



## CLOSURE

by Deborah Latham

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### Prologue

*Oh, Doctor. I didn't know it was going to be this hard.*

*When I met you on Mynydd y Seren, and you saved not just the world, but the entire universe, it was so utterly incredible to be a part of that. And when Veralashtar's machine shorted out and I ended up with some of your mind in mine – your knowledge, your memories – so was that. What was even more incredible was that you let me keep it...*

*And so was what happened after that. Taking me to Kvitverden, where, of all the gin joints in all the universe, we met Jack Harkness. Oh, and saved the Imus, of course. And all those planets you took me to, especially Felindre. That was where I first saw the Diakonos. To this day I don't know what he really is; not a man, not a human, even though that's how he presents himself to the world. Although in another way, I do know what he is – someone with integrity, compassion, kindness, someone who clearly has tremendous power in so many ways – more than I can comprehend, I think – yet he seems to have a special place for me in his feelings. And you. Something happened between you on Eutychia, didn't it? That time I walked in on the two of you, in that room with the Mirror of the Soul – I knew it then, though I don't know what it was. And I know – I don't know how, but I know – that somehow it's not over yet...*

*Of course, having your mind in mine hasn't always been fun. That's how I got caught up in the Mind Machine with you. All that horror, that terror... Sometimes, when it gets really bad, I still have nightmares. And I still wonder about the Voice – who he was, where he came from. I asked Mr Smith about it – I talk to him quite often, you know, especially when Sarah Jane's not there, and that helps. He's good at being objective, as well as knowing all the things he knows. That's what I need, sometimes... Anyway, he told me he'd “subjected the matter to analysis” – you know what computers are like, even Xylok ones! – and he theorized that the Voice was a personification of your own self-hatred and guilt, externalized by the Mind Machine. I asked him if the Voice had ceased to exist once we were out of the Machine, but*

he seemed to think that now that externalization has taken place, the Voice could be 'roused' again – by something as simple as a dream. I hope he's wrong about that. You've enough to cope with, being a Time Lord; the last thing you need is a Dream Lord on your back as well. I hope he never surfaces again, to give you any more pain. You've had more than your fair share of that already.

And there was hearing you go. I wasn't with you, but because I had your mind in mine, I could hear you. "I don't want to go." Too much heartbreak that day, Doctor. That's why it's been so hard ever since. That awareness of loss. Sometimes it's brutal, you know. Because it never goes away. It's always there, in the background, colouring everything. Do you remember I told you how being with you made me notice things, ordinary, everyday miracle things, and they make me think of you? To this day I still can't see curls of steam rising from the surface of a cup of coffee without thinking of you. That's why it's so difficult. Because you're not there, and yet you're always there.

Sometimes I could even see you. When I was with Jack, fighting the Wyvern, I could see you in my head, looking at me, talking to me. Bouncing all over the shop, the way you do. You looked me right in the eyes, and you talked to me, just as if you were really here. You don't do that anymore...

But I still talk to you. Like now. Tell you stuff. Like how grateful I am you've been keeping your promise. "I'm still looking after you," you said, and you are.

But it's still hard. Some of your memories... The others who've travelled with you. The ones who chose to leave you, to take up another life. "They break my heart," you said. I remember how you felt – isn't it strange, that I can feel something not that I felt, but that you felt? – but remember when Jo decided to leave, to marry her professor? I know, because one day that memory surfaced. And it was like it had happened to me. Such grief, such pain. And that was just one parting out of so many. Being the one who's left behind – it's like a bereavement. You know that, better than anyone. You've had to do it over and over and over again. Nobody gets over that sort of grief. They just get used to it, that's all. Sarah Jane had to do it. And so have I.

But I haven't got used to it. Not yet.

Oh, Doctor. I didn't know it was going to be this hard...

## **Chapter 1**

### ***The Beginning of the End***

"I want to go home," said Amy Pond decisively, with a determined toss of her head that sent her bronze-red hair flying around her shoulders. "Right now!"

"Home? Leadworth? *Leadworth?*" the Doctor expostulated, incredulity written all over his face. "Amelia Pond! I've just invited you to choose our next destination – offered you a choice of all the times and places there are in all of time and space – and you want to go to *Leadworth?*"

"She wants to see her parents," Rory explained, from his seat on the top step of the stairs that led from the entranceway to the further interior of the TARDIS down to the console platform. "She's not really used to the idea they're there, yet. You only gave them back to her on our wedding day, remember? She probably wants to check they're still there."

Amy directed a slightly irritated glance at her husband, but didn't argue. She simply nodded sharply at the Doctor, staring at him with stubborn hazel eyes.

The Doctor threw his hands up in the air in a gesture that combined frustration and resignation.

"Oh, all right... But not for long!" he conceded grumpily, brandishing an admonitory finger at her. "Then we go somewhere *interesting*, instead! Which will *not* be difficult," he added, with an air of pointing out the obvious. "Since absolutely *everywhere* in the universe is more interesting than Leadworth!"

Amy ignored the slight on her home village and looked up again at Rory, her eyes gleaming with triumph.

"Go on – pick a date, then," said the Doctor, stoically. "Any date you like. You choose."

"Ohhh-kay," said Amy, her fingers poised over the controls. "This one!"

“Right! On our way!” said the Doctor. Then, a few seconds later, “No – actually, there already!”

Amy and Rory exchanged smiles, and made for the door.

They’d almost got there when the Doctor suddenly said, “Wait!”

They turned back to face him.

“Not yet,” he said. He wasn’t looking at them, but staring at the date display, his left forefinger raised in the air in a gesture of arrest.

“Something the matter?” Rory enquired.

“Amelia Pond,” said the Doctor, very deliberately. “This date you’ve chosen. It’s the 12th of May, 2011.”

“So?” Amy enquired. “Why’s that matter?”

“Why did you want to come back here just now?” the Doctor asked, fixing her with serious eyes. “Why today? Why this date?”

She looked a little puzzled, then shrugged.

“Dunno,” she admitted. “I just had a feeling, you know? Here.”

And she double-tapped her forehead.

The Doctor’s mouth dropped open. In his mind’s eye he was seeing the wording of a note. A note that – in strictly chronological terms, in his own personal timeline – had not yet been sent to him, but would be. A note that he had already seen. A note sent by someone who, he knew, would subsequently vanish off the face of the earth.

“A *unique date in Swedish history*,” he muttered. “*May be the month this year, and the rest adds up...*”

“Doctor, what are you talking about? What’s special about the 12th of May 2011?” Amy enquired.

“It’s the date you get if you take the 30th of February 1712 – which is a date in Swedish history, and don’t strain your brain, Rory, it’s all to do with the historical change from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian calendar – take its component digits of 30021712, take out the digits for 2011 – don’t ask me why, you don’t need to know – and add the remaining digits. That gives you 12. May is the month, 2011 is the year. 12th of May, 2011.”

Rory looked blank. “So?” he prompted.

The Doctor ignored him. He was remembering the final words of the note. “*Don’t go there. Not until you see the right double-tap.*”

Amy had just used the same gesture that Finn Thornton had always used to refer to his mind in hers – a double-tap on her forehead. What was more, where were they now? On Earth, in England – and on the 12th of May, 2011.

“*The right double-tap...*”

Amy was looking at him with concern.

“Doctor? What’s the matter? Something wrong?”

“No! Nothing! Not a thing! Not wrong. Completely not wrong,” said the Doctor, the words spilling out of him in quick succession as he dissembled madly. Then he smiled, widely. “Absolutely not one solitary, single thing. But I think you should put that visit to your parents on hold. I think we should wait in here for a while, instead.”

His eyes twinkled as he looked at their perplexed expressions.

“We may,” he said tantalizingly, “be expecting a visitor.”

\*

“Oh, *blast* and botheration!” Finn Thornton exclaimed loudly, then recollected herself and glanced around to ascertain if anyone was witnessing her predicament. A potentially embarrassing one, but only if observed, of course. And it seemed not; from her position, on her own doorstep, she couldn’t see anyone else out on the street at the moment. It was always a quiet street; at this precise moment it appeared to be emptier of life than a vacuum is of atmosphere. So, thankfully, there was no-one around to notice that she’d managed to come out without her house keys, and thus just discovered that she’d accidentally locked herself out of her own house.

She cast another look up and down the street, to make sure she was alone. At least she didn’t have to just stand there, feeling stupid. She did, after all, have a fallback strategy for this sort of situation.

She was just reaching into the pocket of her gilet in which she kept her sonic screwdriver when a voice spoke from right behind her with shocking unexpectedness.

“Does yours have a red setting?”

Even as she spun round, startled, she was thinking, *But the street was empty...! How could anyone have got that close without me seeing them? It's not possible!*

Yet standing on the pavement just three feet away, looking at Finn with wide, sparkling eyes, was a woman. A strikingly attractive one, with a mass of curling fair hair and an expression of barely suppressed amusement.

“A what?” Finn blurted, startled.

“A red setting. Your sonic,” said the woman, as if it should have been obvious. “Mine does.”

And there, in her hand, was a sonic screwdriver. Thicker and larger than Finn's, and with a more ornate head, but recognizably a sonic screwdriver.

The woman smiled at Finn's astonished expression, and waggled the sonic playfully in her fingers.

Finn stared at it. “Who –?” she began, haltingly. Then she remembered. A conversation she'd had with the Doctor...

*“I've only ever given my sonic screwdriver to one other person,”* he'd said. *“That is, I will do, someday.”*

*“You already have – but you will...?”* She hadn't understood, to start with.

*“I mean I already know that someday I'll do that. Because I've already met her. Out of sequence, as it were. She already knew me, but I didn't know her. Then. But one day I will. Apparently.”*

*“You do lead a complicated life, don't you? Am I ever likely to run into this person?”*

*“No idea. But if you do, she's called River Song.”*

At which point one of the Doctor's memories was triggered in her mind. A memory of a face. With the same amused, sparkling eyes and mass of curling fair hair at which she was looking at that very moment.

“River!” she exclaimed incredulously. “You're River!”

“Yes, I am,” River Song agreed. “And you're Finn. Hello, Finn.” Those amazing eyes continued to twinkle at her, as if inviting complicity into some fascinating mystery.

“Er – yes... Hello...” said Finn slowly, still grappling to come to terms with the unexpectedness of the visitation.

“So – did he?” River persisted.

“Did he what?”

“Give yours a red setting?”

“I don't think so. He never mentioned it...” Rather dazed, Finn got out her own sonic and looked at it as if she'd never seen it before.

River stepped closer and peered at it with her. Then she shook her head, momentarily wearing a look of annoyance.

“Sometimes, I swear that man doesn't listen to a word I say!” she said, almost crossly. Then she relented. “Although – perhaps he hadn't developed it before he gave you yours.”

“What does the red setting do?” Finn asked, curiously. Then, remembering something else the Doctor had told her, she added quickly, “Or would that be a spoiler?”

River threw back her head and laughed.

“Perhaps it would,” she agreed.

For a moment, they regarded each other, the older woman and the younger woman, assessing each other. And each, for different reasons, liking what they saw. Then Finn smiled slightly, fired her sonic at the recalcitrant lock, and pushed the door open wide.

“Won't you come in?” she suggested, making a sweeping gesture of invitation with one hand. River picked up the skirts of her coat and dropped an elegant curtsey.

“Thank you, I will,” she said, and preceded Finn into the house. In the hall, she turned to face her young hostess again.

Finn was thinking hard as she returned her sonic screwdriver to its pocket, not taking her eyes from River's face – a face that, despite the smile and the gleam in those incredible eyes, wasn't giving anything away. Finn didn't think she'd

stand much chance in a battle of wits with this charismatic and formidable – but likeable – woman. So she might as well be direct.

“You don’t strike me as a lady with time to waste. You’d better tell me why you’re here,” she said.

River raised an interrogative eyebrow, but her eyes shone with approbation.

“Why do you think I’m here?” she countered, demurely.

“Well – even though I’m really pleased to have met you – because I know you’re someone important to him” – no need to qualify that personal pronoun; she knew full well there was only one ‘him’ as far as both of them were concerned – “somehow I doubt you’ve made your way here – and now – just to add me to your tick list of his acquaintances. So I assume there’s something either that I need to know or to do, or else something from me that you need to know. And it must be important enough for you to come here, to this point in time, and tell me so yourself.”

“Oh, he was right about you!” River chuckled approvingly.

Finn decided not to ask what that meant. “Was he, indeed?” she commented, with a polite lift of her eyebrows, and waited. River’s face grew more serious.

“I’ve come here to tell you that there’s somewhere you need to be. A specific place, at a specific time.”

“Where?”

“Leadworth. A village in Gloucestershire. Lovely little place – although, it has to be admitted, rather dull in some ways,” River qualified tolerantly. “But you need to be there on the morning of the 12th of May. It’s very important. There’ll be someone there you need to meet.”

“And you’re not going to tell me who it is. Or why it’s so important,” said Finn slowly, making it a statement, not a question.

“Spoilers,” River agreed, putting a hand on her shoulder. “But it’s going to be vitally important for *you*. And for someone who matters to you, very much.”

Finn met her eyes.

“There’s only one person who matters to me very much,” she said, in a low voice.

“I know,” agreed River.

They looked at each other for long moments. Then River dropped her hand from Finn’s shoulder, and Finn nodded in a businesslike manner.

“Well, if it’s as important as that, I’d better get going,” she remarked. “The 12th’s only the day after tomorrow. And I don’t have a car. I’ll need to catch the train.”

River’s eyes were suddenly twinkling again, as she held up her left wrist. Her coat sleeve dropped downward far enough to reveal what she was wearing on it. A vortex manipulator.

“I could get you there quicker,” she offered.

Finn looked at the vortex manipulator impassively, then grinned.

“I never pass up the offer of a lift from a friend,” she said lightly. “Mind you, I hope the ride’s smoother with you than the last time I travelled like that. I’ve got another friend who’s got one of those...”

River raised one eyebrow interrogatively.

“Jack Harkness,” Finn proffered tentatively, wondering if the name would be recognized.

“Ah,” said River, inscrutably.

“Why – do you know him?” Finn asked quickly, intrigued. There had been something in River’s eyes at the mention of Jack’s name...

River merely smiled enigmatically.

“I’ve always been able to fly the TARDIS better than the Doctor – though he’s never going to admit it – so I think I can promise you a reasonable trip with this,” she said, so smugly that Finn couldn’t help grinning.

“Okay, I’d better get ready, then,” she said cheerfully. “So – is there anything special I need to take with me? Apart from a sonic screwdriver without a red setting, of course...?”

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“Why’s he keeping us stuck in here?” Amy demanded in an irritated whisper. She’d joined Rory on his step, and they were sat hip to hip watching the Doctor, who was apparently doing nothing more crucial than patrolling around the control console, tweaking the occasional lever or switch. “I could’ve been to Mum and Dad’s and back again by now!”

Rory looked slightly sceptical at that assertion, but decided not to remark upon it.

“Maybe he doesn’t want you to miss something important,” he whispered back.

“Mum and Dad *are* important!” Amy hissed indignantly.

“I meant, something *he* thinks is important,” Rory muttered.

Amy looked at him sharply, and he returned her look with a slight shrug and an expressive lift of his eyebrows. She opened her mouth to retort, then closed it again. Because there was nothing to say. Rory was, after all, quite accurate in that succinct assessment of the Doctor’s priorities.

But after another few seconds, she found she couldn’t sit in silence any longer. She shot to her feet and glared down at the Doctor.

“Doctor, why can’t I go and see my parents?” she challenged.

“No reason,” he replied, to her surprise.

“But you said –” she began, indignantly.

“No reason at all,” the Doctor repeated, as if she hadn’t spoken. “Provided, of course, you don’t want to miss anything that might happen *here*.” He beamed at her in a particularly irritating fashion, and returned his attention to the console.

Amy was left opening and shutting her mouth like a suffocating fish, with her fists clenched against her thighs, so frustrated by all the things she wanted to say that she couldn’t choose between them. Rory looked up at his wife, sighed, and tugged gently at the hem of her skirt. She looked down at him, pursed her lips, and sat down again so abruptly it was a wonder the jar it must have sent up her spine hadn’t brought tears to her eyes.

“If you say *I told you so*, I am going to *kill* you,” she informed him in an extremely expressive whisper.

Out of sight behind the Time Rotor, the Doctor smiled to himself.

Silence prevailed until he startled both his passengers by unexpectedly heading briskly toward the stairs where Amy and Rory were sitting.

“Make way, make way!” he demanded, hurtling up the steps. “Off the naughty step, you two! Coming through!” Startled, they scrambled to their feet and stepped back to allow him past. Amy watched him vanish into the corridor beyond, then started after him.

“Where are you going?” Rory called after her, as if he hadn’t guessed.

“Gonna find out what’s going on,” Amy flung back over her shoulder, as she marched purposefully into the corridor in pursuit of the Doctor.

“Right. Fine. I’ll just stay here and mind the shop, then, shall I?” Rory muttered to the empty control room, and, for want of something better to do, went down to the console platform and started to walk slowly around it, just as the Doctor had been doing.

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“Well, I can definitely vouch for the fact that travelling by vortex manipulator with you is a much more comfortable experience than with Jack,” said Finn, dropping her hand from River’s wrist.

“Thank you, ma’am,” said River graciously, but still with that twinkle in her eye that seemed to be a default part of her natural expression. Finn smiled, and looked around her. They were standing in a lane on what looked to be the outskirts of a village, with a row of eighteenth-century cottages lining the left hand side. Some twenty-five yards or so down the road a stone wall formed a barrier to whatever lay straight ahead; given the presence of the yew trees towering above its confines, quite likely the boundary wall of a church, though she couldn’t see the church itself from here. The road swung round to the left to follow the line of the wall.

“So this is Leadworth,” she observed, superfluously. “Is there a particular place in it that I’m supposed to be, or do I just wander round and hope I get lucky?”

“The telegraph pole around that corner,” said River. Above the roof of the cottage over which she was pointing, Finn could see the top of the telegraph pole in question. “That’s where you need to go.”

Something about the way she spoke made Finn turn to look at her.

“Aren’t you coming with me?”

River shook her head.

“I have to get back to where I’m supposed to be. But you needed to know that you had to come here, so I thought I’d take the opportunity to meet you while passing on the message. And I’m glad I did.” She was in evident earnest. “I wish it could have been for longer. But I know what you did for him. More than even you realize, perhaps. I wanted to thank you for that. I know how much he valued it.”

“He makes you want to do it, though, doesn’t he?” Finn said, with a shrug that perfectly conveyed the inevitability of her being totally unable to react to the Doctor in any other way. “You think you’ve got a choice about it, but when it comes right down to it, you haven’t, have you?” She looked at River intently. “And I’ve got the feeling you know that even better than me.”

River smiled understandingly. Then she thrust a hand into one of her coat pockets and produced a piece of paper.

“You’ll need to deliver this,” she said. Finn took it from her and looked at it. There was writing on it, but in no language she knew. Although... Another of the Doctor’s memories began to activate as she stared at the strange symbols.

“Isn’t that Old High Gallifreyan?” she suggested tentatively.

“Very good,” River applauded. “Yes, it is. Can you read it?”

Finn looked at it again, and shook her head. “Apparently not. Enough of a memory just surfaced to let me know what it is, that’s all. Although – I can *almost*...” She frowned in frustration at the teasing sensation of being almost on the verge of understanding.

“Never mind,” said River. “You’ll understand soon enough.”

Finn looked up quickly, and so caught the expression on River’s face. It was such a strange look that she found herself wondering what River knew about her future that she didn’t. But since she hadn’t already volunteered the information, there was probably no point in asking her.

“So – a telegraph pole in Leadworth,” she said briskly, tucking the note into one of her pockets. “Not the most glamorous starting point, perhaps, but I imagine that’s why I need to be there. For the start of something. Whatever it is.”

River smiled.

“Everything starts somewhere,” she agreed.

“Very Spike Milligan,” Finn told her with a chuckle, then became serious again. “Thank you, River,” she said earnestly. “I don’t know what this is about, but thank you for the message. And for being the messenger. I’m glad I’ve met you. Because I know you’re somebody else he values.”

They held the look that passed between them for a few moments.

“Well, I’d better go, then,” said Finn. “Presumably it wouldn’t do to be late, whatever this is about.”

River smiled, but something about the way she did it caught Finn’s attention.

“River? Am I going to see you again? Or is this goodbye?”

“Oh, I never say goodbye,” said River lightly. “Just in case.”

“No, you should.” Suddenly Finn was in deadly earnest. “You *should* say goodbye. Because you never know if you’ll ever get the chance again. I *know*. And I expect you know why. You *should* say goodbye, just in case.”

Again, the two women looked at each other; River didn’t speak. Finn smiled, a little crookedly.

“Goodbye, River,” she said, and walked away, heading toward the bend in the road.

She had almost reached it when River called out.

“Finn!”

Finn halted and looked back enquiringly over her shoulder.

“Before we left – you did lock the front door, didn’t you?” River was smiling mischievously and wagging her sonic screwdriver in the air, just as she had when they’d met.

Finn laughed aloud, and River’s smile grew broader than ever. For a moment they shared, not just their laughter, but a connection much more intangible and infinitely more profound. Then Finn turned and walked on, this time without looking back.

And because she didn’t look back, she didn’t see the more sombre expression that came into River’s eyes as she watched her go.

“Everything starts somewhere – and everything ends somewhere... Take care of her, my love,” River whispered, as the retreating figure walked around the bend in the road and passed out of her sight. “You’re still looking after her...”



## Chapter 2

### *Reunited*

Finn approached the bend in the road eagerly, wondering what she would see. Wondering if it would be what she hoped she would see. If she’d interpreted all those veiled hints of River’s accurately. Her step quickened. Then what she saw brought her to a halt in the middle of the road, her eyes wide and fixed.

Yes. No disappointment. There she was.

The TARDIS. Standing on the grass verge of the road, next to the telegraph pole, as if she’d been there for years.

Finn stood looking at her for quite a while, quelling the emotions the sight of the familiar blue shape roused in her. Then she slowly approached, until she was standing in front of the door. Tentatively, as if afraid she might find it weren’t really there, she reached out and touched the surface.

“Hello, you beautiful old thing,” she said, quietly yet fervently. “It is so good to see you again! My best friend’s best friend... I’ve missed you! You do know that, don’t you?” She paused, and gave the TARDIS an appraising look. “You look different, somehow. Did you give yourself a makeover when *he* changed? You look – I don’t know – refreshed...? Renewed...? Anyway, you look – wonderful.” She hesitated, took a deep breath, then said, “Can I come in, please?”

She raised her hand in front of her, and snapped her fingers.

Without an instant’s hesitation, the door swung open.

“Thank you,” she said, and went in, sliding a caressing hand over the blue surface as she passed inside.

As the door swung shut behind her she halted, looking about her in astonishment. Despite expecting change, she still found its actuality slightly overwhelming. It was so much bigger! And so different! Even the Time Rotor was different...

But where was *he*...?

And that was when she saw the young man moving out from behind the console to stare at her in complete and utter astonishment.

Rory had heard the door opening, but it wasn't until a couple of seconds had passed that he realized it shouldn't be doing anything of the sort. Because he, Amy and the Doctor were all inside the TARDIS. How could anyone else get in? Unless it was River... Though what she'd be doing in Leadworth was more than he could imagine.

But when he moved around the console, he found himself looking at a young woman of about twenty-five – a young woman he'd never seen in his life before.

She was gazing at him with a peculiarly intense, searching look. He opened his mouth to ask who she was, and how she'd got into the TARDIS, but she spoke first.

"You're not him, are you?" she asked, though it was not so much a question as a statement.

"Yup, that's right. I'm not him," agreed Rory carefully, starting with a slow nod that he'd seamlessly converted into a shake of his head by the end of the second sentence.

Her face was alight with laughter.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "That was rude of me, wasn't it? Hullo. My name's Finn Thornton." She executed a small wave of greeting.

Rory found himself automatically echoing it.

"Hullo," he returned, cautiously. "Er – I'm Rory Williams."

"Nice to meet you, Rory. You travel with him, do you?" There was evidently no need to spell out who 'he' was.

"Well, yeah," he acknowledged. "Me and Amy. My wife."

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise and approval.

"Your wife? Oh, that's brilliant!" she said, endorsing her words with a smile.

"What's brilliant?" demanded a female voice with a strong Scots accent. "What's going on?"

Finn looked up. At the top of the ramp that led up from the control platform stood a tall, slim, beautiful girl with a mass of the most fantastic bronze-red hair and wonderful legs that went on forever. Her hazel eyes were fixed on Finn, demanding explanations.

"Amy, this is Finn Thornton," said Rory. "She, uh, knows the Doctor. Apparently."

Finn grinned at him briefly to confirm it.

"Finn's short for Fionnula," she explained to Amy. "Pleased to meet you."

Amy stared at her for a few more moments, then evidently decided this stranger passed muster, and smiled.

"Amy's short for Amelia. Pleased to meet you, too," she echoed. "Welcome to the TARDIS." She came down the ramp to join Rory, who was giving her an enquiring look. "Couldn't find him," she whispered out of the side of her mouth, loud enough for him to hear but too low to reach the ears of their new acquaintance.

Finn was looking around her. "She certainly looks different from the last time I saw her," she observed. For some reason, Amy found that remark slightly startling.

"You've been in the TARDIS before, then?" she demanded.

Finn nodded wordlessly, still looking about her.

"She wanted to know if I was him," Rory told his wife, secretly a bit proud that someone might even consider the possibility that he was the Doctor.

Amy looked even more startled. An expression that Rory always enjoyed seeing on her face, because he had privately decided long ago that his wife managed to look even more beautiful when she was startled. So he liked it, even if it meant the unexpected was happening.

"She thought *what*? Wow! What a weird mistake to make!" Amy sounded incredulous, and gave him a look that would have seemed like a complete put-down, if he hadn't detected the twinkle in her eyes.

"Hang on, though!" she exclaimed, turning back to Finn. "Why on earth would you think Rory was him?"

“I haven’t seen him for a long time,” said Finn. “Well, it feels like a long time, anyway. And I knew he would’ve changed...” A look of sadness touched her face momentarily, but vanished almost instantly. “So – how is he?” she asked brightly.

“Oh, you know... Doctorish,” said Amy, with a gesture intended to encompass all the things the Doctor was.

Finn nodded. But still, there was bound to have been change. She couldn’t help wondering how much...

“So it’s you we’ve been waiting for, then?” Rory asked.

Finn looked at him, puzzled. “Waiting for? What do you mean?”

“The Doctor said we were expecting a visitor. That would be you, wouldn’t it?”

“But I didn’t know myself until –” Finn began, mystified. Then she shrugged. “Oh, well, let’s face it – he’s got a definite advantage when it comes to knowing what you’re going to do even when you don’t know it yourself – yet.”

“Yeah. Can be a bit unnerving, that,” Rory agreed.

A soft-spoken voice fell into the slight pause which followed that remark.

“Ah...” it said, reflectively. “Fionnula Thornton. There you are...”

She looked to her left, up at the head of the stairs that led down to the console platform.

A man stood there, leaning forward slightly, his weight on the hands that clasped the railings on either side of the top step.

“Hello, Finn,” he said quietly, looking down at her.

Echoes of long-absent sensations quivered again in Finn’s head and on the skin of her arms.

“Hello, Doctor,” she said, just as quietly, staring at him.

He looked incredibly young, no more than in his late twenties. His face was long, almost rectangular, though with smooth curves of jaw line and cheeks and forehead, a forehead almost invisible under the sweep of brown hair that hung down over it. And his eyes – they had changed more profoundly than anything else. No longer large and brown and expressive, but a pale colour which she couldn’t decide as being green or blue, and set deep into the bone structure of his head. Eyes that could easily hide so much more than they revealed, if he so chose, she thought. But which were, at this moment, twinkling at her with mischievous pleasure.

“So you’ve found me again,” he said, dancing lightly down the steps to the console platform. His gestures were so different – somehow the way he moved his arms made her particularly aware of his elbows, and the angle of his hands as he moved his wrists. And the smooth face was so much more difficult to read. But the smile was still a charming one, even though worn on a different mouth.

She’d known intellectually that he would have changed, but it was proving quite a challenge emotionally, adjusting to the new reality, taking on board that this stranger had once been the man she knew.

He smiled, and wagged a finger at her.

“Aha!” he said. “I know what you’re thinking!”

“That would hardly be a surprise,” Finn retorted. “Go on, then – what am I thinking?”

“Oh, come on!” the Doctor said reprovingly. “I’ve seen that look so many times before, on so many different faces! Trying to adjust to *my* different face! The new reality. The new me. Trying to come to terms with me not being the me I was before, but the me I’ve become. Realizing they’ve got to get used to it. Dear old Brigadier! He ended up wearing that expression for a pastime, in the end, you know...” The Doctor’s smile with rife with amused nostalgia. “But you, Finn – you’ve got an advantage none of them had, haven’t you? An acid test. A detector system all your own. It does still work, doesn’t it?” he went on, beaming down at her.

“Not at the same intensity,” she said, still staring at him. “But enough.”

“Excellent!” he exclaimed, strode down the ramp, marched right up to her, and flung his arms round her.

Finn leaned into the embrace, her face struggling to know what to express. Her chin on the Doctor’s shoulder, she saw both Amy and Rory looking at them with somewhat mystified expressions, but didn’t have time to react to them, as the Doctor let her go and stepped back again.

“You know, it’s good to see you, Finn. Very good. Excellent,” he said again, with relish. “And you’ve met Amy and Rory.”

“Who presumably, at some point, will have explained to them everything about this they don’t know?” prompted Amy meaningfully.

“Oh, Finn knew me before ever I knew you, Amelia Pond,” the Doctor said, addressing her, but still looking at Finn. “Knew my mind like no-one else. Could read me like a book, couldn’t you?” His eyes gleamed at Finn with joyous complicity.

“I think that was before you started on the latest chapter,” she said uncertainly. “May take me a while to get used to the new style of writing.”

He smiled again. Another difference, Finn thought; this new Doctor smiled where the previous Doctor, *her* Doctor, would have grinned.

“You’ll soon get the hang of it,” he assured her. “Let’s face it, you have got a *head start*.” Now the gleam in his eyes was inviting her to share the joke.

“I see some things haven’t changed,” she observed, picking up the incomprehension on Amy’s and Rory’s faces in her peripheral vision. “So Amy and Rory are travelling with you now, are they?”

“Certainly are,” Amy affirmed with relish. Rory just nodded; Finn wondered if that bemused expression was his default one. If she was Amy, she thought, she wouldn’t mind if it was – it had a very attractive quality about it.

“Super, isn’t it?” said the Doctor complacently. “Mr and Mrs Pond and me. All travelling together.”

Finn looked puzzled, and turned to Rory.

“Hang on – I thought you said your name was Williams?” she queried him.

“It is,” Rory agreed.

“But – you married Amy?” Finn persisted, perplexed.

“He seems to think it was the other way round,” Rory explained.

“It was,” Amy smirked.

“Well, doesn’t he understand that’s not how it works?” Finn asked, continuing to address Rory.

“Just – humour him,” Rory advised resignedly. “I do.”

“Ah,” said Finn, and nodded sagely.

The Doctor cast Finn a quick, unreadable glance with those new, deep-set eyes of his, and then ran back up the ramp and turned his attention to the console.

They all looked at him expectantly.

“Where are we going, Doctor?” Rory asked.

The Doctor lifted both hands in the air, away from the controls, and beamed at him.

“Nowhere, just yet.”

“Why not?” Rory was understandably confused.

“Because Amy wants to visit her parents,” said the Doctor, as if it was obvious. “That’s why we came here, wasn’t it? And that’ll give me and Finn an excellent opportunity for a chat, won’t it? We’ve got a lot to catch up on.” He rubbed his hands together, evidently as anxious now for them to go as he had previously been for them to stay. He clearly wanted to talk to Finn alone.

Amy and Rory looked at each other, then at Finn and the Doctor.

“Right,” agreed Rory carefully. “Good idea. How long do you want us to...?” He ended with an indeterminate gesture of enquiry.

“Oh, as long as you like,” said the Doctor magnanimously. “We’re not in a hurry, are we? Lots of time!”

“Okay, then,” Amy agreed, bursting with curiosity, but equally anxious to see her parents. “Well – in that case – see you later!”

She was first out of the door; Rory looked back, and lifted a hand briefly, before following her. The Doctor followed them down the ramp and leaned out to wave a vigorous farewell before firmly shutting the door. Then he turned around and leaned back against it, his hands clasped in the small of his back. There was a brief silence, as he and Finn studied each other.

This face was so very different from his previous one, she thought. That had been so expressive that sometimes it had been hard to keep up with the flow of emotions across it. This new face gave her the feeling that it was more adept at masking his feelings, was much harder to read. Could often only be read, she suspected, if he chose to allow it. But her perception was that the weight of guilt he'd carried with him before, though not gone – it would probably always be a part of him – had been buried much further down, where it wasn't interfering with how he was getting on with his life now. She was glad of that, for his sake.

Strangely, though his physical appearance was much younger, she felt as if she now had a greater sense of his real age. The initial impression of youthfulness was, she thought, very deceptive. Now she felt aware of an aura around him broadcasting every one of those more than nine hundred years. She didn't know quite how to describe it to herself, but there was an impression of – *fatigue* was not the right word, nor was *oldness* – if that even *was* a word...! An *awareness* of antiquity, perhaps? He was such a very strange mix of young and old. But he was still the Doctor. The Doctor, to whom she owed so much.

And the smile he was now giving her still had that familiar mischievous quality she remembered so well.

“So,” he said. “Fionnula Thornton. Back in the TARDIS again. With me. Have you missed me?” He didn't look much in doubt of the answer.

Finn gave him an old-fashioned look. “Don't tell me this new you is in the habit of asking silly questions,” she retorted, with slightly scornful tolerance.

“Hm,” said the Doctor, both answered and reproved.

“But I've got used to it – I suppose... What about you? Are *you* all right now?”

“What do you mean, *all right*?” the Doctor asked quickly, throwing his head up and back like a rearing horse.

“I felt you go, you know.” She double-tapped her forehead. “I was worried for you. You felt so – distressed.” The look she gave him now was troubled, as the echoes of how she had felt then – how she had sensed *he* had felt – welled up disturbingly.

The Doctor gave her an unreadable look, then relaxed.

“Yes – we-e-ell,” he said, elongating the syllable and coupling it with a shrug. “I got over it.” He smiled at her.

*You might have*, Finn thought to herself. *I haven't...* But even though she hadn't said it aloud, as she met his eyes she once again had the feeling that he knew exactly what she was thinking.

“I'm glad,” she said, without equivocation. “And, for what it's worth, *I* didn't want you to go, either.” Which, quite apart from anything else, confirmed that she'd heard the final words of his previous self. “Still – over, now,” she concluded brightly. “You're back. And you're here!”

“And so are you... So – explanations, I think,” the Doctor prompted, studying her intently. Suddenly he pushed himself away from the door and strode past her up to the console. “Exactly what are you doing here, Finn?” he asked, throwing the question over his shoulder at her.

“I have no idea,” Finn admitted, following him up the ramp. “But I was told I needed to be here, so” – she shrugged – “here I am.”

“And who told you that?” probed the Doctor, turning to look at her keenly.

“River,” said Finn bluntly.

The Doctor studied her thoughtfully.

“Did she?” he mused quietly. “I wonder why...” Then he rubbed his hands together and smiled at her broadly. “Well – in that case... You and I wait until Amy and Rory come back. And then we find out what it is that River Song knows, and we don't...”

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“... And Rory waited for Amy for *two – thousand – years*?” Finn spaced the words out, wide-eyed with amazement. “Wow!”

“Well, he was plastic,” shrugged the Doctor. “He could afford to.”

“It’s not the fact that he *could* do it,” Finn contradicted him, in a tone that told him he was missing the point. “It’s the fact that he *wanted* to... But imagine what that must have been like!” Something she was evidently struggling to do. “Being prepared to do that for someone else. Being alone all that time, just – waiting. All those minutes, all those days, all those years. All those centuries!” She caught the Doctor’s expression, and shook her head at him. “What are you looking like that for? All you had to do was hit fast forward. You didn’t have to wait, the way he did.” Now the shake of her head was one of wonder. “I’ve never heard anything to compare with it. It’s incredible! He must love her *so* much!”

“Well, he’s *in* love, isn’t he?” said the Doctor, with a tinge of condescension.

“I’m sure he’s that, too,” Finn agreed, looking at him oddly. “But I wasn’t talking about being *in* love. I was talking about *loving* someone. When you put their happiness and welfare ahead of your own. When it comes right down to it, that’s what he did for Amy. But then,” she shrugged, “that’s what you do when you love someone.”

The Doctor studied her thoughtfully.

“That’s what you always did for me,” he said at last, in a low voice, the old-young eyes angled up at her from under the cascading mass of his fringe. “So – you loved me, then.”

Finn put her head on one side and returned his regard quizzically. That was a conversational gambit his former self would never have used...

“Probably still do,” she conceded. “It’s just that I’ve got to get used to you all over again.”

And suddenly they were sharing a huge smile, like a couple of children keeping a secret from the grown-ups. Then Finn turned away to survey the new control room – new to her, at any rate.

“So you’ve redecorated, then,” she observed, waiting to see if he’d rise to the bait.

The Doctor looked at her suspiciously. “Don’t tell me you don’t like it!”

“Wouldn’t dream of it!” Finn said innocently. “As long as you do. And *she* does.” She reached out and touched the console with her fingertips, looking up at the Time Rotor. But when her gaze fell again, something in her face had changed. Something, it was clear, was troubling her.

“What?” the Doctor prompted. “What is it?”

She shifted uneasily.

“I don’t know, exactly... But – I suppose – the fact that I’m here. That we’re back together again. Because you don’t go back, remember? You always move on. To other people. Like Amy and Rory. You’ve got them, now. So why did you wait for me to turn up in Leadworth? Rory said you were expecting me. River specifically came to tell me that I needed to be there - but she didn’t tell *you* that, did she? Or why. So how did you even know I was going to be there? Why – to all intents and purposes – did you come back for me?”

The Doctor’s features were impassive. She’d been right about this new face of his; it was almost impossible to read, if he didn’t want you to read it.

“Oh, River just *loves* it when she can keep me guessing,” he said dismissively. “I sometimes think she only lives to tease me... And this is one of those things she knows. So” – he shrugged – “I’m going along with it. Don’t want to spoil the simple pleasures of her life, do I?” He gave Finn one quick look from under his fringe, then away. Clearly that was as much explanation as she was going to get.

She looked at him narrowly, thinking about what he hadn’t said, as much as what he had said. “*This is one of those things she knows*,” he’d said. But he hadn’t added, “...and I don’t.” She had the strongest possible feeling he did know. But he wasn’t going to tell her. She wished she knew why. But she’d always trusted him, and she always would. With an inward sigh, she resigned herself to ignorance.

For now...

“Anyway –” the Doctor was beginning, when they were interrupted.

“Hi! We’re back!” Amy announced, as she bounced into the TARDIS, Rory following at a more sedate pace.

“Hmm – yes,” the Doctor agreed. Finn looked at him, waiting for the obvious enquiry, before realizing that for him it wasn’t the obvious enquiry. But Amy was clearly dying for someone to ask, so she decided to oblige.

“So, how are they? Your parents?”

“My Mum? And my funny little Dad?” Amy crowed joyously. “Terrific! Just” – she searched for another word, but could only come up with the same one – “terrific!”

“Oh-h-h-h, good,” the Doctor drawled with satisfaction. “So now that’s out of the way, and we can get on with what we’re going to do next.”

“Which is – what?” Rory enquired.

“Going wherever it is we’ve got to go,” said the Doctor, as if it should have been obvious.

“Okay, try again – which is where?” Rory persisted.

“No idea,” said the Doctor cheerfully. “Where are we going, Finn?”

Finn looked blankly back at the three pairs of eyes all turned on her expectantly.

“I don’t know,” she disclaimed. “All she said was that I had to be here, today, now. She didn’t say why.”

“She?” enquired Amy, in a tone that showed she already suspected the answer. Neither Finn nor the Doctor, concentrating on each other, saw fit to answer.

“She said – no, hang on a moment!” Finn broke off as she remembered something, and thrust her hand into one of her gilet pockets.

“Does this help?” she asked. “She told me to give it to you.” She held out the note River had given her.

The Doctor almost snatched it out of her hand, and began to read aloud.

“*Hello, sweetie...*” He glanced up and caught Finn’s eye, and shifted uncomfortably. “She always says that...” he said lamely, ignoring the twitch of her lips.

“That’s from *River*?” Amy challenged, demanding confirmation.

“Ye-e-esss...” said the Doctor absently, reading the rest of the note silently. Then he went to the console, referred to the note again, and punched in coordinates.

“She sent directions? Why? Where are we going?” Amy persisted.

“I don’t know,” the Doctor admitted, a tinge of irritation in his tone. He looked at Amy and Rory, and shrugged.

“You know what she’s like. That *incredibly* smug ‘*I-know-something-you-don’t-know*’ thing she does...”

“Who is River?” Finn asked, intrigued.

“Don’t know – yet,” said the Doctor. “She keeps telling me I’m going to find out one day, but so far...” He shrugged again.

“Something of a woman of mystery, then?” Finn teased.

“Definitely,” the Doctor agreed. “And doesn’t she love it that way! But when I *do* find out – !”



### Chapter 3

#### *The Space Elevator*

“Wherever we’re going, he doesn’t seem in that much of a hurry,” Rory muttered. He’d come to join Finn on what the Doctor persisted in calling the ‘naughty step’; Finn had roundly retorted that if he’d bothered to install any decent seating they wouldn’t have to resort to sitting on the stairs.

“I’ve got seating!” the Doctor had said indignantly, pointing at the two chairs either side of the stairway.

“Not so people can sit next to one another! At least you used to be able to sit two people on that tatty old seat you had before,” she’d reminded him.

“Respect, Thornton!” the Doctor had scolded. “Just because you weren’t consulted on the new décor...!”

“I *liked* that seat,” she’d persisted. “It had character!”

The Doctor hadn’t been able to argue, so he’d just thrust his bottom lip out and glowered at her. Amy and Rory had looked at each other and exchanged husband-and-wife signals, as a result of which Amy was now alongside the Doctor at the console, and Rory was up here on the stairs with Finn.

“Maybe,” Finn said, considering Rory’s observation. “Or maybe it’s so far – so to speak – that it’s taking a while for the TARDIS to get there. Or maybe he’s got another agenda entirely. Who knows?”

Rory glanced sideways at her, curious. “You know him. I mean, knew him. Before we did. But sometimes you talk as if you don’t.”

They were speaking in low voices, but the Doctor’s head reared up and he looked at Finn with suddenly wide eyes, as if he’d heard what they were saying and wondered how she was going to reply.

“He’s – changed a lot since I knew him,” she said, raising her voice slightly. She was looking at the Doctor, but ostensibly still talking to Rory. Although, in fact, what she was saying was directed at both of them. “Some things about him are very different. I’m having to get used to him all over again.”

The Doctor’s widened eyes had relaxed again, and in the blue-green depths she detected a smile for her to share. Amy, looking between the two of them, sensed the restoration of rapport and winked at Rory, who acknowledged it with a move of his head before he replied to Finn.

“Well, yes,” he said. “I can imagine you might have to. He is a bit unpredictable, sometimes.”

“Oh, Rory,” Finn drawled. “Trust me – ’twas ever thus!”

“Unpredictable? Me?” the Doctor sniffed. “Don’t blame it all on me! Life – now that’s what’s unpredictable! What about when that vortex appeared in your living room and whisked you off to the Mind Machine? Wasn’t *my* fault, now was it?”

“Hmm,” said Finn, not as if she entirely agreed.

“What happened?” Rory prompted.

“Go on, Finn,” said the Doctor. “Tell the story. Tell them how it began.”

Finn regarded him with an expressionless face for a few moments. That had been the most terrifying of her experiences with the Doctor, and she wasn't sure she wanted to be reminded of it. But then she began to smile. She'd thought of a way to start...

“Okay... Right. This is how it began,” she said primly. “It was about 9.40 pm. Raining like stink, and the wind was positively howling...”

The Doctor's finger shot out toward her, making Amy jump.

“Come off it, Thornton! What you're trying to say is that it was a dark and stormy night, aren't you?”

“I most definitely was *not* going to say that! What kind of a way would that be to begin a story?” she demanded, pretending indignation but in reality grinning all over her face.

He never got to reply, because at that moment the TARDIS landed.

“Ah,” said the Doctor. “We're here. Apparently.”

“And where is 'here'?” Finn enquired.

“It's – ah!” The Doctor's eyes, interpreting the readings from the console, had suddenly lit up. “Oh! Oh! Oh, yes! Oh-yes-oh-yes-oh-yes! Oh-h-h-h, *yes!* Thank you, River Song! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” He was nearly skipping with enthusiasm.

Finn regarded his antics with interest. “Someone's pleased about something, it would appear,” she remarked to Rory.

“Don't know how you can tell,” Rory replied blandly. “It's not like he was giving us any clues, is it?”

Amy decided to tackle the Doctor direct.

“All right,” she said, “what's so exciting that it's got you showing us your dance moves? Again...” she added with a slightly pained expression, remembering the Doctor dancing at her wedding.

“This is Vespertilia! Vespertilia!” the Doctor enthused.

“Meaning – what?”

“Meaning we should take a look outside,” said the Doctor, darting down the ramp. “I think you're going to enjoy the view. I know I am.”

Amy and Rory exchanged a look which Finn privately classified as meaning '*hello, he's off again*', and smiled to herself as the Doctor flung open the door and leaned out.

“Hmm... Bit chilly,” he observed. “But – oh, yes...! Look left, then right,” he added, as if telling them how to cross the road. “Very interesting. Definitely interesting. Superlatively interesting!” He hopped outside, enthusiasm in every line of his body.

As she followed Amy and Rory out, Finn obediently looked first to her left. The TARDIS had landed on the crest of a long slope which swept down toward a vast plain. She seemed to be viewing everything by the fading light of a sunset, for there was a yellowish-orange cast over what she could see – a patchwork quilt of what must be fields, stretching out for endless miles until swallowed in the darkness of distance. Not an irregular patchwork, such as she was used to at home in England, but a neat grid of squares and rectangles, clearly defined with specific purpose. And each enclosure had a number of dark, rectangular structures around it, but she couldn't make out what they were, or what they were for.

“Doctor? What are those things round the fields?”

“Lights,” he said succinctly.

“Well, somebody's forgotten to turn them on, then. What are they –?”

She never got as far as the 'for'; in turning toward him she found herself looking at what he and Amy and Rory were already staring at, and both fields and lights were immediately forgotten.

'Majestic' was the word that came into Finn's mind as she took it all in. The Doctor had been right in his assessment of the temperature, which verged on the uncomfortably cool – Finn wondered briefly whether Amy's skirt provided any meaningful protection as an item of clothing in the circumstances – but since it was apparently night, and they were quite high up, the degree of cold was understandable. The crest on which they stood swooped down into a deep valley; a range of hills marched before them from one side of the horizon to the other. The other side of the valley rose up to an even

higher peak; sprawled to the left of that peak, and what was situated on it, was what looked like a small town, flowing down the side of the hill like icing that has run down the side of its cake.

Her initial impression of a sunset had been mistaken, Finn now saw, because what hung in the sky, seeming at first glance virtually to fill it, was not a sun – not as such, anyway. There was indeed a sun, because what light there was was coming from its corona, but it was a sun almost perfectly eclipsed by a huge planet between them and it. The enormous orb was not quite large enough to cover the sun completely, and a ring of fire spread out around the edges of the globe like the petals of a sunflower, masking the bulk of the sun but still allowing sufficient light to reach them to be able to see their surroundings fairly clearly.

For all that, the floor of the valley would have been in darkness, had it not been filled with what looked like banks of luminescent white tubes, packed closely together. Not quite tubes, though, Finn realized as she looked at them more closely. They looked very familiar, but wherever this was, would it really have enormous stretches of – polytunnels? Illuminated by artificial light? That was exactly what it looked like, though – vast, uncountable numbers of polytunnels, on a scale such as she had never seen, marching from one side of the world to the other...

However, it was the structure to the right of the town, further along the crest of the hillside, which conspired to complete the taking of one's breath away.

It consisted of two parts. The larger part appeared to be an ordinary building of some kind, rectangular and studded with what were evidently windows; offices, or some kind of institution, perhaps, but linked to the smaller structure in front of it. This was not as high as the larger building and was square in shape, with a dome on top which was clearly designed to open in two halves when required. From the sides of the base a number of what appeared to be enormous pipes emerged like long, thin fingers, fanning out to spread along and down the hillside, a couple leading down to the polytunnels, the rest heading off into the distance. From the flat area on the top, immediately to the left of the dome, a gossamer thread, picked out in silver fire by the sun's corona, rose apparently unsupported into the sky towards what looked like a tiny star, high above. The thread ran vertically up past the eclipsing planet, drawing a silver line upward against the black disc behind it. It was only when you compared the thickness of the thread to the buildings in the town that the relative size of what you were looking at began to dawn on you. At which point you realized the sheer scale of what you were looking at, and also realized that that was incredible, too.

"What is that –?" Amy began, only to break off as she sighted movement at the bottom of the thread. Where it rose from the flat surface of the base, a black opening had appeared, and from it emerged a tiny rectangular shape, apparently attached to the thread and travelling up it with increasing speed. In silence, they watched it moving upwards toward that tiny star of light far above, lit by the rays of the obscured sun, until it grew too small to see anymore.

Amy tried again, in a tone of awe. "What is that thing, Doctor?"

The Doctor was gazing with rapt admiration.

"A space elevator..." he murmured, sounding like a man in love.

"Okay," agreed Rory. "And what's a space elevator?"

"Clue's in the name, Rory...!" the Doctor pointed out, slightly scornful.

"I meant," Rory persisted patiently, "what would you want one for?"

"It's a way of getting transport modules – vehicles, if you like – out into orbit around your planet without having to use rockets." The Doctor's tone had modulated, most of his attention focused on what lay before him. "Think of it as hanging a huge plum bob off the planet, if you like. A cable tethered to the surface, and stretched out into space, with a counterweight at the top. Gravity at one end, centrifugal force at the other, pulling the cable – well, more of a tether, really – anyway, pulling it tight and keeping it stationary over a single position on the surface. At some point along the length of the tether – depending on the size of your planet – the gravity pulling downward and the centrifugal force pulling upward equal each other. That's the point where anything fixed to the cable has no weight at all. So that light above is something pretty large fixed to the tether above the point where the two cancel each other out, and moving in geosynchronous orbit with this planet, and what we just saw going up was – well, that was the 'elevator' bit of the space elevator. On its way up to the next floor. There's probably another one – as the one goes up, the other comes down – that's the usual design..." He stared at the silver thread of the cable almost wistfully. "Oh, I wish Konstantin could've seen this," he breathed.

“Konstantin who?” Amy asked.

“Tsiolkovsky,” said the Doctor, without taking his eyes off the vast tether. “Russian scientist.”

“Friend of yours?” Rory enquired, in a *‘never-heard-of-him’* tone of voice.

“Of course he was,” the Doctor said, slightly indignantly, as if the matter could ever have been in doubt.

Rory nodded. “Yeah. Of course he was,” he muttered.

The Doctor ignored him, and went on. “Basically, he was the father of spaceflight. His work inspired a lot of rocket engineers after him. And he was the first man to come up with the idea of a space elevator. He died in 1935, so he never saw his theories realized” – the Doctor’s tone was tinged with regret – “but he would’ve loved this...”

“And Arthur,” Finn reminded him. “Don’t forget Arthur, will you?”

“Ah, dear old Arthur,” the Doctor mused fondly. “Of course not... How could I forget *him*? Yes, you’re right. He would’ve loved this, too.”

“Who’s Arthur?” Amy demanded to know, slightly irritated by this continuing stream of references to names she didn’t know.

“Arthur C Clarke,” the Doctor said. “*The Fountains of Paradise...*” His voice trailed off as he continued to gaze at the elevator.

Amy looked at Finn for help.

“One of his novels,” Finn explained. “About a space elevator based in Sri Lanka. And one of his many contributions to the culture of Earth. Though not his most important one, in my book.”

Rory nodded. “You mean Telstar. The first communications satellite. He came up with the idea, didn’t he?”

“Actually, I meant *‘Telstar’*, the 1962 single by the Tornados, inspired by the communications satellite of the same name,” Finn corrected him, with a wicked grin. “But yes, he did have an influential input into the general concept...”

The Doctor threw her a slightly reproving look for such irreverence, which only widened her grin.

“And what’s all that?” Amy had turned back to the landscape of fields behind them. “Do they grow some special crop here, or something?”

“Not just one,” the Doctor corrected her. “Thousands. At least. Minimum. Tens of thousands, probably. And all special.”

“Why?”

“Because Vespertilia itself is special. It’s just about the most fertile planet ever discovered. Exclusively dedicated to all forms of agriculture. Just about anything will grow here, and it has the most prodigious rates of yield – sometimes several crops a year, instead of just one or perhaps two. It’s a unique environment. And it’s come to the rescue of billions.”

“How?” Rory asked bluntly.

“Once the human race got the hang of interstellar travel they started spreading out,” the Doctor explained. “As they do. Dear old human race, always got to go and see what’s over the crest of the next hill. So to speak... So there they were, for about half a millennium, happy as sandboys, colonizing new planets all over the place.”

He paused, and when he spoke again, he didn’t sound quite so happy.

“But then came the Five Hundred Famines...”

He paused again, for so long that in the end Amy had to prompt him.

“What happened?”

“Well, a misnomer, for one thing,” said the Doctor with a tinge of disapproval. “Strictly speaking, there were actually five hundred and eleven planets affected. But then, history does love a good resounding phrase, doesn’t it?”

“You should know,” Finn murmured flippantly. The Doctor ignored her.

“Let’s just say that the Five Hundred Famines all happened over such a short period of time, and so many billions died, that the human race was fundamentally affected by so many deaths. Bit surprising, really. I mean, you’d think they’d be used to them – Earth’s history has been littered with famines, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.”

His voice became indignant. “And they were so *pointless*! I mean, it wasn’t as if there wasn’t the food there to be distributed! Of course there was – more than enough, on the planet as a whole! But nobody was going to give it to

anybody else for *free*, now, were they? Not on the scale that was really needed. So mountains of excess food in some places went on sitting there, sometimes being simply destroyed, rather than being distributed to where it would do some real good, while people in other places starved to death. They really did think it was better to destroy food simply because they couldn't *sell* it! I mean, can you believe it?"

He shook his head incredulously at the behaviour of the human race at that point in its history before continuing his discourse.

"Okay, we were idiots," Finn said placatingly. "And probably still are. So how did Vespertilia come to the rescue?"

"Ah, well," the Doctor continued, "after the Five Hundred Famines, when Vespertilia's unique qualities were realized, so was the opportunity they offered. Any number of commercial interests yelled about it, of course, but in spite of them, by common consent, the planet was organized to operate on an entirely non-profit-making basis. So now it exports countless types of crops to wherever they're needed," he declared, by way of conclusion. "Any planet that finds that the potential for a famine is developing simply tells them what kinds of plants they need them to grow, and they grow them and ship them off to where they're needed. And countless lives are now saved as a result!" He beamed at them.

"And how does the space elevator come into it?" Rory enquired.

"Ah, well, that's one of the most fascinating things about the whole situation," the Doctor said, rubbing his hands with enthusiasm. "You see, most of the time the sun is unobstructed, and the light from it is one of the foremost elements in the combination of environmental factors that make Vespertilia so fecund. But for two months of the year, the orbits of Vespertilia and that planet – Crepuscolo" – he gestured in the direction of the gigantic orb – "coincide in such a way that Crepuscolo eclipses the sun. So they have to stop production – except for what they can grow in the tunnels. Or they used to have to. But famines don't conveniently stop to wait for two months – they go on happening. So someone concluded that, this being the twenty-sixth century, there must be something they could do to go on producing even during the Twilight."

"The Twilight?" Finn queried.

"The Twilight is what we're seeing now," the Doctor explained. "This period when the only light reaching Vespertilia is from the corona visible around the edges of Crepuscolo. Which ought to mean that everything stops growing, because there just isn't enough light. But a scientist who turned out to be something of a visionary came up with an idea that was little short of brilliant."

"And what was that?"

The Doctor's eyes twinkled at her from under the sweep of his fringe.

"He discovered a way to keep the sun shining."

"And he did that – how, exactly?"

"We-e-ell," the Doctor drawled, drawing the word out, "I *could* tell you, but it would be so much better if we were there, and I could show you, wouldn't it?"

"Well, I can tell you one thing – I'm not walking all that way," Amy declared firmly, "so if you want a closer look..." She directed a meaningful glance at the Doctor.

"I think I might manage to get us from here to there with slightly less effort," he conceded smugly.

"Come on, then," Amy told him, and marched back inside the TARDIS. Rory followed her, but just for a few moments the Doctor and Finn stayed where they were, their eyes irresistibly drawn to follow the glowing skein of light up into the sky to that glittering point of light above. Then Finn's eyes moved on to look at the wider heavens.

"There are stars," she said softly. Difficult to see, because even such light as there was from the corona tended to mask their presence, but they were discernible, if you concentrated.

The Doctor glanced at her.

"Fionnula Thornton," he said in a musing tone. "Still can't get over the physical wonders of the universe, can you?"

"No," she agreed. "And they still always make me think of you." She awarded him a slightly wry smile. "Every time I look at the stars, who do you think I think of? And always will, for the rest of my life? And wonder if the star I happen to be looking at is the one where you are at that moment?"

The suitable response to that seemed to be to say nothing, put his arm round her shoulders, and take her back into the TARDIS. So that was what he did.

## Chapter 4

### *Bow Ties and Saccades*

This time, the TARDIS had ended up inside, not outside, though inside what wasn't exactly clear, at first. Exiting the small shelf-lined store room in which it had chosen to materialize, the clean, well-lit white corridors into which they emerged could have been those of a laboratory, and the men and women with white coats who walked past them without so much as a second glance, deep in discussion with each other, could easily have been scientists. But Rory shook his head when Amy made the suggestion.

"Nah," he disagreed. "This is a hospital."

"How do you know?" Finn asked, intrigued by his certainty.

"I'm a nurse," Rory explained. "I know exactly what a hospital feels like. This," he repeated emphatically, "is a hospital."

"Okay, it's a hospital," Amy conceded. Then, as two new figures appeared in her line of sight, she added somewhat quizzically, "Though not just for humans, looks like..."

The Doctor swung round to follow the direction of her gaze, as did Finn and Rory. Walking towards them, so deep in conversation they took no notice of the four pairs of eyes staring at them so intently, were two beings that, though humanoid, were definitely not human. Their skin was mauve, the single backsweeping crest of hair rising from their skulls purple, their eyes deep green discs under eyebrowless foreheads. They both wore single-piece pale green robes under the same white coats as the human staff.

"Who are they?" Rory asked in a low voice once the two had passed them, conversing in high voices that made them sound like a pair of flutes playing notes at each other.

"They're – they're..." Finn began, screwing her eyes shut in concentration. Then she opened them again with a look of triumph and said, "They're Debronians!"

The Doctor smiled.

"Random access memory not so random this time, eh?" he observed cheerfully. Amy and Rory didn't understand, but Finn chuckled.

"And who are the Debronians?" Rory persisted, deciding to stick to the matter in hand.

"Oh, they're nice people," said the Doctor approvingly. "Very nice people indeed. Makers, not breakers. Peaceful, practical, agrarian-minded. Or, put another way, some of the most successful farmers in the whole of history! Which might explain what they're doing on this particular planet, wouldn't you say?"

"Mmm..." Amy watched the two mauve-skinned figures progressing away from them, then turned to other matters. "Right – which way do we go now?"

The Doctor's right hand came up and its forefinger waved from right to left and back again as he chanted under his breath, "Eenie, meenie, miney – mo..." Then, louder, he said, "This way," turning in the direction the forefinger had eventually designated as 'mo', and striding off at a brisk pace.

Further along the corridor a door opened, and a woman came out; she looked tired, and depressed. But as soon as she caught sight of them her eyes sharpened and her shoulders went back as she drew herself erect. She was evidently waiting for them to approach. The Doctor slowed as they got closer, well aware of the attention she was giving them.

Finn glanced at Amy and Rory, and saw they had been struck by the same thing she had. The woman's expression. Exhausted, anxious – haunted, even – but with an underlying determination.

She no longer waited, but marched directly up to them, her eyes fixed on one person, and one person only.

"Are you the Doctor?" she demanded.

Even the Doctor was a little startled by that.

“The Doctor?” he repeated, with raised eyebrows.

“Yes, the Doctor!” the woman repeated impatiently. “The one I’ve been asking them to send for! Whatever’s wrong with him, nobody here knows what it is. I’ve been insisting they send for someone who’ll know. A doctor with the right expertise to diagnose him and treat him properly. I know he’s only a cleaner, but he’s got the same right to proper medical treatment as anyone else!” Her mounting indignation suddenly flagged, and she hesitated, her tired eyes tinged with doubt. “You *are* the Doctor, aren’t you?”

The Doctor glanced at his companions, then back at the woman. He took hold of both ends of his bow tie, straightened it with a self-important gesture, and smiled at her.

“The Doctor – yes,” he agreed. “I am. The Doctor. I *am* the Doctor. *The* Doctor! And I’ve got more expertise than you can possibly imagine! So – where’s the patient?”

Her weary face lit up with relief.

“He’s in that room, there,” she said, pointing to the door from which she had just emerged.

“Ah, yes,” said the Doctor. He turned round and gestured imperiously at Amy, Rory and Finn. “Well, come on, *entourage!* With me – quick, quick!”

Amy’s eyes flashed with immediate indignation, and she’d got as far as opening her mouth before Rory grabbed her arm in a distractingly tight grip and shook his head at her warningly. She glared at him for a moment, then reluctantly acquiesced, but Finn distinctly heard her mutter, “I’ll *entourage* him...!”

Finn grinned, and brought up the rear as they followed the Doctor, now striding toward the room the woman had indicated.

“Now, remind me,” the Doctor was saying, mendaciously. “What’s his name, again?”

“Keeran Sarahill,” said the woman.

“And you’re his wife.” The Doctor pronounced his deduction with convincing assurance, and she nodded.

“Yes – I’m Raichel,” she said.

“Wonderful to meet you, Raichel,” the Doctor assured her. “And what did you say Keeran’s job was?”

“Oh, he’s just a cleaner,” she said, with a bitterness in her tone that implied that was how others rather belittlingly described her husband, and it rankled.

The Doctor stopped, his hand on the door handle, and looked at her reprovingly.

“There’s no such thing as *just* a cleaner,” he said severely. “Cleaners are some of the most important people in the world! In fact, they do one of the most crucial jobs in the *universe*, and their job is *incredibly* more valuable and important than people remember to realize. What they do is far, far more vital for society than – well, all the investment bankers and management consultants and - and - and *media critics* there are or ever *have* been! *Put together!*” he added with emphasis, and brandished an admonitory finger at her. “So I want you to remember *this* – never, *never* tell people he’s *just* a cleaner, ever again! He’s *essential*, that’s what he is!” And with an emphatic nod at her astonished face, he pushed the door open and went in.

He went straight to the bedside and leaned over the man half-lying, half-sitting there, propped up on pillows and dressed in a baggy t-shirt and pyjama-like trousers, both an institutional shade of pale blue. Raichel followed on the Doctor’s heels. Amy, Rory and Finn stood back a little way, not wanting to crowd them, but from where they were they could see the patient was attached by all manner of tubes and wires to various machines.

“What’s that lot?” Finn whispered to Rory. “Do you recognize any of them?”

“Intravenous... Heart monitor... Pulse oximeter...” Rory listed, looking over the equipment. “Looks like all the same stuff we’d use back on Earth for somebody in a prolonged state of unconsciousness.”

“So he’s in a coma?”

Rory shook his head. “Not if he’s not on a ventilator. If you can breathe without artificial aid, it’s not a coma – you’re just unconscious. But normal unconsciousness doesn’t last for weeks...”

He was interrupted by a peremptory wave from the Doctor.

“Nurse Pond! I want your opinion on this.”

Finn looked enquiringly at Amy. “Are you a nurse, as well?”

Rory shook his head.

“He means me,” he said, with an air of resignation, and moved forward. Finn frowned at Amy as they followed him.

“Why doesn’t he call him by his proper name?” she demanded in a whisper.

Amy just raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

“Look at this,” the Doctor was saying, as they gathered round the bedside. He pointed at Keeran’s face.

It was a pleasant face, Finn decided, though unnaturally pale at the moment; that of a man in his mid-forties, soft spikes of brown hair, pale blue eyes. It was clearly those eyes that the Doctor was inviting comment upon. They were not closed, but nor were they still, either of which one might have expected if he was in a state of unconsciousness. Though the head was completely motionless, as was the rest of the patient’s body, the eyes themselves flicked ceaselessly from side to side, as if watching a tennis match at high speed. Right – left – right – left. . . Over and over again. There was an almost unnerving regularity to it.

“Ever seen anything like that before?” the Doctor asked.

Rory shook his head, at a loss. The Doctor tut-tutted, and looked at Raichel.

“You just can’t get the staff, these days,” he said loftily. “Miss Thornton – a word!” He gestured imperiously. Fighting down another grin, she stepped forward and tilted her eyebrows at him interrogatively.

“Yes, Doctor?” she enquired primly.

He flashed her a glance, then stepped back from the bed and leaned toward her so that his lips were close to her ear. “The computer monitor over there,” he said, pointing. “No patient notes lying around, so they’re probably on there. See what you can find out, will you?” He put out a finger and tapped the pocket of her gilet that held her sonic screwdriver. She winked at him, and stepped back, saying, “Yes, Doctor,” in the same tone of voice as before. Then she slid unobtrusively over to the monitor and stood in front of it, masking what she was doing with her sonic from Raichel’s sight – though not from Amy’s or Rory’s; they exchanged a swift glance of surprise – but after a few seconds the Doctor’s peripheral vision saw the screen lighting up.

“Now, Raichel, remind me,” the Doctor said briskly, returning to the side of the bed. “How long has he been like this?”

“Close to a month,” she said, with that tinge of bitterness back in her voice at the lack of priority his condition had received. “He’s just lain there, like that, the whole time. His eyes never close. They just flick back and forth, back and forth...” Suddenly, for all her air of determination, she was close to tears.

The Doctor put a hand gently on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” he said comfortingly. “I’ll find out what’s wrong with him. I promise you. And whatever can be done, I’ll do it. I promise you that, as well. Now, you’re obviously tired and worn out with worrying about him, aren’t you?”

She nodded, wearily, and sagged slightly under his touch.

“Well, I’ll tell you what you’re going to do, Raichel...” The Doctor now had a hand on each of her shoulders and began steering her towards the door. “You’re going to go and get some rest. Because you need it, I can tell. And while you’re resting, I and my team here are going to find out exactly what’s happened to Keeran, and what we can do to put it right. Trust me?”

She nodded, wordlessly, and allowed him to shepherd her out of the room.

“You get some sleep, now,” he exhorted her, leaning out to watch her walk away along the corridor and giving her a reassuring wave when she turned round for one last glance. Then he darted back inside and shut the door firmly behind him.

“Right! Finn! What news on the Rialto?” he enquired, heading energetically back to the bed, where Amy was now staring intently at the ceaseless movement of Keeran’s eyes.

Rory had joined Finn in front of the monitor; he’d been scanning through the record Finn had summoned up onto the screen. She had turned to regard the Doctor with amusement.

“He’s very” – she searched for the right phrase to express what she was trying to say – “wrists and elbows, isn’t he?”

Rory thought about that, then nodded; it was a strange description of the Doctor, but very accurate, for all that.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Yeah, he is.”

“Heard that, Thornton,” said the Doctor sternly, his back to them. He spun round and came over to join them at the monitor. “Well, Rory – in your professional opinion, what’s the prognosis?”

“Basically, they haven’t got a clue what’s wrong with him,” Rory summarized succinctly. “There was some kind of accident in a lab – not much detail on that, but it seems to have involved some kind of energy release or explosion – and it left him like this. Unconscious, to all intents and purposes. Except –”

“Except,” the Doctor took over the sentence, “that his level of brain activity increased by two hundred per cent. Interesting.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then picked up on the fact that Finn was smiling broadly.

“Yes? What? Is something amusing you, Miss Thornton?” he demanded stiffly.

“It’s the bow tie,” Finn explained. “It’s so very – ‘consultant’...”

The Doctor looked slightly crestfallen, as if he’d hoped for a different reaction from her.

“Bow ties are cool,” he asserted swiftly. Over by the bed, Amy rolled her eyes at Finn.

“Hm,” said Finn; she was able to keep her tone neutral, but not her expression, and Amy had to stifle a chuckle.

“What?” the Doctor demanded, sensing a caveat.

“Well, I’m remembering that this is the view of a man who chose to wear a stick of celery on his lapel...”

The Doctor assumed a look of injured dignity, then visibly decided to ignore her teasing. He spun on his heel and strode back to the bed. He leaned down, very close to Keeran’s face, and stared intently at the almost metronomic movement of the eyes.

“Ye-e-e-es,” he said at last. “Saccades...”

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*They knew they were being observed. It had taken them so long to work out what had happened, where they were, what kind of environment. Nothing in their experience had prepared them for such an occurrence, and the initial shock, followed by the search for comprehension, had lasted for a long time. And even now that they understood the broad outline of their situation, there was so much they still did not know, and must learn, if they were to function effectively. Instinctively, they knew they had to go on concealing their presence while they sought the further necessary information, for if they were detected, who knew what might happen?*

*Fortunately, they had found a way. So they could watch the watchers, without the watchers being aware of them. And go on picking up every possible scrap of information that they might use to survive in this strange, strange place, full of strange, strange creatures...*

\*

“What are saccades?” Amy asked.

The Doctor glanced over his shoulder with a mischievous look. “See if Finn knows,” he suggested.

Rory narrowed his eyes. It was almost as if the Doctor was implying there was some particular reason why Finn might know. As if there was more to it than that.

Finn could see he’d registered the strangeness of the Doctor’s comment, and gave the Doctor’s back a brief glare before drawing in a deep breath with the air of one about to embark on a long explanation.

“He’s talking about his mind in mine,” she said. Rory blinked, and Amy looked around, her interest piqued.

“When I first met him, something happened that meant our minds got temporarily fused together,” Finn went on, stripping her narrative to the barest of bones. “What it boils down to is that a whole load of stuff got transferred from his head into mine. So now I’ve got a sort of ‘buy-one-get-one-free’ thing going on in my head. It’s just that I can’t always tell what’s in stock. Sometimes I go to the shelves and find just what I want. Like knowing who the Debronians are, even though I’ve never met one before. Other times I go to look, and the cupboard’s bare.”

“Woh,” said Rory, impressed by the implications.

“Doesn’t that get complicated?” Amy enquired. “Two sets of memories?”

Finn suddenly dimpled.

"I've always been in two minds about that," she said, tongue firmly in cheek. A quick glance at the Doctor picked up the amused glint in his eyes. "But on the whole, it's pretty useful," she admitted. "And several times it's been a literal life-saver."

Amy decided to get back to the matter in hand. "So – does this Doctor's data bank of yours include saccades?"

"Hang on..." Finn closed her eyes for a moment, then nodded. "Saccades," she said, sounding as if she was quoting, "are quick, simultaneous movements of both eyes in the same direction."

"Is that all?" Amy complained, dismissively.

"Missing the point, Pond," said the Doctor in a tone of reproof, still intent on the man in the bed. "Tell her why, Finn."

"It's not always easy to translate it straight into words, you know," Finn told him with a degree of irritation. "That's not how it's stored. I have to" – she sought for the right word – "to *process* it first..." She sighed, then concentrated again.

"Right," she began. "Okay, it goes something like this... The thing about how you see is that for quite a lot of the time, you don't."

"Don't what?" Amy asked.

"See," said Finn. "You don't see. For about two hours a day, you're effectively blind."

"What she means is," interrupted the Doctor, straightening up and turning round to join in the conversation, "your eyes aren't like a camera, recording everything. They move too quickly for that; about four or five times every second. Everything would jerk or blur all the time. You'd end up permanently seasick, if you *really* saw everything. So your brain does this brilliantly clever trick. Every time you move your eyes, it cuts out the visual information during the move. Each eye movement – each saccade – leaves you in the dark for about two hundred milliseconds at a time. Which adds up to about two hours a day, as Finn said."

"What the brain does instead," Finn supplemented, "is *sample*, and produce a coherent whole. Like taking a lot of tiny snapshots, and building them into a complete picture, and that's the image the brain 'sees'."

"Next time you look in a mirror, look at your left eye, and then at your right eye, and try to catch your eyes moving between one and the other when you do it," the Doctor suggested, with a mischievous smile.

"Okay, but what's it got to do with *him*?" Amy gestured at Keeran.

"Don't know," the Doctor admitted. "Yet... But you've got to admit, he's racking up a pretty phenomenal total of saccades, if he's been like this for a month. Day *and* night. With a two hundred per cent increase in brain activity. I think I'd like to know why. And what's happening in his brain during the saccades. So I think we'll go and find out what happened."

"How?"

"Were there any witnesses to the accident?" the Doctor demanded, before hurrying back to study the records on the screen himself. After a couple of moments his eyes lit up. "Oh, excellent! Absolutely truly and completely excellent!" he exulted.

"What is?" Finn demanded.

"We can ask the man who was there. FTS Allaster. Allaster himself."

"FTS? What does that mean?" Rory asked.

"It's the acronym for First Tier Scientist, according to the record notes," Finn said, leaning over the Doctor's shoulder to look at the monitor.

"Ah, acronyms," said the Doctor. "You humans... You do love a good acronym, don't you?"

The corner of Finn's mouth twitched. "And we do love a good hierarchy, too. So it's always going to end in tiers, isn't it?"

"Hmm... And to think you're the girl who once said puns weren't her strong point," the Doctor responded, his eyes sparkling at the memory.

Amy unexpectedly felt a sense of being on the outside of something as she looked at the two of them smiling at each other, poignantly aware of a connection that Finn shared with the Doctor and she didn't – couldn't – because she hadn't

had the same experiences that they had. Maybe she ought to remember that sometimes Rory must feel like that, over the times she'd shared with the Doctor and he hadn't. It wasn't an entirely comfortable insight.

Finn studied the Doctor narrowly. "What did you mean – 'Allaster himself?'" she asked. "Who is he?"

"The man I was telling you about earlier. Who worked out how to keep the sun shining. And also, by the way, identified the Allastron particle," the Doctor said happily.

"That being?"

"Another triumph for particle physics. Just because they'd got as far as the Higgs-Boson in the early twenty-first century, didn't mean they'd discovered the lot, you know. Things have moved on since then."

"Okay – so where are we going to find him?" Amy enquired.

"The Sephevayim Laboratory, it says here," Finn said, pointing at the screen.

Which didn't take long to locate, once the Doctor had elbowed her aside and used the system to summon up a street plan of the whole town, from which, it turned out, the building in question took its name.

"Right, then," said the Doctor, shepherding them all toward the door. "Let's go and find out what the famous FTS Allaster has to tell us."

"What about Keeran?" Rory glanced back at the figure in the bed, still motionless save for the incessant motion of the staring blue eyes.

"And Raichel," Amy backed him up. "You said you'd tell her as soon as you found anything out."

"And so I will," agreed the Doctor. "When I know enough to tell her something *meaningful*. So come along, Ponds! Come along, Thornton!" He clapped his hands briskly. "Lickety split!"

\*

*At last, the creatures were gone. But while not everything they had done and said had been understood, it was clear that one of them, at least, was reasoning in such a way as might soon lead to discovery. Therefore they, the hidden, must hasten, before what was hidden became revealed. Were they sufficiently ready?*

*Whether they were or not, it seemed that the necessity for the attempt had been forced on them. They had no choice. They had to do it – and do it now.*

*Still, at least, when left alone and unobserved, they had been able to practise their newly acquired skills. Hopefully well enough to pass unnoticed by those around them. Time to put those skills to the test.*

The man in the bed began, somewhat jerkily, to move.



## Chapter 5

### *The Eyes of Vespertilia*

The Laboratory turned out to be the larger building that linked to the structure housing the base of the space elevator. The receptionist was more than happy to be of help to such an eminent visiting consultant as the Doctor; it wasn't long before they were being shown into a room that evidently served partly as office and primarily as laboratory to its occupant, who looked up enquiringly as they entered, then rose to greet them.

He was tall, with silvering hair and distinguished features, and there was an almost instantly engaging gleam in his eye that was both humorous and inquisitive. He beamed at them welcomingly and extended a hand to the Doctor.

"Hello, hello," he said cheerfully. "Doctor – I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

"We-e-ell, I don't go shouting it about," parried the Doctor, affecting self-deprecation. "Don't like to overawe, you know..."

"Well, no," agreed Allaster, momentarily bemused but willing to accommodate. "And you're a doctor of medicine, I take it?"

"I am a Doctor of many things –" the Doctor began.

Rory caught a sudden grin on Finn's face. As if a memory had surfaced, and she was enjoying it.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Oh, nothing," Finn whispered back, still grinning. "It's not the first time he's described himself like that, that's all."

"Oh. Right," said Rory.

Meanwhile, the Doctor was continuing his introductions.

"– but we won't go into all that now," he went on, genially. "And these are my" – he caught the look in Amy's eye, and decided not to use the word 'assistants', after all – "these are my protégés. Amy – Rory – Finn..."

"Delighted to meet you," Allaster declared expansively, encompassing them all in his welcome. "The unexpected is always a delight, isn't it?" He caught the gleam of response in the Doctor's eyes, and for an instant they smiled at each other, one kindred spirit to another. "And is this your first visit to Sephevayim, the bustling and foremost metropolis of Vespertilia?" he went on, widening his question to include all of them.

"Not mine," said the Doctor. "But my staff..."

The look on Amy's face immediately told him he still hadn't chosen the right word as far as she was concerned.

"So they haven't seen the Eyes of Vespertilia, then?" Allaster looked as if he were commiserating.

"Actually –" began the Doctor, but Finn cut across him.

"I'm afraid I was a last-minute addition to the Doctor's party, and I missed the briefing," she said, sounding apologetic. "I mean, I know about Vespertilia, and Crepuscolo, and the Twilight, and everything, but not really about the Eyes. Would you mind awfully explaining what they are, what they do?" She shook her head wonderingly. "I've never seen a sight like that, ever!"

The Doctor smiled inwardly at the act she was putting on. Her strategy was immediately successful.

“Finn, isn’t it?” Allaster enquired, making sure he had the right name; she nodded. “Well, come to the window, Finn, and I’ll explain it to you.”

The Doctor, Amy and Rory followed as Allaster led Finn across the office. His window faced the space elevator, looking along the line of hills, but down to the right they could see the valley with its marching lines of illuminated tunnels, and to the left a tiny arc of the eclipsing planet and the sun’s corona streaming out from behind it. It was to this that Allaster was directing Finn’s attention.

“Well, as you obviously already know, we always used to have to stop production while the Twilight lasted,” he began.

“Until you had your idea,” the Doctor interjected. Allaster smiled with apparently genuine modesty.

“Well, I’m sure someone would have come up with it sooner or later,” he said. “It just happened to be me.”

“What idea?” Finn asked, her eyes full of interest. She might have initially been putting on something of an act to elicit the information they needed from Allaster, but not entirely, and certainly not now; Amy could hear the note of genuine fascination in her voice.

“The Eyes of Vespertilia,” said Allaster grandly, before lapsing back into the lighthearted tone that was apparently his normal manner of speech. “The elevator connects the Eyes, you see.”

“And what are the Eyes, exactly?” Finn pressed.

“The Oculus, and the Ocellus.” Allaster pointed forward, to the square structure from which the massive cable of the space elevator rose skywards, with the dome beyond it. “Down there, under that dome, is the Ocellus. And above it, circling round us in geosynchronous orbit, is the space station that holds the Oculus, and which we reach by the use of the space elevator whenever necessary. Now, *‘what do the Oculus and the Ocellus do?’*, I hear you thinking.” He smiled at Finn, daring her to contradict him, knowing she couldn’t. In response she widened her eyes at him inquisitively, hard put not to break into a laugh; he had such an engaging manner of address.

“The Oculus is high enough above Vespertilia to be able to have a direct line of sight to the sun, over the top of Crepuscolo. What it does is convert the energy from the sunlight and periodically transmits it in pulses down to the planet. That dome you can see opens up and accepts the beam transmission into the Ocellus, which is essentially the receiving station where the energy is stored. In fact” – he glanced round at a chronometer on the wall – “you’re just in time to see the next one. Look, the Ocellus is opening.”

He pointed at the dome. A dark line had appeared across it, growing wider as the two halves slid apart. It was, indeed, as its name suggested, like an eye opening. The two ‘eyelids’ slid down out of sight, leaving a round black ‘eye’ staring upward. High above, the Oculus would be doing the same. The Eyes of Vespertilia were open and looking at each other.

“Wait – just a few more seconds...” Allaster said. “Look up, and you’ll see the pulse coming.”

All eyes obediently turned upward, just in time to see what looked like ball lightning come shooting down from the blackness above and vanish into the black maw of the Ocellus. As soon as it had done so, the two eyelids began to close again.”

“There!” said Allaster with satisfaction. “And from there it’s fed down to the growing tunnels such as the ones that you see down in the valley.”

“There are other tunnels, then?” the Doctor surmised.

“Oh, yes, thousands of them,” Allaster assured him. “Every valley within miles that’s too small to hold any useful size of field is covered with tunnels, all having the energy from the sun piped through to them, so to speak, so that we can continue to grow any suitable species of plants and therefore go on producing even while the Twilight endures.”

The Doctor saw the gleam in his eyes, heard the note of suppressed excitement in his voice, and recognized both. The unmistakable signs of a scientist who has found a new idea to pursue.

“And – now?” he probed.

“Ah, well, now,” said Allaster, turning away from the window. “What I’m working on now, along with some of our Debronian colleagues, is an extension of the original idea. A project to try to enhance the energy yield from what the Oculus gathers and transmits to the Ocellus. We want to try to obtain a higher level of energy, because although we’ve already built a network of – well, I suppose you’d have to call them floodlights, really” – Finn remembered the rectangular

structures she'd noticed when they'd first landed, and the Doctor's description of them as lights – “floodlights that are large enough to illuminate entire fields – ”

“Yes, we've seen them,” the Doctor interrupted. “They were off, though.”

“Night-time, my dear chap,” said Allaster with cheerful succinctness. “We could have them on all the time, of course, but we get better results if we replicate the day-and-night cycle. So we power down and power up. But the point is, the floodlights already enable us to extend the growing season into the Twilight. So if we can maximize or increase the energy yield that we use to power the lights, we can grow even more. And save even more lives,” he ended simply.

“And what are you using for this enhancement?”

“Oh, still experimenting,” Allaster disclaimed. “We're trying various other energy sources in combination with the – well, I'll call it the Oculus energy, for simplicity, shall I? – like trying to create a new cocktail, if you will. Two types of alcohol, mixed together, become more potent in effect when combined. So we've been experimenting with that principle with different types of energy, to see whether the whole might be greater than the sum of its parts, so to speak.”

“Including Allastron particles, I assume?” said the Doctor. Allaster flashed him a look of gratification – as if he'd been hoping someone other than himself would mention his discovery, without him having to blow his own trumpet.

“Yes, indeed,” he agreed. “In fact, that's what we were trying to do when poor Keeran got injured.”

“We?”

“Vondrai and I.”

“Vondrai?” the Doctor queried. “That's a Debronian name.”

“Yes,” agreed Allaster, a fond smile crossing his face. “Most Debronians' talents lie in the biological sciences, but Vondrai has a real flair for physics. She was here helping me when it happened.”

“And what did happen, exactly?”

“Well, we were working late,” said Allaster, gesturing across the laboratory to a large workbench with some kind of apparatus set up on it at each end, aligned toward the window. After a brief glance Finn mentally classified it as some kind of laser emitter and receiver, the latter at the end of the table nearest the window.

“That's a scaled-down version of the Oculus transmitter, up in the gathering station at the top of the space elevator. Basically our method is to combine Oculus energy with other types into a single beam, which we transmit to the receiving equipment and measure the output,” Allaster went on, confirming her guess. “And that's what we were doing when the accident happened. Some sort of malfunction occurred – and we still don't know what caused it.”

“So what happened?” the Doctor repeated.

“Well, Keeran had come in – he'd put his head round the door, saw we were still here, and said he'd go away and come back later, but I told him it was quite all right to carry on. In fact, I let him sweep the floor around the bench first, so he could do the rest of the lab after that. He should have been quite safe – we were nearer than he was, and we only use small levels of energy; provided you don't actually touch the beam, it's perfectly safe. Normally... Anyway, I told him to stand over to one side and just to wait for a few seconds while I activated the beam, and then he'd be able to get back on with his work. Technically I only need a few milliseconds in order to obtain an output measurement, you understand, but I allow five seconds each time, to be really sure I have enough data – only, this time...” He paused.

“This time?” the Doctor prompted.

“Well – not to put too fine a point on it – bang,” Allaster said simply, spreading his hands wide. The fascination of an enquiring mind over an unexpected phenomenon warred on his face with sincere regret over what had happened to Keeran as a result. “I used the emitter tube” – he gestured at a small tubular device on the bench – “to introduce Allastron particles into the beam, and –” He shrugged expressively.

At that moment the door opened and a Debronian started to enter the room, stopping short as she registered the fact that Allaster had visitors. Her long lashes flickered over the emerald green spheres of her eyes in a gesture which in a human would have indicated confusion.

“Oh! My apologies are offered! I am disturbing you!” she piped in the flutelike tones of her species.

“Nonsense!” Allaster contradicted her roundly. “You've come at a most opportune moment, Vondrai. The Doctor and his colleagues are here asking about what happened to Keeran.”

Vondrai inclined her head in a gesture of acknowledgement that included them all.

“This accident is a terrible thing,” she said. “We are wishing we could identify the cause.” Her sentence structure was sometimes a little unexpected, but it had a quirky charm to it that Amy rather liked.

“So where, exactly, was everyone when this happened?” the Doctor asked.

“Oh, you want a re-enactment!” Allaster sounded pleased. “*Where were you when the lights went out,* eh? Except that in this case they came on, rather emphatically... Well, Vondrai and I were here.” He gestured to her to position herself at one end of the table, behind the emitter part of the apparatus, facing the window. Once she was in place, he stood on her left. “And Keeran...” His eye lighted on Rory. “Young man, will you be so kind as to be Keeran for the purposes of this exercise? He was standing there. Right in my line of sight.”

Rory obligingly moved to the place Allaster indicated, at the right hand end of the window.

“And that,” said Allaster to the Doctor, “is where we all were.”

The Doctor assessed the relative positions of the apparatus and Rory.

“Hmm, yes... And – bang... You said ‘bang’,” he prompted Allaster. “What sort of bang?”

“Only a quiet one, in terms of the level of sound,” Allaster said, almost regretfully. “But there was a very intense white flare. Blinding! Caused a very strange optical illusion, let me tell you!”

The Doctor’s head shot up. “And what was that?”

“Well, only for a moment, mind you,” Allaster amended. “It’s difficult to describe, exactly. Bit like a smoke ring, I suppose. Yes – as if there was a hole, a tear, a rent – but edged like a smoke ring. It was only there for a moment. I could see Keeran right through it. I had the idea it was travelling toward him – washed over him, you might say. But only for an instant. Then it was gone. And he was on the floor.”

“I see,” said the Doctor, evidently thinking furiously. “And you saw the same thing, Vondrai?”

She inclined her head, the upward sweep of her mauve hair momentarily pointing toward him. “As the FTS is saying,” she agreed. “We are going to him, of course. But we cannot rouse him.”

“Were his eyes closed, or open?” the Doctor asked.

“His eyes are open,” she said. “At first they stare. But then they begin to move. Side to side. And this they are doing ever since.”

“Have you formed a diagnosis yet, Doctor?” Allaster enquired. His tone was genial, but his eyes were afire with scientific curiosity.

“I’m beginning to,” the Doctor said. “This – ring – you saw... You say it ‘washed’ over him?”

“This is what we are seeing,” Vondrai confirmed. “There is being a very slight visual distortion of what is being seen through the ring. This distortion is being more intense when it was passing through the place where Keeran is standing. Then it is gone.”

“Very interesting,” said the Doctor. “*Very* interesting...” He turned a huge, beaming smile on Allaster and Vondrai. “You’ve been most helpful, both of you. And I think it’s time we went back and had another look at Keeran.” He whirled round and turned the beam on Amy, Rory and Finn. “Come along, entourage!”

And at that point was reminded by the look on a certain face that someone still had a definite bone to pick over his choice of terminology.

\*

Amy was still in full cry when they got back to Keeran’s room, by which time the Doctor was definitely looking beleaguered.

“Wishing you had a deflector shield, Doctor?” Finn enquired cheerfully, winking at Rory. The Doctor gave her a sour glance.

“But, Amy, I have to admit it, I’m really awestruck,” Finn went on. “I wish I had a talent like that.”

Amy, cut off in mid-flow, shot her a look of puzzled incomprehension.

“What are you talking about?” she demanded.

“The way you managed to do that without drawing a single breath between the Laboratory and here,” Finn explained. “Dead impressive.”

Amy had the grace to look slightly shamefaced, while Rory had the wisdom to look entirely neutral.

The Doctor took advantage of the respite to open the door of Keeran’s room, but stalled in the doorway.

“Oh,” he said, as he took in the view of the room.

“What?” Amy demanded, peering over his shoulder before she, too, said, “Oh...”

She followed the Doctor in, and at last Finn and Rory could see the cause of the consternation.

The bed was empty, the bedclothes thrown back in tousled disarray, the occupant nowhere to be seen.

“He’s gone!” Rory exclaimed.

“Oh, well spotted, Mr Amy Pond,” said the Doctor, with that slightly derogatory tone he often seemed to use when addressing Rory. Finn found herself slightly annoyed by it.

“You’re doing it again!” she challenged.

The Doctor blinked, and Amy and Rory looked puzzled.

“The surname thing!” Finn said. “Why isn’t he at *least* Pond-Williams?”

“Oh, we don’t bother with the Williams,” said the Doctor dismissively, with a flap of his hand. “Too many extra syllables. Just Pond is quicker.”

Finn folded her arms and regarded him with a less than adulatory expression.

“So – let me get this straight – Rory waits for, and protects, Amy for two thousand years, and at the end of it he doesn’t even get the use of his own surname? I’m sorry, Doctor, but while you’ve had your moments, even you didn’t use to be that graceless.”

The Doctor’s lower lip jutted sulkily, and so did his jaw, but he didn’t look at her or reply. Amy was uncharacteristically silent, and looked a little uncomfortable; she evidently hadn’t thought of it in quite that way. Rory looked at both of them, then turned to Finn.

“Thanks, but – you don’t need to worry about it that much,” he said. “We *are* married, and she *is* my wife, so the labels don’t matter that much, do they?”

“He’s lucky – you’re more tolerant about it than I would be!” Finn looked over at Amy. “This is quite a man you’ve got here – I hope you know just how fortunate you are.”

Amy took a step to put herself alongside Rory, and took his hand. They looked at each other briefly. Then Amy returned her attention to Finn.

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to be reminded,” she conceded. And she wasn’t angry, or even annoyed; she found she was grateful to Finn for driving the point home to her. Not least because of the look in Finn’s eyes – an expression she probably wasn’t even aware she was betraying. The expression of someone who doesn’t have what you have, but cares enough to remind you to set the proper value on it, because you do have it. You owed it to someone in that position to take notice of what they were telling you. Amy couldn’t help glancing at the Doctor and saw that he was looking at her and Rory; after a second, he looked away, but she could see he’d registered Finn’s comments, too.

“Yes, well – back to the matter in hand,” he said, not very subtly changing the subject. “As has been so scintillatingly observed, Keeran’s gone. So where? Why? How?”

“Could it be because of us?” Rory suggested.

“Us?”

“Well, his wife said he’d been in that condition for a month. Just seems a bit too much of a coincidence that we turn up, and suddenly he’s gone.”

“Sounds entirely plausible to me, Doctor,” said Finn. “Let’s face it, you’re nothing if not a disruptive influence.”

“Thank you for the character reference, Miss Thornton,” said the Doctor, affecting hauteur. But they were back in harmony; the mutual amusement in their eyes was clear to see.

“But why would our turning up affect his condition?” Amy wanted to know.

“Good question,” said the Doctor.

“Maybe it was something we said,” offered Rory. “I mean, just because there’s something wrong with his eyes doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with his ears.”

“Oh, brilliant!” Finn applauded. “Amy, I *like* your man! If you ever decide you can do without him, let me know – I’ll take him on for you!” She winked at Rory, who did his best both not to show how flattered he was, and to show an innocent face to his wife.

Amy looked at both of them, trying to seem severe but ruining the effect somewhat by the gleam of laughter in her eye, and shook her head decisively.

“Nah, not finished with him yet,” she said. “Can’t spare either of my boys at the moment! But I’ll bear it in mind, just in case I decide to take you up on the offer.”

“Right-oh,” said Finn comfortably, while Rory looked more pleased than ever.

The Doctor, who had been observing this little exchange with folded arms, shook his head, flopping his fringe down over his forehead.

“I cannot *believe* you two are negotiating for custody of *Rory*,” he said, incredulously.

“I don’t suppose you can, no,” Finn agreed. “That’s because you aren’t human, and you aren’t a girl.”

“And never have I been so grateful on either count!” the Doctor retorted sourly.

Amy and Finn looked at each other for a long moment, their eyes sparkling with amusement, then burst out laughing.

The Doctor glowered at them, then turned an accusing stare on Rory, who swiftly assumed a blank expression, shrugged – as much as to say, “*Nothing to do with me...!*” – and, displaying acute discernment, declined to comment.

“Anyway, suppose Rory’s right, and it’s something we said,” Finn said, returning to the matter in hand. “What could it have been? What did we talk about when we were in here?”

“Saccades,” the Doctor reminded her. “And then we decided to go to the scene of the accident.”

“But what possible difference could that make to Keeran?” Amy was clearly struggling.

“If I’m right – and let’s face it, I always am – well, nearly,” said the Doctor, adding the caveat hastily when he caught Finn’s expression, “what he heard would have frightened him. And if not him, then someone.”

They all stared at him.

“What someone?” Amy asked.

“That’s what we need to find out,” said the Doctor. “So we need to find Keeran, and we need to find him quickly. So you’d all better start looking for him.”

“While you’ll be doing – what?” Rory prompted.

“Since I can’t talk to Keeran, I’m going to have another talk with Allaster and Vondrai. Get some more details of the exact mechanisms they’re using for their experiments. I think the answers might be quite key to what they did.”

“And what is it you think they did?” Finn enquired.

“Opened a door,” said the Doctor. “And someone came through. Which is why we need to find Keeran. As quickly as possible.”



## Chapter 6

### *Trouble in Spades*

Amy and Rory stood in one of the hospital corridors, debating which way to go; Finn had already vanished some while ago, arranging to meet them back at Keeran's room later, while the Doctor had raced off to re-interview Allaster. Despite carefully scanning the face of every human they'd seen on the way – for obvious reasons they were ignoring any Debronians they saw, for the purpose of this exercise – they'd seen no sign of Keeran. Now they'd come to a node where two corridors intersected – quite literally to a crossroads, each arm extending into the distance as far as they could see – and they were deciding whether to split up from each other to widen the search. Rory was a bit reluctant about the idea. Amy, on the other hand, wasn't.

"This hospital's a pretty big place – we'll cover a lot more ground," she pointed out.

"Even hospitals can be dangerous places," muttered Rory darkly.

"Only for the patients," Amy retorted. "So, come on – which way –?"

Then she broke off, and froze for a moment. Rory followed the direction of her gaze, and saw what she saw. Some way down the corridor directly in front of them, a barefoot figure in pale blue, soft spikes of brown hair pointing in all directions. He was moving, but very slowly, as if he had no real idea where he was going. Even as they watched, he came to a stop, as if uncertain what to do next.

"It's him!" Amy exclaimed. "Come on!"

She was gearing up to run when Rory laid a restraining hand on her arm.

"What?" she demanded, catching the look on his face.

"The Doctor said someone came through the door, and that's why we had to find Keeran," he said. "We don't know what came through, or what they've done to him. He might be dangerous in some way."

"What, him?" Amy derided, gesturing at the hesitating figure in the distance.

"I still think we need to find the Doctor first, before we approach him," Rory insisted.

Amy conceded his point of view grumpily.

"All right," she acquiesced reluctantly. "You go and find him, then. I'll keep an eye on Keeran."

"Make sure it's just your eye," Rory said. "Don't get too close. Not until we know what we're dealing with. Promise."

"You're going all husband on me," Amy pouted.

"Yeah," Rory agreed, in an 'of-course-I-am' tone of voice.

Amy scowled at him, then smiled, reluctantly.

"Back soon, then," said Rory.

"Okay," Amy agreed.

\*

Finn was already waiting when she saw Rory hurrying towards her.

“Doctor!” he said, rather surprisingly. Then she worked it out and swung round to find the Doctor coming towards her from the other direction.

“Doctor,” Rory repeated, panting slightly. “We’ve found him!”

“Excellent!” the Doctor approved. “But where’s Amy?”

“Keeping an eye on him while I came to get you.”

“So where is he?”

“That way...” Rory pointed behind him without looking, but Finn did look in the indicated direction.

“Er...” she said, in a tone of warning.

The Doctor and Rory both looked, and saw Raichel approaching.

“Time to go into plausible mode, Doctor,” Finn murmured.

“Right, yes, thank you,” the Doctor murmured back, before painting a huge smile on his face with which to greet Raichel. “Ah, Raichel, there you are! Nice rest, I hope? Afraid Keeran’s not here at the moment.”

Raichel looked faintly alarmed. “Not here? Where is he?”

“Oh, I’ve asked for a few tests,” said the Doctor breezily. “So they’ve taken him off somewhere to get them done. Hopefully won’t take too long, but you know what hospitals are like! So you can wait here or back in your room, whichever you prefer. I’ll let you know as soon as there’s any news, of course.”

Raichel looked uncertain. “Well, perhaps I’ll wait here, to start with...” she ventured.

“Yes. Do. Wonderful,” the Doctor enthused. “And if they’re too long about it, you can go and take another rest until he’s back. Entirely your decision. Now, I hope you’ll excuse me, but there’s someone I have to find.”

He flashed her a smile and began to hurry off, Finn and Rory with him.

“Would that be the young lady that was with you earlier?” Raichel enquired.

The Doctor instantly halted, pivoted on his heel, and came back toward her.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, it is. Why? Have you seen her?”

“Yes, just a few minutes ago. Going toward the Tunnels exit.”

“The Tunnels exit?” The Doctor didn’t recognize the term.

“That’s what everyone calls it. The exit that comes out by the entrance to the nearest Tunnels. There’s a travelator there for the agworkers.”

“Sorry – the what?” Rory asked.

“The agricultural technicians,” Raichel explained. “It gets shortened to agworkers.”

“Much quicker to say,” the Doctor agreed. “Did she say why she was going that way?”

“Oh, I didn’t get to speak to her. I just saw her, that’s all. She was standing staring along the corridor, and then suddenly she muttered something as if she was cross – I couldn’t hear what – and she started heading away from me, toward the exit.”

“He must be on the move again,” said the Doctor, more to himself than to the others. “And she’s following.” He looked up to see Rory and Finn looking at him in complete comprehension, but Raichel frowning, puzzled. “And so must we!” the Doctor went on brightly. He grasped Raichel by the shoulders and smiled at her. “Thank you! You’ve been most helpful, Raichel! Come on, troops – with me!”

He released her and started along the corridor at a smart pace, his two companions in his wake.

“I hope you find her soon,” Raichel called after them, but they were already gone.

\*

Having reached the Tunnel, Amy was now debating what to do. Or, rather, which way to go. She seemed to be in a kind of junction area, the most striking features of which were two large doors, one on her right, one on her left. On the

wall alongside each door were racks of what were evidently gardening tools. Some of the smaller hand implements were unfamiliar to her, but the spades, at least, were unmistakable.

She turned her attention back to the doors and chewed her lip for a moment, then turned to her left and cautiously pushed the door on that side open.

She found herself gazing at a riot of vegetation, as far as she could see. Which wasn't very far, because of the tens if not hundreds of varieties of plants, massing together, blocking any long-range view. If Keeran was here, he wasn't going to be easy to find; it would be like trying to spot someone in a jungle. She could see no movement of any sort, hear no sound other than the almost subliminal susurrations of what she took to be some sort of air conditioning.

"Hello!" she called out, tentatively, in the hope that there might be someone about, staff of some kind, tending the plants. But there was no response.

Perhaps he'd gone the other way; maybe she'd better check that first. She retreated through the door, pulling it to behind her, and turned to go in the opposite direction.

Only to find Keeran right in front of her.

She only had time to utter a brief gasp of shock before he gripped her by both shoulders and thrust her back against the door with such force that she was pinned against it. Before she could react, he'd thrust his face so close to hers she had nowhere to look but into his eyes.

And once she had done that, there was no escape.

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Minutes later, the Doctor, Rory and Finn also arrived in the airlock area. The empty airlock area.

The Doctor wasted no time.

"Rory, Finn – that way," he directed, pointing to the right. "I'll go this way. Meet back here as soon as either of us finds anything."

After saying which he opened the door on the left, darted through it, and vanished.

Rory rolled his eyes at Finn, who grinned back at him.

"Let's do what the man says, then," she suggested.

"Don't we always?" muttered Rory as he opened the door. For a moment they stood surveying the view, which, though they did not know it, was much the same as the one Amy had seen through the other door. Then Rory stepped cautiously inside; Finn followed him.

"I wonder if there's anyone about? Any agworkers, I mean," she mused, as they made their way along the maintenance walkway between the plants, so tall and broad-leaved that they overhung it and had to be pushed aside as they walked.

"Might not be," Rory said, pointing upwards. Finn followed the direction of his forefinger and saw that there was a regular series of spray nozzles depending from a network of narrow pipes. "Automated irrigation. Maybe fertilizer as well as water. If these things are all over the planet, they probably designed for minimum maintenance."

"Makes sense," Finn agreed. After they had walked on for a minute or two, scanning their surroundings for any sign of life – more to the point, any sign of life that wasn't a plant – she broke the silence again. "Rory?"

"Mm?"

"How did you meet the Doctor? You and Amy?"

"Amy met him when she was a little girl. He told her he'd come back. Then he vanished for twelve years. Which she didn't appreciate much... *'Twelve years!'*" Rory's imitation of his wife was an excellent one; Finn could imagine Amy's voice, sharp with remembered indignation, and smiled. "But he did come back in the end. Took her travelling in the TARDIS. Like he does. But brought her back in time for our wedding. Then he took us both with him, for a while. Until he decided to let us start leading normal lives. Except that we don't, not all the time, because he keeps turning up. Now you see him, now you don't. Never know when he's going to come and whisk us away to the far end of the universe. It makes planning ahead a bit – problematic..." Rory concluded with glaring understatement.

“Right,” said Finn, and left it at that – but what she was thinking was that Rory probably didn’t realize what a change in the Doctor’s behaviour he was describing. Before meeting her – Finn – the Doctor had had many companions who’d travelled with him, but once they’d left him, he’d never gone back for any of them and taken them with him again. Jack had told her that.

*“You said he looks back, but he doesn’t come back. What you seem to keep overlooking is that for you, he did. Several times, from what you’ve told me. Kept bringing you home and leaving, but always turned up again... For others, he doesn’t come back... You’re the only one he ever did it for. Only for you...”*

It seemed that the Doctor had learned from that; from doing it for her, he’d learned that he *could* leave people and yet go back to them. Because he’d been doing it to Amy and Rory. So being with her might have been responsible for what amounted to a fairly profound change in his behaviour. That was – interesting...

“What about you?” Rory asked, pausing to hold back an extra-long frond of some plant or another to let her pass. “Where did this ‘his-mind-in-yours’ thing happen?”

“On a mountain in Wales.” Finn smiled her thanks as she passed the frond and Rory let it swing back into place again. “He was saving the Earth again. As usual. What wasn’t very usual, I suppose, was the ending up ‘being of one mind’ thing, as you might say.”

Rory stopped for moment and looked at her. He couldn’t help feeling curious about that. “What’s it like?” he asked.

“Sometimes fun, sometimes weird. All sorts of interesting memories keep surfacing. They’re just not mine.” Finn grinned, and double-tapped her forehead.

Rory registered it straight away. “Why did you do that?” he asked sharply, instinctively pointing to her still-raised hand.

“Do what?”

“Double-tap your forehead.”

“Oh, that! I often do that when I’m talking about his mind in mine. Why?” It clearly mattered.

That’s what Amy did in the TARDIS,” Rory said, staring at her keenly. “And it shook him, you could see that. That was when he said we were expecting a visitor. And then you arrived.”

“Right...” Finn said slowly, looking as if she was trying to work out the implications as much as he was. “So, you’re saying – he *knew* I was coming...?”

“Yeah. And he said something about the date. The 12th of May, 2011. It was like something had finally slotted into place. Like he’d suddenly put a puzzle together.”

“Was it?” Finn said softly. “I wonder what the puzzle was...” After a moment, something else occurred to her. “You know, River mentioned the date, too. She said I had to be in a specific place on a specific day. In Leadworth. *That* day... I wonder how *she* knew?”

Rory didn’t even attempt to answer that one.

“*Curiouser and curiouser, said Alice...*” Finn quoted. “I wonder just what it was that both the Doctor and River know, and we don’t?”

“One thing we do know,” said Rory resignedly. “We won’t find out unless he decides to tell us.”

Finn nodded, and searched the vista ahead of them for a moment. Not so much as one leaf stirred, anywhere.

“We haven’t seen a sign of Keeran this way,” she said. “Perhaps we should go back. See what the Doctor says. About lots of things.”

“Yeah,” agreed Rory. “Maybe we should.”

\*

In his side of the Tunnel, the Doctor shut the entry door behind him and turned to consider the tangle of vegetation that prevented any chance of seeing anything that wasn’t more than a few feet distant. Amy might be miles away, or only yards. He considered the mass of green for a moment; anything could be in there and you might never know it. And if Keeran was in there, and Amy didn’t know it... Better find out if she was within earshot.

The Doctor cupped his hands round his mouth and bellowed, “AMY!”, but there was no reply. He hoped that didn’t mean what it might mean... He strode forward into the walkway between the plants, pushing the encroaching foliage out of his way as he went. Even though the agworkers must come this way from time to time, it didn’t appear to be their practice to trim the crops back very often.

He hadn’t gone more than a hundred yards when he heard a brief rustle of leaves – *behind* him. He turned round just in time to see branches and leaves swinging quickly back into place, but not quickly enough to mask the sight of bronze-red hair heading in the direction of the entry door.

“Amy? Amy!” the Doctor shouted, and began to pursue, thrusting the slapping and entangling leafage out of his way as he ran.

As he burst back out of the walkway he saw the door just being pulled to. He hurtled toward it, yanked it open, and shot through. Then abruptly stopped, before turning slowly to face the figure standing with its back to the wall in the space between the tool rack and the door he had just come through.

“Amy?” said the Doctor gently, almost enquiringly.

She was pressed back against the wall as if engaged in a last-ditch defence against an attacker. Her feet were spread slightly apart and the palms of her hands were flat against the wall, as though ready to launch herself away from it at any instant. Her head was at an unnatural angle, also pressed back. Nothing about the way she was holding her body was good, as far as the Doctor was concerned. But the thing that really disturbed him was the way her eyes were flicking from side to side, just like Keeran’s...

“Amy?” he prompted again. “What’s happened?”

Her head turned slightly so she was directly facing him, but her eyes continued to flick, never resting on him for more than a split second.

“Amy? Or am I talking to someone else?” the Doctor continued. “I’m fairly sure I am, you know. But it would be nice to know who you are. What I should call you. It’s always polite to call someone by their real name. Don’t you agree? So what should I call you?”

There was a long pause, during which Amy neither spoke nor moved. Then, just as the Doctor was beginning to think he wasn’t going to get an answer, her lips opened.

“No name,” they said, haltingly. It was Amy’s voice, but flat, stiff, as if unused to uttering speech.

“No name?” the Doctor protested. “Don’t you use names, where you come from?”

“It is not necessary. I am known. We are known. We do not use names.”

“All right – okay...” The Doctor spoke slowly while thinking fast. “And where it is that you come from, exactly?”

“Here. Not here.”

“Here, but not here?” The Doctor frowned, struggling to understand. “You’re from Vespertilia, but you’re not from Vespertilia?”

“You – creatures – here. You say Vespertilia. We do not. Where we are is known to us. Here is not known to us. Was not known to us,” the speaker added, intriguingly.

“How did you get from where you came from to where you are now?” the Doctor asked carefully. He was beginning to have an inkling of the truth.

“Taken. Nothing, then something. Not here, then here. No warning.”

The Doctor considered, as he stared almost unseeingly at Amy’s ceaselessly flicking eyes. More and more implications were beginning to pile into his brain.

“You know,” he said slowly, “if what’s happened is what I think has happened, you’ve been through an experience that would have broken the minds of most intelligences. I think you need help. I can help you.”

There was suddenly something more intent in the expression of Amy’s eyes, and they seemed to move even quicker than before.

“Much to learn. All” – the being inside her seemed to be searching for exactly the right word – “all new. All to discover. All to explore.”

Something about the way it was said troubled the Doctor.

“All to explore? You want to explore?”

“We want to explore.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” the Doctor agreed. “Because there’s more than one of you, isn’t there?”

\*

They were not far from the entry door when Finn suddenly grabbed at Rory’s sleeve.

“I heard something,” she whispered. “Something moved, up ahead of us.”

“If it’s Keeran, he must have hidden until we were past, then doubled back,” Rory speculated. “Wait here – I’ll check it out.” He could see the protest forming on her face. “Please,” he added. “Just till we’re sure it’s him.”

“But –” Finn began, then bit down on her own objection. “All right,” she said, resignedly. “But you be careful!”

“You’re sounding like a wife,” Rory told her, a faint twinkle in his eye.

“I’d better not. You’ve got one,” Finn grinned.

Rory grinned back, then he turned in the direction of the door again. “I’ll let you know if it’s all clear.”

Finn watched him go, until a large fronded plant hid him from her sight. As soon as he’d vanished, she began to follow.

“I did what you said, Rory,” she muttered to herself. “I waited there. You just didn’t say how long I was to do it, did you?”

Up ahead of her, Rory was proceeding with extreme caution. Keeran – if it was Keeran Finn had heard – could be hiding anywhere in the ranks of plants on either side of the walkway. But he saw no movement, heard no sound – until he got close to the door. Because it was no longer closed; it was ajar, and he could hear voices. Voices he knew. Amy’s voice, and the Doctor’s. He hurried to the door, pulled it open, and stepped through.

\*

“Yes,” said the being using Amy’s voice. “Another one is here. And many more than one, not here. All to explore.”

“What do you mean by ‘*all to explore?*’” probed the Doctor uneasily. “You’re exploring already. You and your friend. You know” – he sidetracked for a moment – “I really do need to call you something. You’re from Vespertilia, aren’t you? Or not, as the case may be... But let’s say, for the purposes of this conversation, you are. I think that makes you Vespertilions, doesn’t it? Vespertilions. Yes! I like that! Vespertilions! There, I’ve named an entire race. Mind you, that’s nothing. I named an entire galaxy once. Alison, in case you were wondering... Actually – no, you weren’t, were you...? Anyway, back to the point. About where you’re from. Don’t you want to go home?”

“All new,” the being in Amy repeated. Her eyes were moving even faster, as if the thing inside her was becoming ever more excited. “Must explore.”

The Doctor frowned momentarily. Did the creature really mean it only wanted to explore? Or did it mean something more?

“Well, why don’t we talk about that?” he suggested diplomatically. “Because, you see –”

Suddenly, behind him, came the sound of someone hurrying through the door from the other Tunnel. Almost before he had time to register that, there came a muffled thud followed almost instantly by a sound that was half a grunt of pain, half a gasp of surprise, and almost as quickly again by a much louder thud. The sort of thud you get when an unconscious human body hits the floor.

The Doctor spun round, realizing that the unconscious human body in question was Rory’s, and that Keeran was standing over it with a solid metal spade in his hands. Almost subconsciously the Doctor’s peripheral vision picked out the empty space in the tool rack on the wall.

But, of course, in turning to face him, the Doctor had turned his back on Amy.

Or, rather, the being currently inside Amy, the one controlling her muscles, her reactions, and her hands. And who was also standing by a tool rack.

So by the time something had connected painfully with his own head – had she used a spade, too? – and he was collapsing onto the floor alongside Rory, he just had time to conclude that maybe turning round hadn't been such a good idea. Before he stopped concluding anything at all.

\*

Above their unconscious bodies the two Vespertilions in Amy and Keeran looked at each other, their eyes flicking almost in unison. The Amy Vespertilion put both hands to her head with an instinctively human gesture.

“What is wrong?” the Keeran Vespertilion asked. Between themselves, not having to use human language, they could communicate fairly easily, though it was still more difficult than in their native environment.

“It is hard,” the Amy Vespertilion replied. “In that one, where you are – where I was also – it was not hard. It does not resist. Here, it is hard. This one resists my presence. I must fight for control constantly. It does not give up. I must find another. One that does not fight as this one does.”

“Then you know which one it must be.”

“Yes. The one who can do for us what needs to be done.”

Together the two Vespertilions turned and left the junction area. They had to go to where the creature they needed would be, and the two sprawled bodies on the floor could not interfere. Let them lie; they were no longer of any importance.



## Chapter 7

### *Cultural Concepts*

“Owww!” The Doctor rubbed the back of his head and scowled. “Honestly! Whatever happened to ‘violence never settles anything?’”

Finn looked across from where she was helping the now conscious but still slightly dazed Rory to his feet.

“That’s always been a stupid thing to say,” she observed. “Violence settles lots of things, often pretty thoroughly! It just doesn’t do it the best way. You of all people should know that,” she added meaningfully.

“Yes, well – fair point,” the Doctor conceded, grumpily.

“Where’s Amy?” Rory enquired, wincing slightly as his abused head continued to complain at the treatment it had received. “She was here when I arrived.”

“Ah, yes – the thing is, she’s got company at the moment,” the Doctor said evasively.

Rory caught his tone, and was suddenly tense. “Doctor,” he said flatly. “Explain.” But he was talking to the Doctor’s back as he started towards the stairs.

“Would if I had time, Rory! But I think I know where they’re going. And possibly why. And if I’m right – we need to hurry!”

\*

First Tier Scientist Allaster looked up from the adjustments he was making to prepare the laser equipment for its next test as he heard noises outside his laboratory. He could hear Vondrai's voice, muffled by the closed door; she sounded uncharacteristically disturbed about something. Then there came a sound as if someone had dropped a large, heavy sack to the floor outside. What on earth could it be?

He straightened up as the door opened, and his eyes widened.

"Keeran? What are you doing here? Don't tell me you've recovered? My dear chap, I'm delighted to see you! And – Amy, wasn't it? You were here with the Doctor, earlier, weren't you? What can I –?"

He broke off as he saw the eyes. The two pairs of eyes, ceaselessly flicking from side to side, apparently never settling on anything. Yet the intelligences behind them were clearly intent. On him...

\*

"Why Allaster's laboratory?" Rory asked, as he and Finn kept pace with the Doctor. "Why do you think she's going there?"

"She and Keeran," the Doctor corrected. "There are two Vespertilions, one controlling each of them. I think they're going to try to get back to their home, and for that they need Allaster. He's the one who conducted the experiment that brought them here. They'll want him to reverse it. So they need his help."

At that very moment they came into view of the laboratory door, and what they saw made them all halt for a second as they took in the implications.

"Peculiar way of asking for it," Finn observed, with a flippancy that Rory's expression indicated he thought was misplaced.

On the floor in front of the door lay Vondrai, unconscious, her skin a paler mauve than it should have been and her purple crest sad and flat against her skull. The Doctor hurried forward, knelt beside her and gently explored the patch of bruising on the side of her head.

"She's alive, but she'll take a while to come out of it," he said.

"What about Amy?" Rory was single-minded with anxiety.

The Doctor stood up. "Let's see..."

Cautiously he pushed open the door and entered, Rory and Finn at his shoulder.

The lights were off; the only illumination came from the dim rectangle cast through the window onto the laboratory floor by the corona of sunlight around the edge of Crepuscolo. Inside the pale outline an inert figure lay on its side, long legs sprawled, bronze-red hair spilling over the face. The Doctor and Rory both leaped forward. Gently, between them, they turned her over.

"Is she all right?" Finn demanded.

"I think so," said the Doctor. "Unconscious, but..." He looked up at Finn. "Put the lights on, will you?"

"Yes," agreed a voice from the deep gloom of the laboratory. "Light."

Finn jumped at the sound, and her hand, already reaching toward the sensor plate on the wall, jerked. The abrupt movement did what was required. The lights activated, and she, along with the Doctor and Rory, looked in the direction of the speaker.

Allaster and Keeran, their faces expressionless, their eyes flicking back and forth with eerie synchronization, stood behind the bench on which stood the testing equipment Allaster had demonstrated on their previous visit. There was something unnatural about their stance; they held themselves stiffly, arms at their sides like soldiers standing to attention, hands out of sight below the edge of the bench.

"What have you done to Amy?" Rory demanded. There was an angry edge to his voice.

The Allaster Vespertilion cocked his head slightly to one side, as if struggling to define the relevance of the question.

“I was – with – her.” There was a curious pause either side of the word ‘with’, as if the speaker was using it for a purpose for which it was not intended. “Now I am here. Nothing else was done.”

“There must have been some neural stress because of the transfer,” said the Doctor.

“What transfer?” Rory asked, still in that tight, dangerous voice.

“The Vespertilion that was inside her.” The Doctor got to his feet. “Now it’s inside Allaster.”

“This one does not resist.” Allaster made a jerky motion with one arm. “The other one resisted. It was difficult.”

“That’s Amy all right,” the Doctor agreed, a momentary glint of humour in his eyes. “She resists, and she’s difficult. Isn’t she, Rory?” He didn’t give Rory a chance to respond. Which was probably just as well; Rory, still crouching beside his wife, clearly wasn’t able to laugh about it.

“Is she going to be all right?” he demanded.

“She will be when she wakes up,” said the Doctor. “Bit of a headache, probably...” He returned his attention to the Vespertilions. “So, you chose Allaster as your new host.”

“This one knows what we need to do,” came the stiff reply.

The Doctor nodded. “That’s what I thought. You want to go home, don’t you? And you want his help to do it.”

The Allaster Vespertilion cocked his head again in an echo of his earlier gesture. “Help, yes...”

But Finn, watching, felt that there was something in his manner that implied the Doctor had missed the point.

“So where *is* home?” she asked. “Where are you from?”

This seemed to perplex the Vespertilion. “Here. Not here,” was all it could manage.

“*Here, not here?* What does *that* mean?” Finn was equally perplexed.

“Still haven’t got the hang of human vocabulary, have you?” the Doctor commented to the Vespertilion. “What it’s trying to tell you, Finn, is that it’s from another dimension. A dimension *without* dimensions. Intelligences without bodies. Suddenly, shockingly finding themselves dragged into another world. One where intelligences *are* housed in bodies. Something of a culture shock, I’d say – wouldn’t you?”

Finn’s mouth opened in astonishment. The Doctor could almost see the implications beginning to emerge in her brain. Having his mind in hers, her own was quickly attuned to his thought processes. It was like being a patron, watching their protégé at work. He felt almost proud.

“So is that why you need Allaster’s help?” Finn asked the Vespertilion. “To go back to your own dimension?”

“No,” it replied. Something about the way it spoke the word suddenly chilled the Doctor’s blood.

“No? But if you don’t want help to go home, what do you want?” he challenged.

“To show others,” said the Vespertilion cryptically. It looked at its colleague for a moment, then back at the Doctor. “We go now. With her.”

Rory realized which ‘her’ and abruptly rose from Amy’s side, outraged. “You’re not taking her anywhere –!” he began, taking a step forward.

“Stop!” snapped the Allaster Vespertilion. At the same instant, the Keeran Vespertilion raised his right hand, with something in it. A small tubular device, which it pointed toward the Doctor, Finn and Rory. The emitter tube that Allaster had said he has used in the original experiment, the one that had brought the Vespertilions through in the first place. The Doctor instantly spread his hands protectively, one of each side of him, a gesture that also served to freeze Finn and Rory into stillness.

“Don’t move,” he said quickly. “We don’t want to provoke him into using that.”

“Because it might open another portal?”

“Good point, Rory, but no,” the Doctor disagreed. “That thing emits Allastron particles, remember? Very, very, *very* bad for your health. If enough of them penetrate human tissue it starts to die, fairly quickly, and increasingly painfully. And there’s nothing you can do to stop it. So we’re not risking it.”

“But –” Rory began.

“Not a suggestion, Rory!” The Doctor looked at the Allaster Vespertilion. “So what happens now?”

“For non-corporeal beings they seem to have absorbed the cultural concept of tying people up to immobilize them fairly quickly,” Finn observed a short while later. Like the Doctor and Rory at the other end of the bench, she was seated on the floor, comprehensively tied to one of its very sturdy legs.

“And hostage-taking,” the Doctor agreed, glancing at the spot on the floor where Amy had been before the two Vespertilions had taken her with them. “They seem to have got that principle down pat, too. I don’t think association with humans is doing their morals a lot of good.”

“I refuse to comment on that on the grounds of possible self-incrimination,” Finn retorted. “Having any luck with the knots?”

“No,” the Doctor admitted with a touch of frustration. “They seem to have invented one Harry never came across.”

“Harry?” Rory queried blankly.

“Houdini,” the Doctor said, a little indignant that he should have to explain.

“So what are we going to do?” Rory demanded. “Just sit and wait for someone to turn up and rescue us?”

“As a general policy it has its flaws,” the Doctor conceded, “but, just at the moment, I haven’t got a better one.”

“Surely someone’ll spot Vondrai out there sooner or later,” Finn said hopefully. “Or else she’ll come round herself.”

“Well, I hope she hurries up,” Rory muttered. “Where do you think they’ve gone?”

The Doctor chose not to answer that.

The silence that followed was eventually broken by Finn.

“I wonder what it’s like,” she mused.

“What?” Rory asked.

“To be a non-corporeal being who suddenly finds itself in a corporeal world.” She was clearly fascinated by the concept. “I mean, imagine what it would be like for us, if it happened the other way round! We’re used to being able to touch things, move them, feel sensations. What if we found ourselves in a non-corporeal environment? Nothing there to be touched, no way to touch it if there were. And no physical feelings. I mean, think how that would affect your understanding of something as basic as vocabulary...!”

“What do you mean?” Rory frowned.

“She means that humans talk about their emotions in terms of physical sensations,” the Doctor interjected. “You talk about *feeling* happy. *Touching* the sky. *Tasting* defeat. The *smell* of fear. The *sound* of panic. *Seeing* red. All terminology associated with phenomena experienced through the senses. If you don’t have physical sensations, you would never express yourself using that terminology, and you wouldn’t understand it if you heard it.”

“From a non-physical world, to a physical world, full of shapes and colours and sounds and sensations...” Finn was still trying to visualize it, imagine it. “If you came from somewhere like that, how would you go about interacting with an environment like this? Or understanding it? Where would you even *start*...?”

“That’s why Keeran was paralyzed for so long,” agreed the Doctor. “The Vespertilions hadn’t the faintest concept of physicality, or a physical universe. First they had to get their minds around what had happened. Culture shock, big time. Then they had to work out what to do with a body, to work out how *it* worked. If you’d never had a body before – quite apart from not knowing how to consciously move it – think of all the things you wouldn’t know. You wouldn’t know that it needed food and water. You’d have no reference points by which even to recognize them for what they were out of all the other strange things in this weird new environment. And you wouldn’t know about needing to sleep, or going to the toilet, or keeping yourself clean, or anything.”

“Some great images there, thanks, Doctor,” Rory informed him.

“Yes, but think what kind of mind you’d need to be able to take all those new concepts in, and then start to work with them,” said the Doctor, growing more enthusiastic as he analyzed the problem objectively. “A strong mind, an intelligent mind. Which means that sooner or later, you’d stop concentrating on what had happened, and start thinking about what you were going to do next.”

“Yeah, well, they’ve done that all right,” Rory muttered.

“The eye-flicking thing. Saccades,” said Finn, remembering. “Why do you think that’s going on?”

“The Vespertilions must have senses we can’t imagine. I think the visual input from the eyes into the brain blocks them in some way. During every saccade it’s being cut out. Perhaps that allows them to communicate more easily between themselves,” the Doctor theorized. “Keeran’s brain activity increased by two hundred per cent, remember?”

“There were two of them in him,” Rory pointed out.

“Yes, so they needed to communicate with each other. So they increased the periodicity of the saccades so they could talk to each other. Work out between themselves what was happening. And come up with their plan.”

“Which is?”

“Oh, didn’t I say?”

“No, Doctor,” said Finn plaintively, with an air of pointing out the obvious. “Mostly, on the whole, by and large – you *don’t* say. Not beforehand, anyway.”

The Doctor turned his head round as far as it would go, so that he could frown at her directly.

“Of course I do! Tell anybody anything, me.”

“Oooh, you fibber! You might be able to get away with that with a stranger, but this is *me* you’re talking to, remember?”

“Okay! All right! Yes!” the Doctor conceded sulkily.

“Look, shut up, you two, and tell me what’s going on,” Rory demanded.

“Sorry,” Finn apologized.

“Oh, don’t mind Rory,” the Doctor advised. “He always gets lost in thought because it’s such unfamiliar territory.”

“My current thinking,” said Rory with emphasis, “is that you’re not answering the question.”

“I’m still trying to get my head round what it must have been like,” Finn said. “Being bombarded with all that stuff. The ultimate sensory overload. If it was me, I think I would have gone mad.”

She and the Doctor were in tune, all right. The same thought struck them at the same instant, and they both twisted round as far as they were able, locking eyes along the length of the bench. The quality of the silence between them alerted Rory.

“What? What is it?”

The Doctor and Finn were still staring at each other.

“That’s exactly what’s happened,” said the Doctor. “It’s not their morals. It’s their minds. Unbalanced them. Literally sent them mad. That’s where they’ve gone!”

“Where?” Rory demanded.

“Showing others.” Finn was looking at the Doctor with dismay. “You mean – *that’s* what they’re going to do next?”

“What are you talking about?” Rory persisted.

“They don’t want to go back,” the Doctor said urgently. “They’re fixated on bringing other Vespertilions *here*...”

“But how can they do that?” Rory objected. “They haven’t got bodies of their own, so how could they...?” His voice trailed off into horrified silence as he mentally followed his own enquiry through to its logical conclusion.

“Exactly,” agreed the Doctor tensely. “They’d need ours.”

The next instant all of them froze, then whipped their heads round to stare at the door, from where there was the sound of someone trying to open it.

“Vondrai?” the Doctor called out.

“Yes. Who is that?” came the muffled reply.

“The Doctor. The door’s been locked. Can you open it?”

“Yes... Wait. I will be opening it momentarily.”

She was as good as her word. A few seconds later there was a click, and the door opened. Vondrai stood in the doorway, staring at them, her green eyes round with astonishment, a hand cradling one side of her head. Her purple crest was still flattened; she clearly wasn’t feeling at her best.

“What has been happening?” she said slowly. “Why is FTS Allaster attacking us? Attacking *me*? I have been his colleague for many years. Never is he behaving like this!”

“Vondrai, you’ve got to untie us, quickly!” the Doctor urged. “Allaster and Keeran – we’ve got to follow them!”

“Why?” Vondrai enquired. Her crest was a bit higher now. She began working on the Doctor’s bonds as she spoke.

“Look, it’s not Allaster who’s doing this. There’s a Vespertilion controlling him.” The Doctor saw Vondrai’s mouth opening to ask what a Vespertilion was, and hurriedly overrode her, leaping to his feet as soon as she had freed him.

“I know what he’s trying to do – what I don’t know is where he’s gone to do it. Although – wait!” A look of realization spread across the Doctor’s face, and he suddenly smacked his own forehead. “Oh, aren’t I *stupid*?”

“How very brave of you to invite comment,” said Finn, somewhat acidly. “But since you’ve advanced it as a theory, give reasons. And you might untie me while you’re at it?” Vondrai was already attending to Rory.

“Ah! Right! Yes!” The Doctor knelt and pulled at the bindings on her wrists. “Because I know not only what they’re going to do, but how. And that tells me where.” He straightened up, and Finn, now free, did the same.

“Where, then?”

He strode to the window and looked up. Finn and Rory followed him, while Vondrai continued to regard him with a perplexed expression.

“Up there,” said the Doctor, pointing. Finn and Rory followed the direction of his finger with their eyes. He was pointing toward the space elevator. “And we’ve got to follow them. Before we run out of time.”

“You cannot follow until the capsules are reaching the respective ends of the elevator cable,” Vondrai reminded him.

“Don’t worry – there’s a way,” the Doctor assured her. “Finn, Rory – TARDIS!” He started towards the door, then realized he still had questions he needed answered. “What exactly is up there, Vondrai? What kind of structure?”

“It is called the Platform,” she said. “It is containing the energy harvester technology that is feeding the solar energy from the Oculus to the Ocellus.”

“Artificial gravity, I assume?”

“Yes. Not in the capsules, but on the Platform, yes.”

“And what’s the physical layout of the Platform?”

“There is a small laboratory, an emergency survival capsule in case the elevator ceases to function and anyone is trapped there until repairs are carried out, and the Oculus chamber. This is where you think FTS Allaster is going to?”

“Yes,” said the Doctor. “So that’s where we need to be, too. Vondrai, one last thing – in the laboratory, up there. Has he got the equipment there to replicate the same experiment as the one that injured Keeran down here?”

“Yes. But why –?” Vondrai never got to finish her question. The Doctor, Finn and Rory were already gone.

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From the padded seat in which she had found herself strapped when she regained awareness, Amy sat in one corner of the elevator capsule, her hands tied behind her, and glowered at the two men similar strapped into seats against the opposite wall. They had ignored her return to consciousness and spent the whole time staring at each other in silence but evidently communicating throughout, their eyes flicking ceaselessly from side to side.

Other than the passenger seats, the capsule was empty, though it had been built to be large enough to carry quite big items of equipment as well as passengers, but it had four small viewing ports built into it, which had quickly enabled her to work out where she was. The two in the side walls were all right, and the one in the ceiling was presumably intended to show you how near you were to the top of the space elevator. She was less keen on the idea of the one in the centre of the floor – it would look a vertiginously long way down to the surface of Vespertilia from up here. She had quickly realized the purpose of the straps, too – up here, beyond the gravitational field of the planet, she would have been floating helplessly without them.

She realized the speed of the capsule was slowing; they must be nearing their destination. As if to confirm her guess, a bland, automated voice began to announce, “Platform docking in ten minutes. Platform docking in ten minutes. Prepare for embarkation integrity checks in five minutes. Prepare for embarkation integrity checks in five minutes.” Neither of the Vespertilions reacted. Amy decided she needed data.

“Hey, you two!”

Two pairs of flickering eyes turned in her direction.

“Look, I want to know,” she said loudly. “Why are we here? What are you going to do?”  
But the Vespertillions weren’t saying.



## Chapter 8

### *The Scenic Route*

“This is just like the old days,” Finn panted, keeping pace with Rory as they ran after the Doctor, heading through the hospital corridors for the store room where they had left the TARDIS, ignoring the curious stares of passers-by wondering what and where the emergency was.

“What do you mean?”

“Running. He used to run everywhere. All the time. Quite nostalgic, this.”

Ahead of them, the Doctor skidded to a halt in front of the store room door and threw it open as if about to launch himself straight into the TARDIS. But the launch was aborted. Instead he stood with one hand on each door jamb, staring into the interior.

“Doctor? What is it?” Finn demanded. Then she and Rory reached him and looked over his shoulder into the room. The empty room. The completely empty room.

The TARDIS was gone.

“But – where is she?” Finn asked in dismay.

“Somebody must have moved it,” Rory said. “But who?”

The Doctor was staring at the vacant space where the TARDIS had been from under lowered brows.

“Wrong question, Rory,” he said, working his jaw as if he had a nasty taste in his mouth.

“Then what’s the right question?”

“How. How did they move it? The TARDIS is bigger than this doorway.”

It was true, Rory realized. No-one could have physically carried the TARDIS out through this door; the opening was too narrow, too low.

“But – then, where - ?” he spluttered.

Finn was staring intently at the Doctor’s profile. There was something about the expression on his face... He was shocked, yes – but somehow she had the feeling he wasn’t surprised. Almost as if it was something he had been expecting at some point, but hadn’t realized it would be yet, would be now. She didn’t like the feeling it was giving her. Then he turned to look at her with unreadable eyes, and she liked it even less.

“Doctor...?”

“No time,” he said abruptly, without taking his eyes off her. “We’re going to have to go by the scenic route.”

“The scenic route?” Rory was still grappling with the absence of the TARDIS.

“The space elevator. Once they’re at the top, the other capsule’ll be down here. Come on!”

\*

Her hands still bound, Amy had been floated out of the elevator capsule by the escorting Vespertilions into an airlock; the sensation of being restored to normal – albeit artificial – gravity had been something of a relief. From there they had conducted her into what Vondrai would have been able to tell her was the laboratory.

The feature that first caught her attention was a rectangular window in the opposite wall, two feet deep and at about head height, through which she caught a glimpse of a room beyond. There was also a metal shutter that could presumably be used to cover the window. Both it and the door alongside, which evidently allowed access to that room, gave the impression of great solidity, as if both needed to offer a high degree of protection when they were closed.

But she didn't have the time to really take it in. The Keeran Vespertilion had taken the emitter tube from his pocket and was pointing it at her, and that demanded her immediate attention. She didn't know what the tube was, but clearly it posed a threat.

"Go there." It pointed to a spot in front of the other door. "Stay. Do nothing."

"What if I don't?" she challenged, brandishing her defiance at him.

"This will kill you. It touches you, it kills you. Do nothing."

She wanted to disobey, but there was a chilling flatness to his tone that conveyed complete conviction.

"The Doctor and Rory will come for me," she said, with a conviction of her own. "They'll follow you up here."

Even as she spoke, a tone sounded and an automated voice, just like the one in the elevator capsule, began to speak.

"Warning. Warning. Elevator in operation. Capsule One is departing. Repeat, Capsule One is departing. Capsule Two will dock in one hour and eleven minutes. Elevator in operation."

As the voice fell silent, Amy smiled triumphantly at the Vespertilions. "Told you so!"

The two men turned to face each other and communed for a moment. Then the Allaster Vespertilion turned back to her. It was much more coherent and fluent in its speech, she noticed; perhaps because its host's intelligence and range of knowledge was so much wider than Keeran's.

"Not important," it told her. "What needs to be done can be done in that time." It paused, and then added, "Whoever comes – the particle emitter can kill them also. Do as we say, or it will kill you."

\*

Like his wife before him, Rory was studying the view out of the nearest port in the elevator capsule. He was strapped into the seat next to Finn, who sat with her arms folded, studying the Doctor in his seat on the other wall with a slight frown. He had been uncharacteristically silent ever since they had begun their ascent, staring moodily at nothing for the entire journey thus far. . . Rory, sensitive to the atmosphere, glanced across and caught Finn's expression.

"What's wrong?" Instinctively he kept his voice low.

"I don't know. Something... I don't know. But somehow I've got the feeling he knows where the TARDIS has gone. Or why it's gone, anyway."

"So why wouldn't he tell us?"

Finn just shook her head.

"This" – Rory searched for the right description – "this connection you've got with him. That doesn't tell you anything?"

"It doesn't work like that. I've got memories and knowledge up to the time I last saw him. Nothing that's happened since then. We have to directly connect for that kind of transfer. I used to be able to tell what he was thinking, but I couldn't read his mind directly, if you get the difference. I can't pick his thoughts out of his mind from a distance just by wanting to, I mean. I wish I could." She continued to regard the Doctor with a troubled look.

"Having his memories in your head. I keep thinking how weird that must be," Rory observed.

"That's just one of the words," said Finn, with feeling. "A human mind couldn't contain all of it. Not safely. It happened once, to someone else... She did get the lot. And to save her life, he had to take away every bit of it. Including

her memories of him. All of them. A complete wipe, so she didn't know she'd ever known him. I was lucky. I've only got some. The first time was an accident, but the second time he did it deliberately. Gave me more. Stuff he wanted me to know."

Rory heard the slight emphasis on the word 'wanted' and instantly picked up on the implication.

"Then – there's some stuff you've got that he wouldn't want you to know?"

"I think I got quite a lot of memories that first time that he might not have bargained for. And I know that because some of them have surfaced from time to time. But I haven't told him that, and I'm not going to, either. Because there are probably more of them in there somewhere, still dormant for now, but who knows for how long? So I know a lot more about him than even he realizes. But even if he does realize, he won't say anything. Because he doesn't. Say anything. If nothing is said, nothing has to be answered."

Rory nodded. That was, after all, exactly the way the Doctor dealt with things.

\*

On the Platform, from the corner of the laboratory, Amy watched as the two Vespertilions worked. For close to an hour they had been building something, some kind of device, but even though it was clearly almost complete its purpose was still a mystery to her. As she had on several occasions already, she looked around the room unavailingly for an escape route, but there were only two doors – the one they had come in by, and the one in front of which she stood – and she didn't fancy her chances of getting through either of them with her hands tied behind her back and the Keeran Vespertilion so ready to use the emitter tube, within easy reach beside him on the workbench.

"What's in the other room?" she asked. No reaction. She decided to risk the couple of steps she would need to take her to the window. Instantly the Keeran Vespertilion looked at her and moved a hand toward the emitter tube.

"Do nothing," it repeated menacingly.

"I'm not," Amy retorted. "I'm just looking."

The Vespertilion stared at her for a moment, then decided she was telling the truth, and returned to its task.

In point of fact there wasn't much to see through the thick glass. From the centre of the ceiling what looked like a thick metal tube about three feet in length pointed down to a similar tube coming up from the floor, their two mouths precisely aligned. And that was all. Other than the two tubes, the room, though spacious in its dimensions, was completely bare. But, like the door and the shutter, there was an overwhelming impression that it had been built of very strong materials, as if it needed to house something that the rest of the Platform had to be shielded from.

The Oculus. Amy realized that what she was looking at must be the Oculus, the Eye of Vespertilia that periodically harvested energy from Crepuscolo and transmitted it down to the Ocellus in Sephevayim, far below.

She looked back at the Vespertilions again. Every instinct she had was screaming at her to escape, but what was the point? With no elevator capsule available, there was no way off the Platform. She could only hope that she was right, that the Doctor was coming. And Rory. And Finn.

She must try to find out what the Vespertilions were doing. Whatever it was, it must be to do with the Oculus, or why would they have come here? She looked into the Oculus chamber again, but it offered no more clues than before. She stepped back, and caught sight of a small panel in the wall below the window, about six inches square, of a similar design to the shutter. It was positioned directly in line with the gap between the two metal tubes inside. She wondered what it was for.

"Move." She realized the Keeran Vespertilion was addressing her, and turned to find it aiming the emitter tube at her. "Move there." It was pointing into the corner of the room nearest the Oculus chamber door. "Move now!"

"Okay, okay, I'm going, all right?" she muttered rebelliously, and obeyed. She studied the device as the two men transferred it from the workbench on which it had been built onto a moveable platform, which they pushed toward the wall of the Oculus chamber. The device had a tapering nozzle; at the wall, the Allaster Vespertilion slid aside the small panel to reveal a cylindrical hole, the purpose of which became clear when the two men jockeyed the platform into position so that the nozzle slid into it.

“Look, you might as well tell me,” she huffed. “What is it you’re doing?”

“We make a door,” said the Allaster Vespertilion, stepping back from the device to look at her. If you could call it ‘at’, with that ceaseless flicking of the eyes.

“What do you mean, a door?”

“For the others to come.”

“You mean – others like you? To come here?” It dawned on Amy what the Vespertilion was proposing. “But – you can only exist here by using other people’s bodies!”

“That is true.”

Amy stared at him, aghast. “You’re deliberately going to use our bodies, and keep our minds captive inside them? Against our will, like you did with me? How can you even think of doing that?”

It was Allaster’s eyes that were turned upon her, but not Allaster’s intelligence that looked at her through them.

“I can look at the mind of this one,” it said. “This one remembers history. Your race has kept many captives. Other creatures on your world of origin –” It hesitated, searching for the word it wanted.

Amy frowned, trying to work out what it might be trying to say. “Animals, do you mean?”

“Yes. Animals. Captive, not free. Against their will. Why should not we? And even your own kind. Captive, not free. We have no – animals... But making others of our own kind captive? This we have never done. Does that not make us better than you?”

Amy wanted to protest that that kind of thing no longer happened, that mankind had learned better. But she got no further than opening her mouth, because she couldn’t. Because it wasn’t true. Even in the twenty-first century animals on Earth were still kept captive for man’s use, confined and used to produce food or to be food, to be used for scientific experimentation. None of it at the animals’ will. And – the Vespertilion was right – even people. In that same twenty-first century, slavery of various kinds and for various purposes still took place, even if people didn’t want to think about it, looked away, shut it out. Because – she was forced to admit it to herself – there would always be men who were willing to dominate others and force them to perform acts against their will.

But at least there was one thing she could say, in spite of that.

“But it’s *wrong*,” she said forcefully. “Whatever else, it’s *wrong*! Don’t you have consciences?”

The Vespertilion stared at her blankly; its reply – the manner of it – chilled her to the bone.

“What is a conscience?” it asked, as if the answer was of no possible interest.

“Something inside you that *tells* you when something is wrong,” she said desperately. “Like a voice that no-one else can hear but you. Tells you what you should do, and what you shouldn’t do. Tells you when something *shouldn’t* be done. Not *to* anybody, not *by* anybody!”

The Vespertilion stared at her, eyes flicking without expression.

“We hear no voices inside,” it said at last. “We will decide what is wrong, not you. Now be silent. We must complete our task.”

## Chapter 9

### Setting 42

“Platform docking in ten minutes. Platform docking in ten minutes. Prepare for embarkation integrity checks in five minutes. Prepare for embarkation integrity checks in five minutes.”

Finn had looked up for the source of the voice, but when the automated message ceased she returned her eyes to the Doctor, arms folded in the body language of rejection, his chin resting sullenly on his chest, his brows lowered. She wondered what it was that was having such an effect on him. Perhaps she should –

But before she got any further with the thought, the Doctor shot bolt upright – which wasn’t quite as easy as it would have been before they’d reached the altitude where downward gravity and upward centrifugal force had begun to cancel each other out, producing weightlessness – and his face was no longer sullen, but animated.

“Sonic!” he exclaimed.

“Hello – somebody’s had an idea,” Finn deduced, alerted. “Sonic what?”

“Yours. I need it.” The Doctor unstrapped himself, an action that immediately resulted in the automated voice announcing, “Warning. Warning. Passenger safety harness disengaged. Passenger safety harness disengaged. Warning. Warning...”

“Oh, shut up,” the Doctor muttered, as he pulled himself from his seat around to Finn’s by means of the railing attached to the wall, evidently provided for that very purpose. He floated into the seat beside her and strapped himself in, silencing the voice.

Finn, meanwhile, had extracted her sonic, and offered it to him. He got out his own and used it to make some sort of adjustment to hers. Then he used hers to do the same thing to his before handing it back to her with a triumphant smile.

“There – that should do it,” he announced happily.

“Do what?” Rory asked.

The Doctor simply smiled smugly.

“What have you done?” Finn asked, examining her sonic. It looked just the same to her.

“Oh, just tweaked one of the settings,” the Doctor said, gesturing with a positively theatrical casualness.

Finn regarded him levelly. “Watch out – he’s gone wrists and elbows again,” she remarked. “If he’s wriggling that badly it’s a sure sign he’s preening.”

“So what *have* you done, Doctor?” Rory persisted.

“Look, don’t pander to him when he’s doing his ‘*I’m the most brilliant mind in the room*’ thing. It just makes him worse,” Finn advised dryly. But it was difficult not to react to the Doctor’s ill-concealed excitement. Whatever he’d come up with, it must be quite something, to put that gleam into his eye.

But then, to stop the Vespertilions, it would need to be.

\*

“Well, this is nice and cosy, isn’t it?” said the Doctor, rubbing his hands enthusiastically and spraying a smile around the semi-circle at his back composed of Finn, Amy and Rory. Ignoring the particle emitter tube the Keeran Vespertilion was pointing in their direction, he looked round the laboratory, summing up the situation. The Allaster Vespertilion was staring at him.

“Why have you come?” it grated.

“To stop you, of course. I can’t let you do what you’re planning – you do realize that?”

“They’ve been making some kind of device, Doctor,” Amy interjected urgently.

“Oh, yes, I know. I can see it,” the Doctor agreed, nodding at the device inserted into the opening in the wall.

“What is it?” Finn asked.

“That,” said the Doctor, “is a bigger version of what Keeran’s waving at us. An Allastron particle emitter. Precisely aligned, you’ll have noticed, so that when the Oculus is operating, it can release a stream of Allastron particles into the next energy pulse. A situation which our friends here have created with the intention of opening a much bigger and more stable portal than the one they came through. So that all *their* friends can come through and take a look at what’s on this side.”

“Oh, I get it,” said Finn. “They’re doing the ‘*if you build it, they will come*’ thing.”

“Exactly,” the Doctor nodded.

The Vespertilion stared at them for a few seconds, as if it was a system that had hung because it had received an input it couldn’t compute. Then it abandoned the attempt.

“The energy pulse will be generated. Two minutes after that it will pass through the Oculus chamber. At the correct instant the emitter will fire into the pulse. All controls are preset. There is a countdown,” it said. “You can do nothing to stop it.” It pointed to a digital timer on the top of the particle emitter; at that instant it read 07:00, but immediately flipped over to 06:59... 06:58... 06:57...

“Oh, yes, we can,” the Doctor contradicted roundly. “Finn – sonic at the ready!” He cast her a meaningful look; she got the message. Moving simultaneously, they both produced their sonics and pointed them at the emitter.

Instantly the Keeran Vespertilion threatened them with its emitter tube.

“Stop,” it ordered, stepping forward. The Doctor appeared shocked as his sonic was snatched away. The Allaster Vespertilion came forward and took Finn’s from her at the same moment.

“Give that back!” the Doctor demanded, sounding uncharacteristically disturbed.

“What does this device do?” asked the Allaster Vespertilion.

“Lots of things. It can increase the volume of energy discharges,” said the Doctor, apparently giving away gratuitous information, “but I was going to use it to stop the discharge entirely. You mustn’t do this!”

The Vespertilions studied the sonics for a moment, then looked at each other, silently communicating.

“We will increase the volume of energy from the emitter,” the Allaster Vespertilion announced. “The portal will be bigger. How is it done?”

“I’m not telling you,” said the Doctor. He leaned closer to Finn and whispered – rather too loudly for Amy’s liking – “*It’s all right. As long as they don’t use Setting 42 before they turn the emitter on, they can’t do anything...*”

The Keeran Vespertilion clearly overheard, and instantly turned to his colleague. After a few seconds of conference the Allaster Vespertilion announced, “Setting 42. This is what we will use.”

“No!” objected the Doctor, waving his hands in a panicked fashion. “You mustn’t do that! Whatever you do, don’t use Setting 42!”

Rory and Amy stared at the Doctor for an instant; Amy got there first.

“Doctor, shut up!” she shouted. “You’re giving the game away!”

Rory looked at her, puzzled; she gave him a meaningful look, and then he got it, too.

“Yes, shut up, Doctor!” he said – gamely playing along, but not without some private satisfaction at being able to use those particular words, Finn thought. “Don’t tell them anything else!” His voice was perhaps a little stilted, but the Vespertilions were not practised at interpreting either voice intonations or any other kinds of human responses. The Allaster Vespertilion wore an air of triumph.

“We do not need anything else,” it said. “You will go now.”

“Go where?”

“The Oculus chamber. You cannot interfere from there.” An almost maniacal gleam shone in Allaster’s eyes. “All must know that a place like this exists. All must be able to come, to know, to experience. It is their right. You would prevent that. *You* must be stopped.”

“Oh, that’s bad,” the Doctor muttered. “Bad, bad, bad.”

“Why?” asked Rory. “Beyond the reasons we already know about, that is. Is the solar energy dangerous?”

“Not as long as you don’t touch it, or stare at it.”

“Then what?”

“They’re going to shoot a beam of Allastron particles in there, remember? When they hit the the energy pulse, the particles will diffuse throughout the chamber. And if we’re in there, us as well.”

“Then – we’ll all die?” Amy stared at him.

The Doctor nodded. Amy rounded on the Vespertilions. “And you said you were better than us!” Her scorn was withering.

Neither Vespertilion deigned to reply. The Keeran Vespertilion raised the emitter tube and pressed it to Amy’s head.

“In,” it said, without emotion.

There was no choice. They were herded in; once Finn, the Doctor and Rory were inside, Amy was thrust in so roughly that she would have lost her footing had Rory not caught her. He immediately turned to the task of untying her. Both Vespertilions regarded them from the doorway. Then, with a remorseless movement, the Allaster Vespertilion reached forward and pulled the door shut.

“You mustn’t use Setting 42!” the Doctor yelled; again, he was ignored. There was a metallic sound as the door was locked and sealed.

The Doctor leaped toward the window; the others followed, craning their heads to see into the laboratory. Finn looked at the digital countdown on the emitter. It read 02:54.

“What are we going to do?” she asked. She couldn’t believe that they were about to die. The Doctor wasn’t going to let that happen – it was impossible. He was the *Doctor*...!

“Don’t worry. It’s not what we’re going to do – it’s what they’re going to do,” said the Doctor. “Watch.”

In the laboratory, the two Vespertilions were raising the sonic screwdrivers and pointing them at the particle emitter.

“You went to a lot of trouble to get them to use Setting 42. What’s it going to do? Destroy the device?” Amy asked.

“Er – no,” said the Doctor carefully.

“Then what –?”

As she spoke, the Vespertilions activated the sonic screwdrivers. A huge flash of white blinded everyone for a moment, making them all instinctively turn away to protect their eyes. As soon as it was gone the Doctor was first back to the window.

“Oh.” He sounded positively disconcerted. “Now, *that* wasn’t supposed to happen...”

Finn looked through the window. Allaster and Keeran had both completely vanished.

Along with Rory, Amy, too, was back at the window. “What *has* happened? Where are they?”

“I don’t know,” said the Doctor. He looked utterly mystified. “All that should have happened was that the Vespertilions were sent back to their own dimension. Leaving Allaster and Keeran here. Safe and well. Stopping the countdown and letting us out of here. That’s what was *supposed* to happen.”

“Then what *did* happen? Where are they?”

“I don’t know,” repeated the Doctor blankly.

\*

Allaster opened his eyes, and blinked. They felt very tired and heavy, as if he’d been over-using them in the recent past. But if he had, he couldn’t remember why...

Nor did he know why he was lying on the floor of his laboratory. As he sat up, he realized he was holding something in his hand. A small device of some kind, with four small clamp-like appendages at one end around what looked as if it would be a small green light when the device was activated. He didn’t recognize it. Where had it come from?

The sound of a movement behind him distracted him. Still seated on the floor, he swivelled round to see Keeran, raising himself to a sitting position, and with a similar device in his hand, though that one was slimmer, paler, and had a blue tip, not a green one. The two men looked at each other, confused.

“FTS Allaster?” Keeran sounded tentative, as if he couldn’t understand where he was. “What’s happened? Why am I here?” He winced, screwed his eyes shut, and put a hand to his temple. “My eyes! They’re so sore... What’s been going on?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Allaster admitted. “I can’t seem to remember...”

They both looked round as the door opened. Vondrai was there, Raichel at her shoulder.

“Keeran!” Raichel exclaimed. “You’re here! You’re” – she realized – “you’re all right again!”

“What do you mean, all right? I don’t understand. How did I get here? What’s been happening?”

“I must admit I’d rather like to know that, too,” said Allaster, getting clumsily to his feet. Vondrai, her crest fully erected to reflect her relief, hurried across to help him.

“You have been with the Doctor?” she asked quickly.

“The Doctor?” Allaster frowned, trying to remember.

“He was here. He was following you. The Vespertilions.”

“The Vespertilions? What are you talking about?”

“Look, both of you need to sit down and have some sort of drink,” said Raichel decisively, one arm round her husband, who was looking as confused and fragile as Allaster felt. “So let’s do that and we can sort out the whys and wherefores while we’re doing it.”

Allaster recognized a force of nature when he saw it. “Yes, excellent idea,” he agreed, summoning up a smile for both her and Vondrai.

“What about this?” Keeran asked, gesturing with the sonic he was holding. “What do I do with it?”

“Perhaps the Doctor will know,” Vondrai suggested.

“Yes,” Allaster mused. “Yes, perhaps he will. Let’s leave them here, and ask him when we see him.” He took Keeran’s device and placed it, along with his, on the laboratory bench.

“Vondrai – about the experiment. The Allastron particles –”

At that instant a most peculiar sensation filled his brain. As if he’d had hold of something that had just been swept away from him. An idea he’d just forgotten. Knowledge he’d had and had suddenly lost...

The sensation passed, and he found himself staring at Vondrai. “The Allastron particles,” he repeated. “We must never run that experiment again. Ever.”

“No,” agreed Vondrai, but in an abstracted way, as if she, too, was searching her mind for something now absent.

“Why not?” Raichel asked.

Allaster looked at her blankly. “I don’t know...” he said slowly. “I just know – we mustn’t.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I still think you need that drink,” Raichel said, shrugging the matter off. “Come on!” She took her husband’s arm and propelled him toward the door.

Allaster, still puzzled by that peculiar sensation of loss, allowed Vondrai to usher him in Keeran and Raichel’s wake. He stopped for a moment, and surveyed the otherwise empty laboratory.

“Very strange,” he muttered. Then Vondrai urged him on, and the door shut behind them.

Moments later a hand reached down, and picked up the two sonic screwdrivers.

## Chapter 10

### *”I’m still looking after you...”*

“Look, we’ve got to find a way out of here,” Rory said sharply. “Allaster said the countdown was preset, it couldn’t be stopped. As long as we’re in here, he’s right. That means their plan’s still going ahead. Unless we can get out we’re still going to get Allastron particles sprayed all over us, and the portal into the Vespertillions’ dimension is still going to open.”

“I was afraid you were going to get round to that,” said the Doctor.

“The countdown’s about to go to two minutes,” Finn informed him, trying to ignore the dryness of her mouth. “So how do we get out?” Looking at the Doctor’s face, she was terribly afraid she knew the answer. And from the way he was looking at her, he knew she knew.

At that moment they heard a hum, rapidly swelling in volume. The next moment, a pulse of light burst out of the metal tube above and streamed down into its partner below, illuminating the whole chamber in an unforgiving white glare for a couple of seconds. The Oculus had sprung into action, harvesting solar energy from Crepuscolo and transmitting it down to the Ocellus below.

“Don’t look at it!” said the Doctor sharply. “You could cause irretrievable damage to your eyes!”

“The damage’ll be a lot worse than that if we don’t do something about it,” Amy retorted. “So answer the question. How are we getting out?”

The Doctor looked up at her from under his fringe. “We aren’t,” he said flatly. “The sonics are gone. There’s nothing here we can use. We’re trapped. The next energy pulse will be in two minutes, and there’s nothing we can do to stop it.”

Amy and Rory stared at him in horror as they realized he was serious. It suddenly came to Rory that they were all clustered directly in front of the cylindrical channel from the laboratory in which the nozzle of the particle emitter sat, waiting to do its work, and he instinctively leaped back, pulling Amy with him.

“Finn, get away from there! You’re right in front of the emitter!” he snapped. She obeyed – as if it was going to make any difference – but, like the Doctor, she continued to stare at the inimical black hole in the wall. Amy and Rory were desperately scanning the otherwise completely empty chamber in dismay, their eyes searching everywhere, as if that

could somehow conjure up something they could use as a shield to deflect or absorb the Allastron particles. But there was nothing. Except....

Finn felt an old memory quivering in her head, coming up to the surface. Not one of her memories, of course... When it materialized in her mind, she looked quickly at the Doctor, while the other two still desperately sought for a solution. She knew what he knew. That there was only going to be one way.

He wasn't looking at anyone; he was motionless, regarding the black hole from which their fate would inexorably issue, his eyes half-hooded by their lids. Then he spun round, drawing everyone's gaze to him.

"Actually, we *do* have something in here that'll be dense enough to block Allastron particles," he announced.

Amy and Rory stared at him blankly, but he saw Finn looking at him with complete comprehension.

"Well, what? What?" Rory stuttered.

"A body," said the Doctor succinctly.

There was a brief silence, as his meaning sank in.

"But you said if Allastron particles penetrate human tissue it's fatal," Rory said, beginning to understand, but not wanting to.

"Yes, I did," the Doctor agreed.

"But that means –!" Amy began.

The Doctor cut her short. "Yes, it does. So you three are going to get over into the corner, as far out of the way as you can. And you're going to do it right now!"

"But, Doctor, what'll happen to *you*?" Amy demanded, her eyes swollen with anxiety.

"Oh, lots of interesting things, I should think," he parried. He could feel Finn's eyes on him, assessing his evasions to Amy. He clapped his hands a couple of times, and raised his voice slightly. "Come along, Pond! Not a moment to waste!"

"You'll die, won't you?" Amy challenged him. "Doctor, you *can't*! You mustn't! There's got to be another way!"

"Yes, well, wouldn't it be lovely if there was?" the Doctor agreed, a slight edge in his voice. "But there isn't. Not in the time we've got. So – Rory, get Amy into the corner and keep her there. Finn – you, too. *Hurry*, everyone! Time's nearly up!"

Rory nodded silently, and put both arms around his wife. Not to embrace her, but to restrain her. As soon as she realized what he was doing she instinctively began to resist, but her arms were firmly pinned by his, and even though she tried to plant her feet she couldn't stop him pulling her toward the corner of the chamber, well away from the path the particle beam would take.

"*Doctor!*" she wailed.

"Hurry up, Finn," said the Doctor, gesturing at her while still looking at Amy and Rory. "Only a few seconds left!"

"Seven, to be precise," Finn confirmed, from behind him.

The Doctor hardly had time to register the sudden widening of Rory's and Amy's eyes before a pair of hands was planted firmly in the centre of his back and he was shoved violently forward.

Taken by surprise, he lost his footing and collided heavily with Rory and Amy; the three of them went down in a tangled heap on the floor. It took valuable time to extricate themselves; the Doctor rolled aside and, still full-length on the floor, propping himself up on his forearms, he looked at Finn. But it was far too late to do anything.

She was standing in front of the emitter, still half-turned toward her friends. In the last couple of seconds that were left, her eyes sought the Doctor's and fixed on them. Then, incredibly, her mouth curved in a smile before she stepped decisively into the path between the emitter and the Oculus tubes.

The energy pulse burst from the top tube and travelled downwards to be swallowed by the receiving tube. At that instant, the particle beam fired. But it couldn't reach its target. Finn was in the way.

She was enveloped in a pulsing blue glow that grew in intensity and luminosity, making her body a blurred dark outline against the increasing glare of light. It grew brighter and brighter, almost too bright to look at; the Doctor raised a hand to shade his eyes, was aware of Amy and Rory doing the same, as they tried to see through the blinding light.

At last it began to subside, receding from unbearable to a glare, a glow, a blue outline – and then, nothing.

The Doctor, like Amy and Rory, remained transfixed for a few seconds, sprawled on the floor, staring at the girl still standing motionless in front of the emitter.

Slowly, she began to turn round to face them again. Her face was blank, expressionless, the eyes unfocused. Then she seemed to see them again. The faintest hint of a smile tugged momentarily at the corners of her mouth.

“Wow,” she said, slowly, quietly.

Then she staggered, and went down.

The spell was broken. The Doctor leapt to his feet; Rory levered himself off the floor and helped Amy up. The two of them were on the Doctor’s heels as he hurtled over to Finn, skidding onto his knees by her and gripping her shoulders to help her as she struggled to rise, her weight resting on one arm, the palm flattened against the floor. Their eyes met.

“Oh, Finn,” said the Doctor, sadly.

She summoned up a smile, momentarily interrupted by a wince and a gasp of pain before it was resumed.

“Well, what did you expect?” she challenged, her voice a hoarse whisper. “Protégé, remember? This is one of the things a protégé does. Imitates her mentor. Does what he’d do.”

She switched her gaze for a moment to Rory and Amy, then back to the Doctor.

“I had the most incredible time with you,” she told him, her voice gaining strength, though she panted a little as she spoke. “Then I lost you. Did you really think I was going to let that happen to Amy and Rory, if there was something I could do about it?” She coughed. “Remember what Jack told you on Kvitverden? ‘*Not risking you if there’s an alternative.*’ This time, I was it. You’re running out of regenerations. Couldn’t let you do it.”

Then she sagged against him, turning in his grasp so that her left shoulder was supported by the right side of his chest; he pulled her head back to rest against his right shoulder, and held it there.

“Doctor? What can we do? There must be something we can do!” Amy pleaded, her eyes overbright. Rory, his face a picture of distress, remained silent, but never took his eyes off Finn.

“She’s absorbed all the Allastron particles,” said the Doctor. “Every cell in her body, soaked in them. The human body can’t take that much. Not and live.”

“Oh, Finn!” Amy whispered. She reached out and grabbed Finn’s hand where it lay limply in her lap.

Finn gave her a smile.

“Well, somebody had to do it,” she said, with a feeble attempt at a shrug. “I wasn’t going to let it be *him*.” She moved her head slightly against the Doctor’s chest. “*Or* Rory! Your boys, Amy! Personally, I don’t think you can spare either of them. Do you?”

Amy couldn’t find the words to reply. She just squeezed Finn’s hand, while a tear slid down one cheek.

“What are we going to do, Doctor?” Rory asked in a low voice, still with that deeply troubled look on his face.

“He already said,” Finn reminded him, and coughed, wincing again. The Doctor tightened his grip around her shoulders. “There isn’t anything you can do. Keep up, Rory!” She winked at him.

“Actually, I didn’t say that,” the Doctor corrected her, almost casually.

Three pairs of eyes abruptly locked onto his face.

“I only said you couldn’t absorb that much energy and live,” he remarked.

“But –” Rory began, then stopped, utterly confused.

“What d’you mean, Doctor?” Amy probed quickly.

The Doctor gave Finn’s shoulder another squeeze, and smiled down at her.

“Don’t give up just yet, Finn.” Then he said the words that made her eyes widen. “*I’m still looking after you.*”

There was a brief silence. Then Rory spoke.

“Er, Doctor...” he said slowly, in the tone of one who has reached the stage of being beyond surprise. The Doctor looked round quickly, following the direction of his gaze, and heard Amy’s indrawn breath as she did the same.

Behind them, where there had been nothing and no-one, there was now something and someone. Or, rather, two somethings and a someone.

All of them familiar to the Doctor.

The first ‘something’ was the TARDIS.

The second 'something' was a large mirror, ten feet tall and six feet wide, in an ornate gilt frame.

And the 'someone' was a man, slightly built and who looked to be in late middle-age, with a gentle, kindly expression.

"Ah," said the Doctor. "There you are. I was expecting you about now." He glanced at the TARDIS for a moment, then turned his attention back to the newcomer. "So *you* took the TARDIS... And I suppose you took Allaster and Keeran, too. To prevent them stopping the particle emitter. Was it absolutely necessary to do it this way?" His tone held an edge of anger.

"Do you think I would have done it otherwise, Doctor?" the man asked, hints of both reproof and regret in his tone. "Had you been able to use the TARDIS to get here earlier than you did, that would have changed the course of events. As would any intervention that disabled the particle emitter. This – outcome" – he chose the word with precision – "was necessary."

"Really?" the Doctor challenged. He held Finn closer for a moment, feeling the pain pulsing in her body. "Was it really?"

"If someone needs an operation to save their life, you know they will suffer a temporary degree of pain. But you also know that when the pain passes, they will be well and happy again."

"I know. But I still don't have to like the process," the Doctor muttered rebelliously.

"But now the TARDIS is returned," the other observed, changing the subject with a slight smile. "You'll be needing it very shortly. And there are these," he added, extending his hand. The Doctor's expression changed when he saw what was being offered.

"Ah! Thank you! I was wondering how I was going to get them back!" He reached out and took the two sonic screwdrivers. "And what about Keeran and Allaster? What did you do with them?" He thrust his own sonic into his inside breast pocket as he spoke, then tucked Finn's into its usual place in her gilet. She briefly smiled her gratitude, but her eyes didn't leave the newcomer.

"They are safe, and have been returned to Vespertilia," the man confirmed. "As have the two Vespertilians to their own dimension. And Allaster will never conduct that particular experiment again, I can assure you of that. Both this Vespertilia, and the other, and all their inhabitants, will be safe."

"Good," the Doctor approved. "Excellent."

"Look, Doctor – who is this?" Amy demanded.

"Diakonos," said Finn. Amy and Rory looked at her; she and the stranger were smiling at each other. "That's the Diakonos."

"Fionnula and the Doctor and I are old friends," said the Diakonos, turning his smile on Amy and Rory. "But I'm pleased to meet you also, Rory and Amelia."

"Hang on," said Rory, lifting one forefinger into the air. "How do you know who we –"

"Oh, never mind that now," said the Doctor, abruptly cutting across him. Rory sighed silently and lowered the finger.

The Doctor looked at the Diakonos. "We probably don't have much time. We ought to get things moving."

The Diakonos nodded. He came to kneel alongside Finn, putting out a hand to touch her shoulder briefly.

"I've come to help you, Fionnula," he said. "I've brought the Mirror. Be strong, for just a little longer."

"What *is* that mirror?" Amy demanded, impatient for an explanation.

"It's called the Mirror of the Soul," the Diakonos told her.

"That doesn't tell me anything," Amy complained. "What does it *do*? How's it going to help Finn?"

"A mirror reflects what it sees," the Diakonos said. "This Mirror has the capacity to see, to reflect, this entire universe. Two universes, this one, and that one, separated by a mere plane of atoms, Amelia. What if a single step could take someone from this universe into that one?" He raised an interrogative eyebrow, as if to say, *What then...?*

"What is this? Alice, *Through the Looking Glass*?" Finn jested, weakly.

"Yes! Yes, that's it exactly!" the Doctor confirmed, excitedly. "Alice! *Through the Looking Glass*! A whole mirrored universe to explore. An entire universe, just for you, Finn! Well, actually, not just you," he amended. "You'll see..."

"I don't think I'm going to have much time for exploring," Finn commented regretfully.

"No! No, no, no, no! You don't understand!" the Doctor said quickly.

“Let me take her, Doctor,” said the Diakonos. “You have things to say to each other.”

The Doctor nodded. The Diakonos knelt and took his place, supporting Finn in his arms, smiling reassuringly at her as he did so. The Doctor shifted alongside, still kneeling, focused on Finn.

She, however, was looking up at the Diakonos. “I told you I would,” she said, almost triumphantly.

“You did, Fionnula,” he agreed. “And you have. I never doubted you.”

“What are you talking about?” Amy demanded.

“He once asked Finn if she’d give her life for me,” said the Doctor quietly.

Finn looked at him sharply, almost with shock. “You *knew*?”

“I heard you. And I knew you meant it.”

As she stared at him, he leaned forward and took her face between his hands.

“Listen, Finn,” he said, eyes locked on hers. “You’re going to be all right. I’ve made sure you’ll get your reward. And because you’ll get yours, I’ll get mine.”

A spasm of pain convulsed her. “I don’t understand...” she said, when she was able to speak again. All at once her voice sounded weak, strained.

“Listen to me,” said the Doctor. “Listen to me. All those years, all those centuries, generating so much guilt for so many things. And it started to get too much for me. Started to overtake who I was. And it was so lonely, in that place! But then there you were, with my mind in yours. Suddenly there was someone else who understood! *Really* understood, in a way nobody else ever could... And never blamed me, never criticized, just encouraged. Perhaps it was selfish of me – no,” he amended, being unusually honest both with himself and with her, “it *was* selfish of me, to make you carry some of that same burden. But it wasn’t so lonely that way. Even though you weren’t with me all the time. I knew you were there, somewhere, knowing, *understanding*. And I knew you were a *good* person. A giver, not a taker. But *I* took. And I went on taking. Taking what you were giving me. Because I wanted to. Because it helped me.”

“Then I’m glad,” she smiled.

“See? You see?” the Doctor demanded, gripping her face more tightly. “Still giving, even now! And I didn’t give back, the way you deserved!”

She contrived to shake her head slightly, between his imprisoning hands.

“So wrong about that, Doctor! You gave me so *much*! I’d never be able to thank you for what you gave me. So many things! Wonderful things! Never.”

The Doctor bowed his head and shook his mane of hair in her face, then looked up and focused on her eyes with renewed urgency.

“Listen. Listen to me, Finn. I knew what was coming. And I was angry! *So* angry! But you made it better. You just kept on caring, all the time. Kept trying to make the burden bearable. Kept on being a good, kind person. Perhaps one of the kindest people I’ve ever known. So if anyone deserves a reward, it’s you! And I’ve made sure you’re going to get one. I’m still looking after you. And as from now, I’m going to keep on doing it.”

She didn’t understand what he was telling her, and she was beginning to feel desperate.

“Doctor – don’t you remember the last thing you said? Before you regenerated? I heard you! You said ‘*I don’t want to go.*’ I didn’t want you to go! But this is different. I’m dying! I can’t regenerate. River said” – she broke off to cough, and winced – “River said, ‘*Everything starts somewhere.*’ So everything ends somewhere, too. And for me, it ends here.” She winced again, and caught her breath. “The pain – it’s not so bad yet, but it’s getting worse. It’s fluctuating, but each time... Before it gets too bad – I *do* want to go!” She was almost pleading with him.

The Doctor released her head from between his hands. “Of course you do,” he agreed, almost complacently. “Why wouldn’t you? When you find out where you’re going. And who with,” he concluded, cryptically.

She looked at him, puzzled, then looked up at the Diakonos. He smiled.

“On Eutychia, you wished for the Doctor’s happiness,” he reminded her. Then he went on, “And he wished for yours.”

“Mine?” Finn echoed wonderingly, looking back at the Doctor. “*Did* you?”

“The other side of the Mirror,” he said, locking eyes with her. “What could possibly be there that would give you happiness? What would it make you happiest to find there, Finn? Who would it make you happiest to see?”

As the first hints of his meaning began to percolate into her dying brain, her mouth fell open in astonishment. Was she understanding him correctly? Could what he seemed to be telling her *possibly* be true?

“I asked you once if you would give your life for the Doctor,” said the Diakonos. “And you have. For him and for others. Just as he himself would do. But I did not say that doing so would necessarily mean he would lose you. Or you, him. You said you would give your life *for* him. That time has come.”

Finn struggled to comprehend. “What do you mean?”

“There are things that must be done,” the Diakonos told her. “The Doctor will tell you.”

“Yes,” the Doctor agreed. “Things. To be done... First of all, you’ve got to write a note, Finn.”

“To whom?” she asked, puzzled.

“To me. *Your* me. To stop me coming to look for you when I realize you’re gone.” He leapt to his feet and held up a finger. “Wait there! I’ll get you something to write on.” He vanished into the TARDIS, then stuck his head round the door and waved the same finger in her direction. “And with.” The head withdrew, then he was back, brandishing the finger again. “Both!”

This time, he really vanished. Finn, Amy and Rory all looked at each other with mirrored expressions of resignation tinged with amusement; even the Diakonos smiled.

Only seconds later the Doctor came bursting back out of the TARDIS, with a small writing pad and a pen.

“Sorry! I had to find exactly the right pad of paper...” he apologized.

“Why does it matter which pad of paper you use?” Amy demanded. The Doctor shot her a look that seemed to encompass the Diakonos, also.

“Oh, it matters,” he said cryptically. Then he turned to Finn. “Anyway... Right! Here we are! Pen and paper! So now you can write,” he beamed at her, handing them over.

“What do I write? What am I telling you?” she asked, her brow contracted in a frown of extreme puzzlement.

“Oh, I know exactly what you’ve got to say. Write this. *‘You’re reading this in 2020, aren’t you? Well, listen carefully! A unique date in Swedish history.’* His peripheral vision picked up the swift glance Amy and Rory exchanged as they recognized the words, but ignored it, and kept dictating. “*May be’* – that’s ‘may’ and ‘be’, two separate words – *‘the month this year, and the rest adds up. But I don’t need to tell you not to tell me yet! Trust me? Then don’t go there. Not until you see the right double-tap.’*”

Finn’s brow was furrowed with perplexity. “What does it mean?”

“It means you’re saving me from trying to make a terrible mistake. So write those exact words. Those *exact* words. It’s important.”

“How do you know it’s got to be those exact words?”

“Because those are the words I read when I first saw your note.”

“Hang on – you know what I’ve got to write because you’ve *already* seen what I’m *about* to write before I’ve even written it?” said Finn, wrestling with the concept. She could see Rory working on it, too. Amy just nodded in blithe acceptance.

“Ye-e-es... Fun, isn’t it?” The Doctor smiled at her. “I do love a good paradox, me!”

Finn expelled a breath of laughter. “In some things you’re so different, but in some things you are *so* the same,” she told him, and bent over the pad, the Diakonos still supporting her.

The Doctor watched her write, his eyes – now that she was not looking at him – full of pain. He could see the slight shaking of her hand as the pen tip travelled across the paper. But by the time she’d finished, he was smiling at her again. But he knew Amy and Rory and the Diakonos had seen his expression.

“Wonderful! Just the job! That’ll do the trick,” he assured Finn, tearing the sheet from the pad and folding it into four, dropping the pad and pen carelessly on the floor.

“Now, if you’ll all wait there for a moment, I’ll just put it where I’m going to find it,” he told them.

He darted inside the TARDIS, and a moment later it was dematerializing.



## Chapter 11

### *Notes to Self*

A few moments more – from the Doctor’s point of view – and the TARDIS was rematerializing in Finn’s living room. On the morning of 12th May 2011. Soon Finn would be walking through Leadworth with River, wondering what she was going to see around that next corner...

He smiled to himself as he came out and looked back at the TARDIS, slotted neatly into its usual space.

“Always kept it free for me, didn’t you?” he murmured. “Now, then...”

He tapped the folded note against his chin, considering the best place to put it. He supposed it didn’t much matter. She wouldn’t be coming back to find it, but the police would.

Having thought, and decided, he went into the hall and took the stairs two at a time, then went into her bedroom. It took only moments to add the folded note to the miscellany of items in the top drawer of her bedside cabinet, where it would easily be found.

“Right! That’s that done, then. Now – next thing on the list...” he muttered, and was about to leave when something made him pause.

Slowly he picked up the small framed drawing on the bedside cabinet, and looked at it for long moments. His former self and Jack Harkness, drawn in pencil, Finn’s initials down in the bottom right corner. She’d drawn this herself. Kept it as a memento of him. Of both of them, maybe. Certainly of Kvitverden.

But it hadn’t been among the papers from her house he’d gone through at the police station when he’d found the clue he’d just left in the drawer. Which meant it hadn’t been there for the police to find. Which meant...

He stared at it for a few moments more, then slid it into his jacket pocket. Mementos were meant to be kept, weren’t they? But Finn wouldn’t need this one anymore, so...

He patted his pocket with a gesture of finality. Then he turned and bolted back down the stairs.

\*

Once more, the TARDIS wheezed back into normal space and time. The Doctor poked his head cautiously out of the door, and checked around.

He was looking out from behind the edge of the tree line of a wood, on the sloping shoulders of a mountain. In the distance a tall white mast stretched up toward the sky. And on one of the crests of mountainside between him and it, far out of earshot, two tiny figures were heading toward it; one of them wearing a hooded jacket, carrying a rucksack, the other tall and slim, wearing a brown trench coat.

“Ah, there we are,” the Doctor breathed. “You and me, Finn. Saving the world from Mynydd y Seren. Now – where are *you*...?” He stepped further out and scanned his immediate surroundings. His eyes lighted on an object about fifty yards away, and he smiled happily. The TARDIS. As it had once been. “Ah, there you are! Good!”

He put a hand on the corner of his own TARDIS, and felt a slight extra vibration.

“Yes, I know you’re a bit close to yourself,” he said reassuringly. “But don’t worry – this won’t take long.”

He walked over to the earlier TARDIS and clicked his fingers. The door immediately opened, and he took a cautious look inside. Almost instantly, a nostalgic smile spread across his face. He went in, and closed the door behind him.

“Hello,” he said softly. “Sorry to confuse you, turning up out of sequence like this. But there’s a message I need you to deliver for me. *To me*. Don’t mind, do you?”

The background hum of the TARDIS remained serene. The Doctor nodded.

He went up the ramp and over to the console.

“Ummm...” he muttered, ruffling his hair. “I’m used to the new layout, now. Got to remember where everything *used* to be... Ah! Yes! That’s right!”

A few seconds of control manipulation ensued; then he straightened up.

“So!” he said happily. “One temporal interdict, set for the 12th of May 2011. Just one – more – thing – to do. Well, two, actually,” he corrected himself. “But this one first...”

He moved around to the monitor and searched his memory, fingers hovering over the input keys.

“Right! Yes!” he said, having successfully retrieved the right words. He remembered being a bit indignant when he’d first read them. He smiled; it was delightfully entertaining, knowing that he was going to annoy his earlier self. He was a bit tempted to start off with “*Hello, Sweetie*”, but of course he couldn’t. Though it would have been good fun to confuse himself even more by making himself think the message was from River... Still, better stick to the script, he supposed.

“*Message – from – me – to – me,*” he muttered under his breath as he typed. “*Tut, tut! Didn’t she tell you not to go there yet? Patience is a virtue! So listen to her! And wait for the right moment. You really ought to trust her.*’ There! That’s it!”

He entered a few more instructions, then pushed the monitor back.

“So if you could just deliver that to me when I try it?” he said to the TARDIS, as if asking a huge favour. “Thanks. And then there’ll be another one – for later on again... But that won’t be until you’ve – well, you know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

He typed quickly, then patted the console.

“You’ll remember that, won’t you?” he said. “But for you to be able to deliver it, there’s something I need from you, of course...”

A couple of minutes later he went back down the ramp, cradling one arm around a largish lump of something he’d thrust inside his jacket. He’d better not hang about any longer. Not that there was any real likelihood of meeting himself coming – something not everyone could do, of course, though definitely a potential problem for him... Better be on the safe side, though.

But he couldn’t help pausing in the open doorway, and looking back, remembering. Remembering so much...

“Thank you,” he said again. “Thank you for everything.”

Then he went out, and firmly shut the door.

\*

“Where’s he going?” Rory demanded.

“Like I’d know,” Amy retorted with a hint of derision. “He’s putting that note wherever it is he’s going to find it. Obviously!”

“But that’s in the past,” said Rory. “You can’t say, ‘I’m *going* to find it’ when you haven’t yet – hang on – no – I mean, when you’ve *already*...” He looked frustrated.

“Plays hell with grammar, this time travel lark, doesn’t it?” Finn observed, with a weak laugh. The Diakonos smiled, first at her, then at Rory.

Before Rory could come up with a suitable rejoinder, the wheezing groan of the returning TARDIS became audible, and it was back.

The Doctor appeared in the doorway, but didn’t come out.

“Sorry – was coming back, then remembered I’ve got another little another errand to run,” he announced. “So I’ll just pop off and do that first. Then I *will* be back. Properly back.”

“Doctor? What’s that under your jacket?” Amy demanded.

The Doctor innocently displayed the item he was cradling with one arm.

Finn’s eyes widened; it was evident that she’d recognized it. But she saw the tiny, tiny shake of his head, so she said nothing, though her eyes were clearly asking, *What are you doing with that?*

The Diakonos, too, wore an expression of recognition, and nodded slowly, as if he’d deduced what the Doctor was doing. Amy, though, like Rory, stared at it in some perplexity. It was a large lump of something that reminded them both of a coral polyp.

“What’s that?” Amy demanded.

“This? Oh, I’m renewing the infrastructure in my aquarium,” said the Doctor airily.

“But – you don’t have an aquarium,” Rory pointed out.

“Don’t I?” said the Doctor, absently, as if his mind was mostly on something else; he casually tossed the lump up and down a couple of times, as if it was of no importance. “Ah. I’ll have to think of something else to do with it, then.”

“Perhaps,” the Diakonos suggested gently, “you could give it to me, Doctor. I’m sure I can look after it until it’s needed.”

The Doctor smiled at him.

“I’m sure of it,” he agreed. “Wouldn’t trust it to anyone else... So I’ll go and put it somewhere for safekeeping in the meanwhile, shall I? I’ll deliver it later. So I’ll just – er...” He didn’t finish the sentence, instead waving his hand airily over his shoulder at the Time Rotor. “Hold your breath, everyone - won’t be a minute! Well, when I say, ‘hold your breath’, best not to take that too literally...”

He disappeared back into the TARDIS, wondering what Amy and Rory would say if they knew it was a piece of the TARDIS as it had been when he’d been his previous self.

Wondering even more what they’d say if they knew what he was going to do with it.

Wondering if Finn had fully worked out yet what he was doing, as the Diakonos had.

Wondering what all of them were thinking as they watched the TARDIS dematerialize again.

When it had vanished, Finn’s eyes came to rest on the discarded notepad the Doctor had dropped on the floor, the pen beside it.

“Amy,” she said, stifling a cough as she pointed. “Can you give me those, please? I’ve got something else I need to write...”

Amy retrieved the pad and pen and handed them over, encountering the Diakonos’ eyes as she did so. Despite the necessity he had claimed to the Doctor, what was happening here was still causing him pain...

None of them spoke while Finn laboriously compiled another document, her lips moving silently as she concentrated on every word, every now and again coughing and then wincing with pain before regrouping and continuing with her task. At last she looked up, with a wry smile on her face.

“Good job you’re both here,” she observed. “Would you mind very much if I asked you to witness my signature?”

Rory and Amy stared at each other, then at Finn.

“What is that?” Rory asked, switching his gaze to the paper in her hand, already suspecting the answer.

“It’s my will, of course,” Finn said, slightly surprised. “Won’t be legal without two witnesses, will it? Oh, and” – for a moment she looked slightly censorious, though it wasn’t directed at either of them – “*please* make sure he puts that somewhere safe in the house, too? Where they’ll find it?”

Amy wondered briefly who ‘they’ would turn out to be... Something about the way Finn had spoken implied she wasn’t talking about family. Then who? The police, maybe? She decided not to ask.

“Yeah,” she vowed bleakly.

“And – something else,” Finn went on. Something in her eyes made Amy drop to her knees beside her, as if it was important to be close. Finn put her hand on Amy’s sleeve; what she was about to ask clearly mattered.

“Tell him to let Sarah Jane know,” she appealed. “Sarah Jane Smith. I don’t want her left wondering, without ever knowing. I don’t want to go without telling her goodbye. She’s been hurt like that before. I don’t want her hurt again. Not by me.” Amy wondered briefly who else she was referring to, but Finn was still speaking. “And Jack. Ask him to make sure Jack Harkness knows. Please?”

“Sarah Jane Smith, and Jack Harkness,” Amy repeated obediently, with the slightest hint of enquiry in her tone, clearly wondering who these people were.

“He’ll know,” Finn assured her. “And – ask him to give Mr Smith my love, will you?” Then she coughed, and her hand weakly slid away from Amy’s arm. Amy looked quickly up at Rory, and they exchanged a concerned look.

Finn stifled another cough, then returned her attention to the pad of paper in front of her.

“Right – I’ll just sign this,” she said, tiredly. “So you’d better watch me do it, or you can’t put your hand on your heart and say you witnessed it, can you?” With an effort, she set the pen tip to the paper and signed her name, then held both pad and pen toward Rory.

“Now you,” she said. “Oh, and Rory –”

“Yes?” said Rory quickly, as he knelt beside her, next to Amy.

“Make sure you sign it with your own name, won’t you? Mr Rory Williams, not Mr Amy Pond. I need this to be legally valid, you know!” She managed a mischievous smile, and it tore Rory’s heart to hear her tease him like that, but he somehow managed to smile back.

“Sort of out of the habit, but – yeah,” he agreed, and did so before passing the pad to Amy.

Finn visibly relaxed into the Diakonos’ arms, as if some kind of energy had gone from her. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Don’t worry,” Amy said huskily. “We’ll make sure he delivers it.”

Finn smiled at her, then turned her head to look up at the Diakonos.

“He will be all right, won’t he?” she asked.

The Diakonos smiled at her. Even now – even though she was dying – the Doctor’s wellbeing still came first with her, ahead of her own.

“He has always survived whatever has happened in his life,” he comforted her. “Rest assured he will continue to do so. The Doctor will always be loved, Fionnula.”

“I know... But you know what I’m asking... *Will* he be all right?” she persisted.

“True justice must be even-handed,” said the Diakonos. “Did I not promise that it would be?”

“Yes, you did,” Finn whispered. “And you told me to trust you.”

“And do you?” He smiled at her, because he didn’t need her to tell him the answer, though she did.

“Yes.” She smiled back. “I have. I do. I always will.”

“Then be easy in your mind, Fionnula. I promised the Doctor you would have your reward, just as he would have his. I’m keeping that promise.”

“I’m – not very sure I understand how, but...” She didn’t know how to finish the sentence, but her heart was in her eyes as she looked at him. “I wish... I wish so much...” She clung to him, helpless to express herself.

“I know, Fionnula,” he said soothingly. “I know.”

“Diakonos... I want to thank you, so much, but – there aren’t the words.”

“I know,” he said again, and cupped his hand against her cheek. “But I hear them, nonetheless.”

She closed her eyes, and hot tears began to seep out from under her eyelashes. She raised her free arm to embrace him, and he gathered her close and held her there for a while.

Amy was crying, silently; Rory, too, with his arms around his wife, was on the verge of tears. Then the TARDIS returned.

The Doctor stepped out, and stood very still for a moment as he assessed the scene. His lips were pressed firmly together, but their distorted line and the tense sideways movement of his jaw clearly betrayed his emotions.

“Doctor,” said the Diakonos. “You’ve returned just in time. It’s for you to show Fionnula what must be done.”

Amy and Rory scrambled to their feet and backed away a few paces as the Doctor came forward. Together, he and the Diakonos lifted Finn to her feet in front of the Mirror of the Soul. The Diakonos lifted her left arm and laid it across the Doctor's shoulders, and let the Doctor take her full weight; she no longer had the strength to stand unaided. Then he stepped back and watched the two of them gravely.

"What *'must be done'*?" Amy choked. "What's going to happen?"

The Doctor ignored her. Finn's head had fallen sideways into the hollow between his neck and shoulder; she was too weak to do much else.

"Look, Finn," the Doctor exhorted her. "Look in the Mirror."

With some difficulty she raised her head, and looked.

What she saw was herself. Of course. But not as she now was – strengthless, collapsing, one arm over the Doctor's shoulders with him clinging onto her wrist, his other arm clasped around her, his legs spread slightly apart, braced to hold her upright. He wasn't even there. She was alone in the Mirror, staring back out of it into her own eyes, as reflections do.

Except that there was another, fundamental difference.

The Finn in the Mirror was erect, healthy, normal.

Not dying, but living.

"Look," the Doctor repeated. "Keep looking."

She obeyed, and felt a strange sensation in her chest. A kind of tug, as if something was being gently but insistently taken from her. The feeling lasted only for a moment, but it was definite, and real.

Watching, Amy and Rory both saw what happened during that moment. Just for an instant, it was as if there was a cloud of dust-sized, golden specks in a human-shaped corridor between Finn and the Mirror, like hovering atoms in the air. Then, almost quicker than their eyes could follow, the glowing particles fled into the Mirror and vanished.

"There," said the Doctor, briefly clasping Finn even more tightly in his embrace. "It's done. You'll be all right now."

Amy and Rory looked at each other, the same thought mirrored on their faces. How could she possibly be *'all right now'*?

Finn looked at the Diakonos; a strange look in which gratitude was combined with so many other emotions. Her lips silently formed two words. "Thank you..." He smiled at her, as he always did. Except that she would never see that smile again. Her time was running out; she could feel it. Only moments left. And there was something she had to say, before those moments were gone.

She turned her face to the Doctor's, and smiled at him, too, for the last time.

"You kept your promise. You did look after me... All my love, Doctor," she said, quietly.

Then she died.

The Doctor felt it instantly; the sensation of severance as the life-force left her body, leaving him supporting what was now a mere inert lump of matter. Before she could fall, he swung her into his embracing arms and held her upright there for a few more seconds.

"Be happy, Finn," he whispered into her unhearing ear. Then, as carefully as if she were still living, he lowered her to the floor, sinking to his knees to support her flaccid body. Just before he laid her down, he lifted her dangling head with one hand and planted a kiss on the still forehead. Then he gently stretched her out, full length, like someone lying in a deep sleep.

Rory and Amy clasped each other even more tightly; both their eyes were brimming with tears. The Doctor looked away from them, to the Diakonos, a silent question in his eyes. The Diakonos looked back at him, and nodded.

And smiled.

Seeing that smile, the Doctor's shoulders visibly relaxed in a gesture of relief.

"Is she dead, Doctor?" Rory asked, grieving.

"She's gone, Rory," said the Doctor quietly. "She's left us. We won't ever see her again. She's somewhere else now, and she can't come back."

"Then – she's *not* dead?" Amy picked up the implications quickly.

“She’s dead here,” said the Doctor, looking sadly down at the still body on the floor at his feet. Then he looked up at Amy and Rory, and there was just enough of the hint of a smile on his face to start a spark of hope in them. “But not where she is now.”

“And where’s that?” Rory demanded.

The Doctor ignored the question, and turned his eyes back to the Mirror. It was empty now; Finn’s image was gone. He walked slowly over to it and leaned forward to put his hands on each side of the gilded frame.

“*Still she haunts me, phantomwise,*” he recited to his own reflection, so softly the others could hardly hear him. “*Alice, moving under skies never seen by waking eyes...*”

There was a pause before he spoke again.

“I have a question,” he said pensively, gazing at the silver surface. Then he corrected himself. “No – two questions. How long? How long will it last?”

Amy and Rory didn’t understand what he was asking, but the Diakonos did.

“You wished for each other’s happiness,” he said quietly. “So – for as long as it makes both of them happy. Who knows? But I suspect it will be a very long time, don’t you?” He raised an interrogative eyebrow at the Doctor.

“*Both of them?* Both of who?” Amy asked quickly. “Who’s *them*? Finn and who else?”

“The other side. Where she’s gone,” the Doctor went on, ignoring her question and continuing to address the Diakonos. “Is it *real*?”

The Diakonos gave him a steady look, tinged with both sadness and amusement.

“What is reality, Doctor?” he asked softly. “*Life, what is it, but a dream...?*”

The Doctor looked back at him for a few moments, then nodded and returned his gaze to the Mirror, without answering.

Amy came forward to stand beside him; Rory did the same on his other side.

“This – wherever she is now,” Rory said, staring at the Mirror. He hadn’t understood everything, but he’d understood enough of what had passed to realize there was a definite basis for hope. “Is she going to be all right, Doctor?”

“Yes. Yes, she is,” said the Doctor decisively. “She’s got her reward, and she’s going to be happy.”

“And she’s going to be safe?” Amy queried.

The Doctor dropped his hands from the Mirror as suddenly as if he’d been burned, and swung round to face her, looking at her as if she’d asked a spectacularly silly question.

“*Safe?*” he expostulated indignantly. “*Safe?* Of course she isn’t going to be *safe*! We don’t do *safe* around here!”

“Tell me about it,” Rory muttered.

“We do *adventure*! And *excitement*! And *discovery*! Not *safe*,” emphasized the Doctor, pronouncing the last word as if it was an unpleasant taste on his tongue. Then he smiled widely at them both, flinging his fringe back from his face with a toss of his head. “*Saving* – well, that’s something different. We do *saving*! But not *safe*.” He sniffed reflectively, then rubbed his hands together with relish. “So let’s go and do a bit more of it, somewhere else, eh?”

He put his arms round their shoulders and began to urge them back toward the TARDIS. He caught the eye of the Diakonos as he went, talking thirteen to the dozen to Rory and Amy, so the farewell that passed between them went unspoken, but not unexpressed. Rory and Amy were so distracted that they didn’t even look at the Diakonos again, as the Doctor hurried them toward the TARDIS door.

“So where d’you fancy?” the Doctor asked. “Brigarea? Planet covered with geysers. How d’you feel about doing a bit of plumbing? I heard they were having a bit of problem with the water pressure... Or Gastrad, perhaps? Big experiment going on there to try to detect an even smaller particle than the Allastron, but I think they’re researching along the wrong lines. Might need a bit of help from me on that one! Because if they don’t get it right, they might start a chain reaction among some of the other particles they don’t know are there yet, as well.” He fished the key out of one of his pockets and thrust it into the door lock. “Or the fourteen moons of Irricum? Bit erratic in their orbits, sometimes – last time I was there, rather worried one of them might be wandering towards one of the others. Risk of collision. Then – dominoes! Which would be bad for the forty-two million Irrica that live on them, don’t you think? If someone doesn’t check on the situation and make sure everything’s all right, that is. What do you think?”

“Can’t we just go somewhere nice and calm, first? And bright? And warm?” Amy suggested, slightly plaintively.

“Yeah,” Rory agreed. “Especially calm...”

The Doctor screwed up his face and shot into the TARDIS.

“Nah, that’s boring! *Bor-ing!*” his voice chided them from within. “Don’t do *boring*, either!”

“Yeah – we had noticed that,” Amy agreed, as she followed him in. “Definitely noticed that.”

“Yeah,” muttered Rory. As the last one in, he turned to close the door behind them – and saw that apart from the TARDIS, the room was completely empty. Both the Diakonos and his Mirror were gone. And so was Finn Thornton’s lifeless body.

“Er – Doctor...” Rory said slowly, half over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off the place where the Mirror of the Soul had been.

“Not now, Rory!” said the Doctor briskly, already skidding around the console like a madman. A madman with a box, of course. “Shut the door, so we can take off! Unless you’re staying? ’Course, could leave without you,” he added hopefully. “If you’d like?”

“No, you don’t, Doctor!” Amy contradicted him. “Haven’t finished with him yet!”

Rory rolled his eyes and bobbed his head up and down in a slightly exasperated ‘*yeah, yeah*’ sort of gesture, unseen by the other two. Then he looked round the room once more.

“Good luck, Finn,” he whispered softly, under his breath. “Like he said – be happy.” Then he shut the door.

And a few seconds later, even the TARDIS was gone.

## Chapter 12

### *The End of the Beginning*

There was blackness, which she’d expected. But then there was a strange sensation of movement, which she hadn’t. As if she’d travelled a tremendous distance, yet had hardly moved at all. Which felt very odd. Not least because she had no business *feeling* anything at all, when it came right down to it. After all, hadn’t she just died...?

Except that she hadn’t. Apparently.

Finn opened her eyes and stared down at herself. Standing erect and healthy, just as she had last seen herself in the Mirror of the Soul. And definitely corporeal; the sensation caused by the instinctive movement of her hand to her own cheek incontrovertibly established *that*. But no Diakonos, no Amy or Rory. And no Doctor...

Instead, she was in what looked like a huge expanse of undulating parkland, with areas of flower-strewn, knee-high grass such as the one in which she now found herself standing, interspersed with stands of trees and bushes. And it wasn’t Earth, even though the sunlit sky above was blue and scattered with white clouds – because it wasn’t the *right* blue. Close, but not the same. Different. She could feel it in her bones. A different world. Or was it more than that? She suddenly heard the well-loved voice of the Diakonos echoing from her memory.

“*Two universes, this one, and that one, separated by a mere plane of atoms...*”

What had the Diakonos *done*...?

But she had no time to think about that just then, because suddenly she was otherwise occupied – jumping right out of her skin – as she was taken completely by surprise.

“Oi! What sort of time d’you call this?” demanded a familiar voice, indignantly. “I’ve been stuck here for two days, waiting for you to turn up!”

Finn spun round to look at the speaker. At the sight of him she made a strange sound, gasping and choking at the same time, and her hand flew up to cover her mouth, as if her very soul might escape if she didn’t block its exit. Those hints the Doctor had given her – she *hadn’t* misunderstood them!

It was *him*. The Doctor. *Her* Doctor!

*There.*

Standing about twenty feet away, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his blue pinstripe trousers and pushing the skirts of his trench coat back behind him, his hair almost standing on end with energy.

For a few moments he regarded her with one eyebrow arched severely. Then he couldn't maintain the front any longer; the grin on his face suddenly spread wide, and so did his arms.

Finn made that same strange choking sound again. Then she grew wings and flew to him, throwing her arms round him, while his enclosed her. He could feel her straining to hold him close, and felt the shaking of her body. He immediately knew what that meant.

"Come on, Finn! No need to cry," he told her cheerfully.

"Of course there is!" came an indignant gasp, muffled by her face being buried against his chest. "How're you going to know this is me, if I don't cry?"

He smiled, and rested his chin on the top of her head. After a short while she relaxed her hold and drew back, wiping her eyes with an endearingly childlike gesture. Then she gripped his upper arms, and looked up at him long and searchingly, her eyes still brimming, both with tears and astonishment. He was just the same! He hadn't changed! The dark eyes looking down at her were just as she remembered them.

"You're here," she said wonderingly. "You're really here. You're not just in my head. You're not a dream. You're *here*. It's really *you*!"

"Course I'm here!" said the Doctor with a touch of indignation, as if there had never been any doubt about it. He glanced around, and sniffed reflectively. "Wherever here is..."

Finn hardly knew which of the hundreds of questions crowding onto her tongue to ask first.

"But – how did you get here? And when? I mean, how long have you been *here*?" She let go of him and looked around, as he had done, though without really taking in what she saw, before fixing her eyes back on his face. "Where have you been all this time?"

"The Diakonos sent me into the Mirror, back on Eutychia. Why – how long has it been since then?" he asked, in interested enquiry.

"For me, it's been about – oh, I don't know – eighteen months? A bit less...?"

He pursed his lips into an 'O'.

"Ooh! I've been lucky, then. Just a couple of days for me. When I went into the Mirror, I was here – and there was the TARDIS. Right where she is now. I must have fixed up with the Diakonos for her to be here waiting for me. Although, not *me*, of course. The other me. Anyway, I went in and had a look round, but everything was just the same as before. Well, I think so. Not entirely sure that other me didn't fob me off with a clone..." he muttered darkly, as if he didn't entirely approve.

"He did!" Finn realized. "I saw him with one of the coral cells."

"He must've taken it back in time and hidden it somewhere safe while it grew back," the Doctor observed. "Then got the Diakonos to send it through to here." He continued to frown for a moment or two, then dismissed it as a side issue, and brightened again. "Anyway, I tried to take a short trip. Just to make sure she was working all right."

"So what happened?"

"There was this message on the screen. '*Let her have her head.*' Me telling me what to do again, obviously." Something about the way he said it told Finn he'd half considered ignoring himself, and she had to fight down an urge to laugh out loud.

"So I did," the Doctor went on. "When I came out for a look round, I thought for a moment she hadn't gone anywhere. But of course, she'd moved in time, not in space. Right here, still, but a couple of days ago."

Finn's face lit with realization.

"He told her – I mean, *you* told her – when to be here! Because he – you – oh, blow it, I'm sticking with 'him'! – *he* knew when I'd be coming through the Mirror! He must have nipped back and briefed her when he took the cell for cloning. Oh, he's brilliant, isn't he?"

"Well, he would be, wouldn't he?" said the Doctor. "Bit out with the timing, though," he added, sniffily. "I mean, two *days*! Wasn't really *necessary*, keeping me hanging about on tenterhooks waiting for you to arrive, was it?" He hesitated,

obviously fighting the urge to ask, but then he couldn't help himself. "Am I still me, there? Or –?" He didn't finish the question.

There was a slightly awkward silence. Just by looking at her, he could tell. His eyes darkened. "What happened?"

"No need to look like that!" she told him. "You saved the world again, of course. As you do! But – well, the last thing you said was, *I don't want to go...*"

"Oh," said the Doctor, very carefully. "Right."

"But you did. And you did change. I could tell you had." She double-tapped her forehead. Then she smiled. "You're very different now."

"Different? Me? Never!" The Doctor pretended indignation. Then, trying to sound as if it didn't matter, "Different how?"

"Look, I'll tell you the details later," Finn promised, with another smile. "Just in case you need to know. After all, you might *meet* your next self one day – it's the kind of thing you do, let's face it... But – I've got to tell you! – thank you! You've been here all the time," she told him, double-tapping her forehead again. "You said you'd still be looking after me. And you did!"

"Well, of course I did!" the Doctor agreed, sounding slightly offended that there might have been any doubt about it. "I promised, didn't I? What sort of thing did I have to look after you about?" he added, with interest.

"I'll tell you about that, too, I promise. Oh, I've got so *much* to tell you...! And, Doctor, before you ask – I did give Jack your message." Finn smiled at the recollection. "Just like you told me to. But there are so many other things I want to ask about first!"

"So do I," said the Doctor firmly. "Like, how you got here. What happened? How did it happen?"

"I gave my life for you," said Finn simply.

The Doctor stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"The Diakonos asked me, '*Would you give your life for the Doctor?*' You know what I said, because you were there. You heard me. I thought he was asking me if I was willing to die in order to save your life. Which I was. And I still am. But he already knew that. That wasn't what he was asking me. He was asking me if I was willing to die in order to *have* you. To be with you. To give my life *for* you. Not to lose it. To *exchange* it. A *translation*."

"A bargain," said the Doctor slowly.

"Yes! A bargain! Who doesn't love a good bargain? Sale starts 12th of May 2011! The day I got the best bargain ever. Exchanged my life *there*, to be with you *here*. And it was the only way. Because *you* aren't there anymore. You're someone else there now. To be with *you* – *this* you – I had to come *here*. Through the Mirror, like you. Because this is where I had to be to get *my* reward. So it looks like the Diakonos has arranged for us to live happily ever after," she added with her tongue firmly in her cheek, waiting to see if he would rise to the bait.

Which he did. His eyes darkened, and his expression abruptly became serious.

"I don't do happy ever after," he said in a tone of warning.

She tried to keep her expression straight, but she couldn't stop the corner of her mouth twitching. "Is that supposed to be today's big news flash? I *know* you don't! But I know what you *do* do." Her smile could no longer be suppressed, and erupted onto her face in a full-on blaze of joy. "Excitement! Danger! New planets! Incredible things! Beautiful things! Fantastic things! Mad risk-taking! And it wasn't how I used to think of myself, but I must've bought into all that, or I wouldn't be here, would I? Oh, and the running, of course! Don't forget all that running I'm going to have to do!"

The Doctor's answering smile was wide and happy; the way she remembered it. She gazed at him, and found herself thinking about the Diakonos.

"*True justice must be even-handed,*" he'd told her. "*With knowledge comes responsibility.*"

"*For it to be truly even-handed, there'd have to be reward for good done, too,*" she'd argued.

"*So anyone whose role it is to dispense justice, if they were a person of integrity, would make sure that was done also. For everyone concerned,*" he'd agreed, with that strange emphasis on the word 'everyone' that she still remembered. And he'd said, "*Have faith... Trust me...*"

His integrity had proved to be beyond doubt. He'd vindicated both her faith and her trust. The Doctor's actions had been evaluated, and for some of them, yes, he'd suffered. He'd wanted to stay as he was, and he hadn't been allowed to. She remembered the feelings of rage and resentment, as he'd had to respond to Wilfred Mott's situation in the only way he could, being the Doctor – at the cost of his own life, his life of being the Doctor he was. That Doctor, in her universe, was gone. Dead, in a way. But in this universe, the Diakonos had kept his word; his justice had been even-handed. The Doctor had got his reward. His other reward. The reward for good done. Here he was still himself, unchanged, the man – the Time Lord, rather – he had been, the one he'd wanted to go on being; the one she herself had come to know.

To know, and to love.

Why she had been sent here to be with him, she didn't know. And yet... The Diakonos had implied that all along it had been no accident that she and the Doctor had been brought together. And it did seem that she'd fulfilled a specific need at a specific time in his life; that the qualities she possessed, with the addition of the Doctor's mind in hers, had uniquely fitted her to fulfil that need. So had the Diakonos' justice – reward for good done – been extended to her, too? Was that why, against all her own expectations, she was not dead? Not here in this new universe, at least, though she was fairly certain about her fate in her own... Was that why she was still with the Doctor? *Her* Doctor...?

Who *was* the Diakonos? *What* was he? A personification of the universe, perhaps? A universe aware of the consequences within it of the Doctor's actions throughout time and space and bringing an entity into being to react to them? Or something else? And if he could do what he'd done for the Doctor and her, what else could he do? Just how much power did he have...?

She might – probably would – never know. But she did know what he'd done for her, and why.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She realized the Doctor was looking at her curiously. “For what?”

He thought she was talking to him. But of course she wasn't... And she felt sure that, wherever he was, the Diakonos would hear her.

“More than you can possibly imagine,” she said, and smiled.

The Doctor, of course, took what she said as a compliment to himself, and shrugged it off. He stuck his hands deep into his trouser pockets, making the skirts of his trench coat spread wider behind him, and looked around at the park-like expanse that stretched in every direction as far as the eye could see.

“Well, I wonder what happens next?” he speculated casually. Then he caught Finn's expression. “What? What are you grinning about?”

She smiled even more broadly. “You, not knowing what happens next. Usually you're the only one who does. Because you've been there, seen it happen. Or made it happen. But this time, not *even* you. Because this is a different universe. Who knows what the Diakonos meant when he said it's a mirror? Maybe things are all back to front here. Or the other way round than we're used to. So maybe history's different here. Who knows? Or maybe it is the same as ours. Well, more or less, anyway.”

“Can't be exactly the same,” the Doctor pointed out. “The Diakonos wouldn't have put me in a universe where I already existed. Not *me* me. He's got more sense than that.”

“So what does that mean? This might be a universe in which you've never existed at all? Crikey, you really *won't* know what happens next, will you?”

“Could be interesting,” the Doctor admitted.

“Unless” – Finn sobered for a moment – “unless this is a universe in which you have existed, but don't at the moment. Because something's happened to you, so there's – well, a vacancy...”

The Doctor gave her a look. “Oh, lovely!”

“Well, something might have!” she said defensively. “It's not that you *can't* die. It's just that so far you've never got to the point where you can't regenerate. Doesn't mean it couldn't have happened to you here. It's not like you're immortal.” A realization struck her. “Jack! Maybe Jack's here, too!”

“With my luck, he will be,” the Doctor muttered, unimpressed. “Worse than flypaper...”

Finn chuckled, her eyes sparkling with delight and anticipation. “The other you – the next Doctor, if you like – he said it was going to be like *Through The Looking Glass*.”

“That’s not the full title, remember,” the Doctor pointed out.

“Why? What’s the rest of it?”

“*And What Alice Found There*,” the Doctor obliged. “Except that this time it’ll be *What Finn Found There*.”

“More like *What The Doctor Found There, with Finn Thornton Struggling to Keep Up!*” Finn retorted. “All right, so what do *you* think he meant? After all, he *is* you!”

The Doctor tried to look nonchalant as he shrugged, but his eyes, too, were giving him away.

“Dunno. Suppose we’d better go and find out,” he suggested, casually. Then he could no longer restrain the tantalizingly mischievous smile spreading wide across his face as he abruptly held out his hand to her. “Come on, then. You’ll be all right, you know! I’m still looking after you, Fionnula Thornton!”

“And I’ve still got you, Doctor,” said Finn, taking the offered hand, and raising her remaining free hand to double-tap her forehead, smiling back at him with as much happiness as it is possible for a human soul to contain.

“Well, then, what are we waiting for?” he exhorted with huge, delighted, shining eyes, as they began to run together toward the waiting TARDIS, hand in hand, like a pair of children eager to examine the most wonderful present ever given. “We’ve got a whole new universe to explore, you and me! *I do* want to go! *Allons-y!*”



## REFERENCES

Most Doctor Who fans won't need the various references in this story explained, but for the sake of newcomers to the Whoniverse, I have identified the source material where relevant (all episode references, followed by the year of the original broadcast by the BBC in the UK, refer to "Doctor Who" unless otherwise specified).

Author's note: "Closure" is the seventh of a story arc of seven stories about the Tenth Doctor and Finn Thornton. It was originally published by TheDoctorDeborah on the DoctorWho fan fiction website "A Teaspoon and an Open Mind" in March 2016 (see <http://www.whofic.com/viewuser.php?uid=12695>).

### Prologue

- Recap: Finn met the Doctor in "Serendipity" (1 of 7 on [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011)); their visits to Kvitverden and Felindre are documented in "Ice World" (2 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983)) and "Felindre's Fortune" (4 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=42902](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=42902)) respectively. Their encounter with the Voice can be found in "All In The Mind" (3 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=40138](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=40138)), and their parting in "Missing Persons" (5 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854)). Finn and Jack's meeting with the Wyvern is chronicled in "Here Be Dragons" (6 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=54432](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=54432)).

### Chapter 1: The Beginning of the End

- Amy Pond's parents were restored to her as part of the 're-boot' of the Universe caused by the Doctor's use of the Pandorica to initiate a second 'Big Bang' (see the episode of the same name, episode 1.13, June 2010).
- For an explanation of why Finn Thornton has the Doctor's mind in hers, see "Serendipity" ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011)).
- The Doctor's reading of the mysterious note and decoding of the date 12<sup>th</sup> May 2011 contained in it is described in "Missing Persons" ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854)).
- The red setting on River Song's sonic screwdriver was revealed in "Silence in the Library" (episode 4.9, 2008).
- The conversation between the Doctor and Finn in which he told her about giving his sonic screwdriver to River can be found in "Felindre's Fortune" ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=42902](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=42902)).
- Finn travelled by vortex manipulator with Captain Jack Harkness in "Here Be Dragons" ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=54432](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=54432)).
- River Song sent a message in Old High Gallifreyan to the Doctor in the episode "The Time of Angels" (episode 1.4, 2010).
- In "The Last Goon Show of All" (1972), written by Spike Milligan, one of the characters for which he also performed the voice, Eccles, was asked "What are you doing down here?" His reply was, "Everybody gotta be somewhere."
- River's quote, "You're still looking after her", is a reference to the Doctor's promise to Finn, first made in "Missing Persons" ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854)).

### Chapter 2: Reunion

- The Doctor's reference to Finn's detector system relates to the fact that after the transfer of his mind into hers (see "Serendipity" ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011))), Finn could always sense the Tenth Doctor's arrival in her vicinity; she would feel a distinctive sensation in her head, and her skin would horripilate (in common parlance, 'go goosepimples').
- The Tenth Doctor's final words before regenerating were "I don't want to go" (episode 4.18, 2010).
- In "The Pandorica Opens" and "The Big Bang" (episodes 1.12 and 1.13, 2010), it was revealed that Rory had become an Auton replica with all the memories and feelings of the human Rory. When Amy had to be installed in the Pandorica in order to save her life, Rory, who had succeeded in breaking free of Auton control and regaining the ability to exercise his own free will, chose to guard the Pandorica against harm for two thousand years, creating the legend of "the Lone Centurion".

### Chapter 3: The Space Elevator

- Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935) was a Russian and Soviet scientist considered to be one of the founding fathers of rocketry and astronautics. He was the first person to conceive the concept of a space elevator, being inspired by the construction of the Eiffel Tower in Paris in 1895.
- Arthur C Clarke (1917-2008) was a British Hugo and Nebula award-winning science fiction writer, science writer, inventor, undersea explorer and television series host. Although he was not the originator of the concept of geostationary satellites, he contributed to the popularity of the idea of they would be ideal telecommunications relays; the paper he published in 1955 entitled 'Extra-Terrestrial Relays – Can Rocket Stations Give Worldwide Radio Coverage?' is usually cited as the basis for crediting him as the inventor of satellite communications. The geostationary orbit 36,000 km/22,000 miles above the equator is officially recognized by the International Astronomical Union as a 'Clarke orbit' in recognition of his contributions in the field. His 1979 novel "The Fountains of Paradise", set in the 22nd century, describes the construction of a space elevator.

### Chapter 4: Bow Ties and Saccades

- "What news on the Rialto?" is a quotation from "The Merchant of Venice" by one William Shakespeare (a friend of the Doctor's, as we know... ("The Shakespeare Code", episode 3.2, 2007)).
- If you don't know that it was the Fifth Doctor who employed celery as what the Tenth Doctor later described as a "decorative vegetable", you haven't been paying attention... (See "Time Crash", CIN2, 2007.)
- Wikipedia's definition of a saccade: "A saccade (/sɪˈkɑːd/ sə-KAHD) is a fast movement of an eye, head or other part of an animal's body or of a device. It can also be a fast shift in frequency of an emitted signal or other quick change. Saccades are quick, simultaneous movements of both eyes in the same direction."

### Chapter 5: The Eyes of Vespertilia

- It was the Fourth Doctor who described Harry Sullivan "as a doctor of medicine" and himself as "a doctor of many things" ("Revenge of the Cybermen", Season 12, 1975).

### Chapter 6: Trouble in Spades

- The time-frame of Amy and Rory's association with the Doctor described by Rory in this chapter covers the events portrayed in the episodes "The Eleventh Hour" (Series 5 (2010), Episode 1) until just after "The Big Bang" (Series 5, Episode 13).
- Jack's remarks to Finn quoted here are taken from "Here Be Dragons" ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=54432](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=54432)).
- Finn first encountered the Doctor during the events in "Serendipity" ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011)).
- In "The End of Time" (Episode 4, Specials, December 2009) the Doctor informed Ood Sigma that he had named a galaxy Alison.

### Chapter 8: The Scenic Route

- The Doctor was forced to wipe Donna Noble's memory of both him and the Time Lord knowledge she had acquired as 'The Doctor Donna' in "Journey's End" (episode 4.13, 2008).
- The Doctor transferred more of his mind into Finn's in "Missing Persons" ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854)).

## Chapter 9: Setting 42

- *My arbitrary selection of 42 is, of course, an ill-concealed tribute to Douglas Adams, who revealed it as the answer to Life, the Universe and Everything in “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”. (I only mention it because – incredible concept! – there may still be people out there who don’t know that...)*
- *For those who have not seen it, “If you build it, they will come” is a quote from the Kevin Costner film “Field of Dreams” (1989).*

## Chapter 10: “I’m still looking after you...”

- *POSSIBLE SPOILER ALERT – DON’T READ THIS IF YOU HAVEN’T READ THE REST OF THE STORY ARC, AND YOU CARE ABOUT SUCH THINGS...! Finn encountered the entity known as the Diakonos in both “Felindre’s Fortune” ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=42902](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=42902)) and “Missing Persons” ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854)).*

## Chapter 11: Notes to Self

- *The first message to himself the Doctor writes in this chapter is/was delivered back in “Missing Persons” ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854)). The second one is found to have been delivered in Chapter 12 of this story (just to avoid any confusion that’s ‘this story’ as in the one you’re looking at now, “Closure”; as Finn observes, “Plays hell with grammar, this time travel lark, doesn’t it?”).*
- *“TARDIS coral was the organic substance of which the Doctor’s TARDIS was composed. The vessels were grown, not built... Part of the Bad Wolf Bay scene at the end of Journey’s End was removed. In it, the Tenth Doctor gave the Meta-Crisis Tenth Doctor and Rose a piece of TARDIS coral, and Donna told them how to increase the rate of growth by a factor of 59. (This scene was removed due to complicating Rose’s departure, but was included in the DVD box set. Russell T Davies says it can still be considered canon despite its omission.) According to the deleted scene a piece of TARDIS coral, which appeared to be roughly the size of a mouse, would take thousands of years to grow a TARDIS.” (Quoted from [http://tardis.wikia.com/wiki/TARDIS\\_coral](http://tardis.wikia.com/wiki/TARDIS_coral))*
- *The ‘Alice’ quotations are taken from the poem ‘A Boat Beneath a Sunny Sky’ by Lewis Carroll.*

## Chapter 12: The End of the Beginning

- *Finn’s conversation with the Diakonos is quoted from “Missing Persons” ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=53854)).*
- *The Tenth Doctor’s regeneration was triggered when he saved Wilfred Mott’s life by taking his place in the Master’s isolation chamber, thus receiving a massive dose of radiation (“The End of Time, 4.18, January 2010).*

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