mean... you love this." He gestured around them. "Being a part of this. A real part, not... just someone who sails in to save the day every few years."

She was silent for a few paces, and he felt his hearts start to beat more quickly. To have gotten her back, only to lose her to a linear existence....

"I do, yeah," she admitted finally. "It's... I feel like I made a difference here, Doctor. Not just as your plus one. Me."

His chest started to hurt at the word *just*, and he stared at the ground. "Yeah. You have."

"Doctor," she said softly, and he felt her hand slip into his. He glanced at her quickly, and saw her staring at him worriedly. "I still... it's not that I didn't love being your plus one." She stopped in the

corridor, making him choose between letting her hand go and stopping himself. He did both, stuffing his hands awkwardly into his pockets and rocking on his heels, still staring at the ground. “I did. I still would, I think. I just... I think I needed this, yeah? Something that was *me*.”

He looked up at her, seeing the faint shimmer of fear behind her eyes, and was unable to stop himself from reaching out for her. “Yeah,” he responded again, compassion overriding his own fear. “I remember... the first time I ever stopped a paradox, right out of the Academy.” He wove his fingers with hers, and essayed a smile for her. “I remember looking at all the people who were alive and happy and not Reaper-food, and thinking... I did that. Little old me. Not my instructors, telling me what to do, not my elders, not the other students helping me. Just... me.”

Her face lit up with a smile, and he felt his own become more real in response. “Yeah,” she said. “But... you know... you don’t have to choose. Your life or... I can come back here, myself, when I need to. Don’t even have to miss a day of work. You can keep on traveling, yeah?”

Here he was, in the middle of one of his worst fears: that she would realize she didn’t need him anymore. She could travel the stars on her own, now. Even go pick up her own companions, if she wanted. “I could,” he responded cautiously, and something in his hearts lifted a bit when her smile grew just a bit fixed. “I don’t know, though.” He looked around. “There’s something to be said for living linearly. Sometimes. Almost like a holiday, don’t you think?”

She bumped her head against his shoulder and smiled at him, and he smiled back. Crisis averted, for now. Nothing had really been decided, but... they’d started laying their cards on the table. Except that, unlike poker, if they both played this right, maybe they could both win. That would be nice. Everybody wins. Almost as good as everybody lives.

“Come on,” she said, bumping him again and tugging on his hand. “If we hurry, we can make it there in time for juice and biscuits.”

She grinned up at him. “They’ve got banana-mango juice.”

“Well, then!” he said, grinning back. “What’re we waiting for?”  
She was laughing as he pulled her into a run.

They rounded the corner at the end of the tunnel together, slowing to a walk again. Rose was breathing heavily, but not panting the way she would have been two years—ten years ago, for her. She’d kept in shape, he thought, and couldn’t help admiring her figure as she walked a little ahead of him. “Petey’s group should be in here,” she said, stopping by a door marked “H9-11 Red (G14-16, D5-6)”. He realized after a moment that the last two groups of symbols weren’t actually in the Roman alphabet. Interesting. She pulled the door open and gestured him inside.

They went through a small anteroom, where cubbies in the walls overflowed with jackets and boots, and on into a larger open space, although at the moment it was divided by temporary walls and large foam shapes. He turned to ask Rose a question, and froze.

A pair of Daleks rolled towards them, eyestalks, beam weapons, and plungers aimed squarely at Rose’s chest. “Ex-term-in-ate!” the nearer one chirped brightly. It was a scene out of one of his recurring nightmares, he thought.

Almost. It was ruined, however, by the fact that both Daleks were barely shoulder-height to Rose and had to reach *up* to poke her in the chest with their plungers. Furthermore, each were wearing brightly-colored signs slung from their eyestalks, proclaiming them to be “Byron” and “Shelley”, complete with glitter and, in Shelley’s case, butterfly stickers.

“Wait!” Rose said brightly, lifting her hands in the air. After a moment and a nudge from her, he did the same. “We surrender! Take us to your leader!”

The two Daleks rolled backwards a bit, held a hurried conference, and then poked Rose with their plungers again. “This way,” Byron said. “You will be detained. Resistance is futile.”

They were marched around a pile of large red foam blocks and up

against a dividing wall, next to a small Gwao wearing a pink jumpsuit. “Stay here,” Shelley said, leaving them in the hands of another pair of Daleks, a slightly larger Gwao in a green jumpsuit, and a human boy.

“What’s going on?” he whispered to Rose after she’d greeted the Gwao next to them.

“Looks like we hit the end of free-play time,” she whispered back. “They’re probably letting the kids play themselves out.” She gave him a worried look. “You okay? I wasn’t... I didn’t mean to walk you into...” She shot a quick glance at the Daleks.

“I’m fine,” he responded automatically. In the middle of the space in front of them, Byron was making a speech about how they had three hostages, and demanding someone come out with their hands up. “I’ve never seen a smaller Dalek,” he commented, retreating into the intellectual.

“They’re new,” she said with a touch of pride. “We’ve been working on a way for them to have... shells, inside the shell, so they can upgrade without risking their lives.” She gestured with her chin at the pair in front of them. “In about a year, they’ll get the extra video components put in, and a more dextrous arm. Gives them time to adjust slowly.” She smiled, somewhat ruefully. “Also, the smaller shells are lighter for their size; we had problems with the younger Daleks before the double-shell program, that they didn’t know their own strength and weight. It’s only this latest lot that we’ve been able to integrate with the other children.”

“Fascinating,” he said, meaning it. Watching the regular children interact with their Dalek counterparts, he was almost able to forget he was looking at the form of his worst foe. Slowly he was growing able to set aside his instinctual urge to snatch the children out of danger and run.

There was a flurry of action behind another pile of foam, and another group of children came boiling out. A pair of Daleks took the lead, pointing what he now realized were actually rudimentary gripping arms, not beam weapons, at the other Daleks and making zotting

noises, while humans and Gwaoos dodged behind an intermediate foam barrier. A human girl (“Patty”, he read on her nametag) popped up, pointing her arms like she was holding a gun. “Pow! Pow pow!” she said theatrically, before the defending Daleks made a “zot!” in her direction and she fell over dramatically.

Movement from his right caught his eye, and he watched as a young human male (“Steven”) slipped through a small opening in the walls they were shoved up against, followed by a small Gwao (“Araeio”). Araeio appeared to be guarding Steven’s back, behavior that became suddenly clear as Steven pulled a small cylindrical block from his belt and waved it vigorously at the pink Gwao’s wrists and ankles, making buzzing noises as he did so.

The Doctor glanced over at Rose, mouth twitching, to find her staring in fascination at the floor tiles, a brilliant pink spot staining the cheek he could see. Before he could say anything, Steven had “freed” the Gwao, who was being urged out the escape route by Araeio, and had turned to him and Rose. He sat politely still as their imaginary bonds were sonic screwdrivered free, and took the opportunity to grab Rose’s hand as they ducked through the barrier. “I don’t really wave my screwdriver that. . . energetically, do I?” he whispered in her ear as they were encouraged to run behind another foam barrier, watching in fascination as the ear in question turned bright red.

They ducked behind the barrier, where the children put their heads together and began to plot a strategy for overwhelming their enemy. They were shortly met by the remaining retreating distraction party (and a few of the “dead”, who had gotten bored sitting around and had apparently decided to come plot with them from beyond the grave—or possibly had regenerated; at the moment he wasn’t entirely sure). The children’s plotting was interrupted by an adult call from behind the nearest barrier. “Children!” the voice said loudly. “Five more minutes, and then it’s snack time.”

There was a rapid flurry of whispered strategizing, and a couple of unsuccessful feints at the enemy stronghold. This incited a few in

return, which they successfully repelled with the use of small lightweight plastic balls, hurled overhand at the enemy, which apparently made “boom” noises and threw their enemies off their feet.

As it became clear that neither side was gaining ground, Steven got up on their barrier—ducking a few imaginary bolts from his opponents—and delivered a passionate, if rather confused, soliloquy on the value of life and cooperation. Negotiation ensued; eventually they settled on a deal whereby their party gave up a number of sugary snacks and the landmass of South America in exchange for peace, the promise of future interstellar trade, and a number of small furry mammals, at which point the children (and the Doctor and Rose) all shook hands (or gripping arms) and trooped tiredly off for biscuits and juice.

The Doctor hung back, letting the children scamper ahead of them. Rose was still gazing in fascination at anything but him, and he couldn't help grinning. “Someone's been telling stories, I think,” he murmured to her, and watched her ears grow redder again. “I did like that speech, though. I'll have to remember the bit about—how did it go? ‘The most important things in the universe are life and pizza,’ that was it.”

Rose let out a soft snort, and the corner of her mouth twitched up. “That's Mickey's son, can you tell?”

“Oh oh oh,” the Doctor chortled, making her giggle too. “I should have guessed.”

“You don't mind, though, do you?” she asked suddenly, stopping and looking up at him seriously.

“What? You telling stories about me?” He grinned at her. “Nah. ‘Course not. Flattered, that's what I am. Flabbergasted, too, of course. I don't *really* wave the screwdriver like that, do I?”

“No,” she reassured him, a grin starting to emerge. “That's all Steven. Seems to think anything works better if you wave it harder.” She tugged on his hand. “Come on. You don't want them to drink all the banana-mango juice, do you?”

He and “Miss Rose” were settled in a place of honor at one end

of the double-wide table and handed two cookies and a glass of juice each. The Daleks congregated around the other end of the table, where they were plugged into a power supply in lieu of snacks. He successfully negotiated with his neighbor (the small pink Gwao, who turned out to be incongruously named “Matthew”) to exchange his oatmeal-raisin cookie for Matthew’s sugar cookie with edible ball-bearings on top, making Rose snicker next to him.

“Miss Rose?” Shelley asked from down the table. “Are you staying for story time?”

“Sorry, Shelley,” she said sincerely. “I’m afraid we have to leave after snack time. You too, Petey.”

“Awww,” her half-brother whined. “But Rose, we’re part way through *The Hobbit*! Bilbo just met the dragon!”

“We have the book at home,” she replied in a tone that suggested it was a reminder. “If you’re good, maybe I’ll read it for bedtime tonight.”

There was a general expression of jealousy around the table that Petey got to have Rose read to him, making the Doctor smile into his juice. “But Miss Rose?” Shelley pressed. “Won’t you come back and read to us? Maybe tomorrow?”

“We’ll see,” she said cautiously. “Maybe, if I hear you’re really, *really* good, I’ll tell you the story of the Lost Little Dalek.”

“We’ll be good,” Matthew promised, which was echoed by the majority of the children, including all of the Daleks. “Please, Miss Rose? I wanna hear about the Little Dalek and the Mean Jailer Man.”

“We’ll see,” she repeated.

The Doctor tried to imagine how in Rassilon’s name she had managed to clean up the story of Van Statten’s Dalek for child consumption, and only managed to call up in startling detail the moment he thought he had lost Rose forever. He stared at his remaining juice, trying to wipe the sound of energy beams from his head.

A small hand appeared on his elbow, and he looked over in surprise at Matthew, who was peering up at him with an expression

he thought might be concern. “Are you okay?” he (or she; the Doctor wasn’t quite sure which gender cue to trust) asked worriedly.

“Yes,” he reassured the child. “I’m okay.”

The child peered up at him, frowning like he wasn’t sure he believed the Doctor’s claim. “Is it the mean Daleks? It’s okay to be scared of the mean Daleks, you know.” His expression assumed a frightening degree of earnestness. “Miss Rose will make sure we’re safe.”

He couldn’t help looking over at Rose, who was blushing badly. “I know,” he answered quietly. “She saved me from them once, you know.”

Silence fell over the table, and he realized twenty-two sets of small eyes were staring at him and Rose in awe. “Miss Rose saved you from the mean Daleks?” Steven asked, sounding like this was complete news. “I wanna hear that story, Miss Rose!”

She put her face in her hands. “You had to, didn’t you?”

“Were you scared?” Matthew wanted to know, eyes growing wide.

“Very,” he admitted.

“Did you think you were gonna *die*?” Patty asked, looking more than a little scared.

“For a little while,” he replied honestly. “But then Miss Rose saved me and made the mean Daleks go away.”

“Wow,” the children said, transferring their wide stares to Rose.

There was another tug on his elbow. He looked back down at Matthew, who was still staring up at him. “I’m scared of the mean Daleks too,” the child admitted in a whisper.

He pulled the child close. *This*, right here, was why he had fought in the Time War. His eyes met Rose’s over the child’s head, and he could see the slight worry in her face. “I know,” he responded. “They scare everybody.”

“Steven says he isn’t scared,” Matthew complained. Steven made a face at him. “But my (here he said a word that the Tardis

translated as “mommy”, although the Doctor got the feeling the actual relationship was considerably more complicated) says he’s lying.”

“Am not!” Steven responded hotly.

“Are too,” Patty piped up.

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

This argument continued without input from the other children for a little while. After a few exchanges, Matthew looked up at the Doctor. “My name’s Matthew,” he said solemnly. “My mommy says it’s a human name. What’s your name?”

“Hello, Matthew,” he responded automatically. “I’m the Doctor.”

It was only when he processed the utter silence that it occurred to him that uttering that phrase in a room full of children who had apparently heard stories about him their entire lives might not have been the best idea he’d ever had.

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He reached out and took her hand as they headed upstairs to change for the party. She squeezed his fingers gently, and he smiled at her.

“I’m sorry about that,” she said. “If I’d’ve ever imagined. . .”

“What?” he asked.

“I never thought. . . this universe doesn’t have a Doctor. I never really even thought about what would happen if they met you.”

He stopped, the smile falling off his face. “You. . . you really believed it was impossible, didn’t you?”

She nodded, then shook her head, then shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I thought. . . I thought if you ever managed it, if we ever managed it, it’d be. . . some tiny hole, just big enough for one person to stuff herself through, and maybe a bag of toiletries if I was lucky.” Her lips pursed. “Then. . . then I thought if I was really, really lucky, maybe we’d fix the popping about thing when I was on that side. I never imagined. . . this.”

He pulled her against him, letting her wonderful human, lively warmth dispel the memory of a supernova and a beach in Norway. “I suppose you couldn’t have known. Did you *really* have to tell them the bit about the bananas, though?”

She giggled into his collar. “At the time, it seemed like a good way to get Petey to eat his fruit. He thought you were the most amazing creature in the universe—any of them—and if the *Doctor* said it was a good idea. . . .”

He laughed. “I suppose it must be true that familiarity breeds contempt.”

“Huh?” She moved her head to blink up at him.

“I’m not the most amazing creature in the multiverse.” He smiled at her. “That’s you.”

She turned a brilliant red, but the corners of her lips turned up involuntarily. It was simply too irresistible; he had to lean down and kiss them. She pulled him against her, running one hand over his back, and he slid a hand under her ear to cup her head.

“Eww, *kissing!*”

They broke apart to find Petey staring at them from the landing below, his nose wrinkled. As he disappeared into his room (the spectacle having ended) Rose collapsed against the Doctor giggling. “Well. So much for my reputation,” he said ruefully.

“I don’t know,” she replied, grinning up at him. “Give him another few years.”

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*missing material*

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The sound of the time rotor filled the Hub. Once, that sound would have sent Jack running for its source and every other member of his team reaching for a weapon. Now only Gwen even looked up as he ambled past her to the Tardis’s usual parking spot.

No sooner had the sound died away than the door was flung open, and Rose bounced out, dressed in something Jack could only call (and then with considerable charity to its structural integrity) a sarong.

She flung herself into his arms; automatically, he caught her, despite the distraction of her attire (or, rather, lack thereof). Part of his mind noted that she was rather more tan than she had been that morning, and he wondered where they'd gone—and, more importantly, how far that tan extended.

“Jack,” she said happily. “How was your day? Or is it days? He *says* it's still the same day, but this is the same bloke who mixed up months and hours once—”

“And you're never going to let me forget it, are you?” the Doctor said fondly, sticking his head out the door. “Hello, Jack.”

“Never,” Rose replied, turning to grin back at the alien. “Brr. It's cold in here.” She let go of Jack and wrapped her arms around herself, covering up assets Jack had been rather appreciating.

“Of course it is,” the Doctor said patiently, coming out the door, and handed Rose the robe he'd had in his other hand. “We're in Cardiff now, now New Miami.”

Rose stuck her tongue out at him, but took the robe, belting it around herself. “Thus speaks the man who took me to Saskatchewan—the planet—and didn't even put on a hat.”

“Is it my fault you don't have a highly-evolved thermal regulatory system?” he countered. “And, by the way, the Tardis systems say it's only been eight hours since we left.”

At her workstation above them, Gwen started laughing. “You two,” she said when the three of them turned to look at her, “are so married.”

Jack winced internally, waiting for the Doctor to say something scathing or sarcastic, but instead the alien's ears turned a light pink, and he said to Jack, “Jack—is she parked all right? We had a spot of trouble with the landing systems—”

“And when he says a spot of trouble,” Rose broke in, a glint in her eye, “what he means is—”

“Well. . . .” The Doctor scratched his ear. “It didn't take us *that* long to dig her out. It was only sand, after all.” He looked back at

Jack.

“Nah,” Jack said, finally getting a syllable in edgewise. “You’re fine. Sand, huh?”

“I was able to jury-rig something,” the Doctor said more seriously, “but I’ll need to actually fix it before we go on any more long trips. Or, really, any short ones either. In fact, it would be best if she just stayed parked.”

“That’s fine,” Jack said. “So—how was New Miami?”

“Sandy,” Rose said dryly. “Oh! We brought you a present! Well, actually, it’s for all of you, but I think you’re the only one who’ll know what it does.”

On cue, the Doctor reached into a pocket and produced a small package. It was actually wrapped, if inexpertly, and Jack detected Rose’s hand there. “What’s the occasion?” he asked, turning it over in his hands.

“No occasion,” Rose responded, bouncing up and down as he began to rip the paper off. He pondered delaying—she really did. . . bounce. . . nice. Gwen gave up even pretending to work, watching over the railing in interest. “Just a little thank-you for putting up with us.”

That did help explain the little green men on the wrapping paper, anyway. He got the paper off, handing it to Rose, who handed it in turn to the Doctor, who stuck it in a pocket. Jack spent a moment imagining some day, hundreds of years in the future, when he’d somehow manage to use it. . . somehow. . . to save the planet. A planet, anyway.

He pried open the plain cardboard box and froze. “Is. . . is this. . . what I think it is?”

“Well, that depends on what you think it is,” the Doctor replied, beaming widely.

“But—it can’t be,” Jack said, removing the fist-size piece of technology from the box. “Hessian temporelativity fluxometers are so rare I’ve never even *seen* one outside a warship. And even if it was. . . how the hell did you get your hands on it? And *where*?”

“A warship,” the Doctor said smugly.

“Never play poker with a Time Lord,” Rose added, giggling. “They cheat.”

“Oi,” the Doctor complained. “It’s not cheating. Not really. Not my fault they didn’t ask my species before dealing me in.”

Jack just goggled at the small, unassuming device sitting in his palm. “I—but—don’t you want it?” he said finally. “For the Tardis?”

“Nah.” The Doctor waved the offer off. “Already got one. Besides, it’s just a backup for her anyway. Backup backup, now we’ve got Rose.” He smiled at the blonde, who blushed and grinned back. “And you need one, anyway.”

“Don’t think I’ve ever seen you cream your shorts like that before, Jack,” Owen commented, leaning on the rail near Gwen. “Not over something that looks like an alien egg timer. What the fuck’s it do?”

“You know that room of equipment Tosh has?” Jack replied after a minute, caressing the fluxometer.

Owen snorted. “That she’s always fucking about with?”

“Owen,” Gwen said remonstratively. “What about it, Jack?”

“This little baby here,” Jack went on, putting it back in its box, “makes that look like a four-function calculator next to a Cray.” Owen whistled. “You *sure* you’re willing to have this in the twenty-first century, Doctor?”

The alien shrugged. “Like I said. You need it.” He glanced at Rose. “Even with a time machine who likes to meddle, we’re not always here, and we’ll both feel better knowing you have it.”

“Aww,” Gwen opined, and the Doctor blushed.