

ALL IN THE MIND

by Deborah Latham

- | | |
|------------|--|
| Chapter 1 | Random Numbers – and Consequences |
| Chapter 2 | The Implications of Horripilation |
| Chapter 3 | Accusations of the Dead |
| Chapter 4 | The Girl Who Loses People |
| Chapter 5 | The Universe Become Hell |
| Chapter 6 | “Get Out Of My Life!” |
| Chapter 7 | The Blue Veil |
| Chapter 8 | Recriminations |
| Chapter 9 | Maelstrom |
| Chapter 10 | Debriefing |
| Chapter 11 | The Thing The Doctor Can’t Say |
| Chapter 12 | A Temporal Collision |
| Chapter 13 | Amygdalae in Overdrive |
| Chapter 14 | Diagnosing The Problem |
| Chapter 15 | “We’re Afraid Our Dreams Will Come True” |
| Chapter 16 | Mazed |
| Chapter 17 | The Brink of the Abyss |
| Chapter 18 | Night Terrors |
| Chapter 19 | “Is It Over?” |
| Chapter 20 | Dream On... |
| | References |

Chapter 1

Random Numbers – and Consequences

One sun was already high over the northern horizon of the city, blazing fiercely in the pale lilac sky. The other was just rising to the west from behind the uneven skyline of towers, domes and pyramids. Their combined light was harsh and blindingly bright, casting hard black shadows from the buildings and their connecting walkways onto the boulevards and concourses below them.

Seen from a distance, the city was vast and impressive, spreading out in all directions as far as the eye could see, an expanse of abstract shapes viewed in black and white and grey, at first glance the very quintessence of a thriving, teeming metropolis.

Closer inspection revealed a different view. Nothing moved in the empty streets; there was no litter for the faint breeze to stir. Not a living thing moved. The buildings stood in various states of disrepair and decay. Shards of broken glass from shattered windows lay splayed on the pavements; others remained suspended in the black recesses of windows like jagged fangs in open maws. Doors hung ajar, starred fractures spreading across their glazed sections. Save for the sighing of the breeze between the buildings, total silence reigned.

Until a hoarse wheezing, groaning sound began to become audible out of nowhere, rising in volume until it ended in a sort of loud thump.

The Doctor opened the TARDIS door and stepped out, scanning his new surroundings. He found himself looking down a wide, empty concourse, lit by the stark white blaze of the northern sun. It burned fiercely on his face, the unforgiving glare making him squint. The double shadows from the buildings, cast to the south and the east, drew his attention to the rising western sun.

“Right, then... Random numbers,” he muttered. “Where’ve they brought us this time?”

He regarded the deserted streets for a few moments, listening for any sound that might indicate the presence of inhabitants. But there was only silence.

“Oooh, it’s a bit quiet, isn’t it?” he remarked to the TARDIS. “*Is there anybody there...?*” he added in an exaggerated spooky whisper. “Let’s find out...”

He shut the door and rested his palm against it for a moment.

“Don’t let anything exciting happen without me,” he said sternly, giving it a quick pat.

He dropped his hand from the door and began to walk southwards, the sun behind him creating his shadow as a distorted, excessively long and thin black silhouette in front of him. Even shoving his hands in his trouser pockets, causing the skirts of his trench coat to spread further sideways, added no real breadth to it.

He walked for at least a mile along the concourse, scanning the derelict buildings and trying to deduce what had happened to the population. The architecture of the buildings suggested that they’d been built for use by humans, or beings with humanoid bodies, at least. But there was simply not a single sign of anything living. Not a trace of bodies, skeletons, not even dust.

Did that mean that everyone had left voluntarily? Or simply that they’d died so long ago that nothing of them remained? He judged that the state of decay of the buildings wasn’t advanced enough for that to be an option.

So where – and when – had they all gone?

And even more importantly, perhaps – why?

Something, nagging at the edges of his consciousness, made him suddenly stop and look about him. What?

He realized it was because he could hear something.

Very, very faint, but definitely there; a distant humming. A power source of some kind. Something, somewhere, was active, operating, either in these deserted streets or in one of the buildings.

The Doctor’s keen hearing gave him a bearing, and he strode briskly in that direction.

He stopped outside a huge, black, rectangular building. The sound was unquestionably emanating from here. The interesting thing about this building was that while it wasn’t totally intact, it wasn’t in such a state of dereliction as its neighbours. Whatever was generating the sound was definitely inside.

Anything could be in there – but was *anyone*? He walked towards the main doors.

The theme of black continued inside the building. A few stray shafts of sunlight made their way in through minor gaps and breaks in its frontage, streaming in to create pools of light that were absorbed by the featureless black floor tiling, and picking out with a subdued glow the occasional line of silver along the metal edges of doorways, desks, tables and the like. The walls were vast expanses of opaque black glass that threw back distorted reflections of himself wherever the light caught him as he passed through the huge reception hall.

A choice of corridors fanned out in front of him, all leading into darkness. He considered the options, then made for the one directly in front.

A few minutes of exploration, tracking down the source of the sound, led him to another large room, almost equalling the reception hall in size.

The light in here was much dimmer, but his eyes quickly became dark-adapted. They showed him walls lined with consoles and computers, lights faintly flickering. An energy source was still operating here, powering the humming sound that had alerted him out in the concourse.

That is, it had sounded like a hum there; here it rose in intensity to an almost painfully high volume. It was coming from a large machine that stood in the centre of the room.

Its layout was a little unusual. It stood perhaps fifteen feet high, and was U-shaped, with the open end facing him. More panels of lights lined the interior walls. It was roofed over, and what looked like spotlight bulbs peppered the ceiling; they emanated the faintest of blue-tinged glows that almost subliminally illuminated the interior.

Perhaps the oddest thing was that at the inner end of the U stood what appeared to be a bed, or couch; the sort of thing one might expect to be told to lie on in the consulting room of a medical specialist. On the walls either side of it the spotlight bulbs extended down from the ceiling all the way to the floor.

The Doctor stood regarding it for a while, chewing the inside of his lower lip thoughtfully.

He couldn't immediately deduce what its purpose was, beyond the fact that it was apparently for some sort of medical treatment. It always irritated him when that happened; he'd seen so many forms of machine, in so many galaxies, in so many centuries, that when he found a new one that he didn't recognize, it felt like some sort of personal challenge.

Which was a bit irrational, the Doctor conceded to himself; nevertheless, that was the way he felt...

But whatever this machine did, there was definitely something wrong about the note of that power source.

"Now, come on," he reproved the quiescent machine. "Don't be shy. I can tell there's something not right. Let me see if I can help. Tell me what you do. Tell me why you're still powered up when nothing else is."

The hum continued steadily.

"Not telling? Right, then," said the Doctor. "Better have a proper look at you. You really don't sound very happy."

He walked into the machine, scanning the panels as he went. Suddenly he stopped, aware that the bluish glow of light from the bulbs was getting stronger.

"Hello," he said softly. "Noticed I'm here, have you?"

He looked about him, but beyond the increasing light levels, nothing else seemed to have changed. He stepped forward to stand beside the couch.

Nothing.

On an impulse, he sat on the couch and swivelled his body, swinging his legs up, so that he was lying full length on it, looking up at the bulbs.

Which proved to be a mistake.

He had no time to react as the hum of the machine instantly rose to a high pitched roar and the bulbs burst into a blinding glare of blue-white light. He tried to close his eyes against the penetrating radiance, but he couldn't.

Even so, everything suddenly went black.

Chapter 2

The Implications of Horripilation

An extra strong gust of wind sent the rain drumming at the window even more forcefully than it had been already.

Finn Thornton glanced up from the book she was reading at the black world outside her living room window, but apart from the water drops running in silver trails down the glass there was nothing to be seen at this time of night. The street light outside her little terraced house wasn't functioning at the moment – no doubt someone would report it to the council eventually – and she couldn't even see the houses on the opposite side of the road.

She gazed at the far end of the room for a while, her eyes slightly unfocused, as she thought back to when the TARDIS had last stood there, after the Doctor had brought her home from Kvitverden. Ever since, she'd made a particular point of seeing that that area of the carpet was kept clear of objects of any sort.

Just in case he decided to park there again...

She dropped her eyes back to her book, reaching out a hand toward the mug of hot chocolate on the coffee table beside the sofa, and bringing it to her lips for a tentative sip. She put it back down again, quickly; it was a bit too hot for comfortable drinking, still.

The light of the table lamp beyond the mug caught the curls of steam rising from the hot liquid and illuminated them into a silver mist; she watched them for a few moments, following the delicate swirls and trails of tiny droplets as they drifted through the air.

Knowing the Doctor, even though briefly, had somehow taught her to notice small things like that and to value their beauty and their wonder, in a way she hadn't always done before.

The joyous shrilling of swifts as they tore round the sky like children in a playground. The delicate beauty of lichens on a fence post. Rainbow tinted drops of silver water on a window, pierced through by sunlight after rain. The subtle colourations of the patternings on snails' shells. The intricate tracery of veins on the iridescent wings of an insect. Textures, scents, tastes, sounds, sights.

Countless small things that went so easily unnoticed in the hurly-burly of living, that you didn't think to stop and really look at, but that, if you only took the time to pay attention, were really fantastically breathtaking in their own ways.

Of course, since Kvitverden, snow – any snow, anywhere – would always mean the Doctor, to her.

And, in this instance, so did the silver mist of steam droplets drifting up from something as prosaic as a mug of hot chocolate.

She really must remember to thank him for this new awareness, if he came again. And he'd said he would; he'd said, in a way that made it a promise, "Next time..."

She smiled happily at the prospect, then returned her attention to her book. Silence fell for a while, save for the continuing beat of rain against the window.

Then her head went up like a dog suddenly alert to a scent, and her book fell unheeded into her lap.

There was the faintest hint of a familiar sensation in her head; she stretched out her arm in front of her, and, sure enough, her skin was beginning to rise into goose bumps. The last time this had happened, it had been triggered by the Doctor's arrival.

But this was different; the physical reaction was not as marked, the mental sensation not as strong. It was as if he was here, and yet wasn't...

She waited, but nothing more happened. There was no sound of the TARDIS; the sensation did not increase in intensity. What she did feel was a rising sense of anxiety. Something was wrong, she just knew it.

She had a sudden premonition that something – she didn't know what – was about to happen; she abruptly felt the need to stand up, to be on her own two feet to face – whatever it was...

Her book slid to the floor with a muffled thump, but she ignored it, too intent on analyzing her sensations. Her eyes fell on the clock on the mantelpiece; the display stood at 9.40 pm. Nothing in the room moved, nothing looked to be wrong.

But she was sure it was.

A conviction that was confirmed as an ominous swirl of movement abruptly appeared in front of her, a funnel of eddying darkness that grew in diameter with startling swiftness until it was almost as tall as she was, blocking out her view of the fireplace and the mantelpiece and the wall.

Taken by surprise, she was slow to react. She didn't realize until it was too late that she couldn't escape from it; there was no retreat through the wall behind her, against which the sofa stood, and the sides of the funnel had curved round to both right and left, enclosing her.

Then the funnel itself moved forward to take her, swallowing her, pulling her into the dark.

*

The sensations of which the Doctor became aware as he came back to consciousness were not particularly comfortable ones. The surface on which he was lying, face down, was hard and cold, the air damp and chilly. He opened his eyes, and got to his hands and knees. Having got that far, he paused, panting; he felt dizzy and disoriented.

Gradually the feeling passed, and he got to his feet.

He had absolutely no idea where he was, nor how he'd got there.

He was surrounded by a thick, featureless grey fog that swirled around him. Even the surface on which he stood was the same grey, giving no clue to his location. The only thing he could make out, squinting into the murk, was something large and dark not far away in front of him. What was that?

He went cautiously toward it, and suddenly blew out his cheeks in relief. It was the TARDIS!

But how had it got here? How had *he*? And where *was* 'here'?

He went to open the door, but there was a problem.

It wouldn't budge.

"Come on!" he protested. "It's me! Let me in!"

No use.

He worked the key furiously in the lock, and hammered on the wood. Tried clicking his fingers.

Nothing.

"Looks like whatever – or whoever – got me here doesn't want me leaving just yet," he muttered, giving up.

He leaned back against the door and surveyed the churning grey surrounding him. He was reluctant to move away from the TARDIS – in this environment there was no guarantee he could find it again if he did – but how else was he to discover what was going on?

Yet something about that formless grey swirl was provoking an increasing feeling of disquietude, for no reason that he could identify. He'd been lost in a million mists in his time, mists which could have harboured anything – and often had! But he couldn't remember ever feeling quite like this – this degree of unease, this level of foreboding.

He took a deep breath, and patted the door.

"Don't go anywhere I can't find you," he said severely. Then he turned and began walking into the swirling mist.

He'd only gone a few paces when he suddenly wished he hadn't said that. He was overwhelmed by a feeling that something bad was about to happen. Something very, very bad.

And he was right.

The familiar noise of the TARDIS dematerializing began to sound behind him. In horror, he spun round and raced back toward it.

Too late. Before he could reach it, it was gone.

He was completely alone in the fog. The TARDIS, the nearest thing he had to a home, was gone. And he had no idea where, why, or how.

He felt the feeling of unease rising toward panic, which he fought to suppress. All right, the TARDIS was gone. But he'd find it, somehow, he told himself. He always found an answer! He'd been in worse situations than this. *And* without the TARDIS...

But it had always been one of his deepest fears that one day he'd lose the TARDIS for good, never again be free to travel to other places, other times.

He remembered a time when he thought that had really happened, when he and Rose Tyler thought the TARDIS had been swallowed up forever in the core of Krop Tor, 'the impossible planet', in the lair of the Beast, and they were stranded for good. A baseless fear, as it turned out – *that* time. He'd found the TARDIS eventually – though by accident, admittedly.

But what if this time it really was gone? What if...?

"Oh, stop it!" he scolded himself aloud. He'd solve this – of course he would!

The feeling of incipient unease stayed with him, nonetheless, as he began to walk away through the grey gloom, with absolutely no idea of where he was going.

*

Finn groaned as she fought her way back to consciousness, and stirred. Doing so made her aware she was lying on her side on a cold, hard surface. Wherever she was seemed to be totally silent; when she managed to persuade her eyes to open they saw only a slowly moving grey mist all about her.

Groaning again, she propped herself up on one elbow, then laboriously climbed to her feet, feeling dizzy and a little nauseous. She stood for a few moments, swaying slightly, waiting to see if the sensation would subside. Thankfully, it did.

She looked around her, but there was nothing to be seen except the swirling mist, and not a sound to be heard.

She thought about calling out, but decided against it. Who knew what was masked by the grey vapour? There was no telling what might answer any call she made!

And, besides, there was something about her surroundings that was making her increasingly uneasy. Was it just (*just* –?!) that she had no idea where she was, or how she had got there, or couldn't see more than a few yards into a grey veil behind which anything might be hiding? Those factors alone would make it a perfectly reasonable reaction.

But somehow she had the feeling there was more to it than that...

Was this the sort of thing that started happening to you, once you knew the Doctor?

Whatever the answer, there was no point in just standing where she was. If she was to find anything out, she needed to leave this place.

She took a deep breath and began to walk cautiously forward, eyes constantly scanning the mist for a sign of any identifiable feature, trying to ignore the roiling sensation of unease in her stomach.

But she drew courage from the fact that there was one positive aspect to her predicament.

She looked down at her arm, now quite definitely horripilating, and felt the unmistakable intensification of the telltale sensation in her head.

Wherever she now was, the Doctor, too, was here.

Somewhere...



Chapter 3

Accusations of the Dead

The Doctor, walking blindly through the grey mist, began to become aware that something was changing. The mist was beginning either to dissipate, or grow paler, as if he was walking towards a strong light source.

A change in the sensation under the soles of his daps made him look down; the plain grey surface had gone. He was now walking on pale granules of something that looked like white limestone.

He squinted ahead. The mist was definitely dispersing. He walked forward again; then, as he stepped beyond its boundary, he halted abruptly, staring at what its absence revealed.

He was standing in a wide-floored valley, sheer, unclimbable white chalk cliffs rising on either side. The valley stretched away from him into the distance; somewhere at its far end, out of his sight, the light source, whatever it was, was turning the sky an unnatural, luminous white.

About two hundred yards away, the TARDIS stood in the middle of the valley floor. If he were to walk to it, ordinarily it would only take him perhaps a couple of minutes at most.

But between him and it, scattered across the entire floor of the valley, lay hundreds of people, sprawled in all manner of contorted attitudes on the white ground.

Dead people.

And he knew they were dead because he recognized so many of them.

He knelt by the nearest. It was Jabe Ceth Ceth Jafe, of the Forest of Cheem, who had died helping him save Platform One and all the lives on it from destruction through the machinations of Lady Cassandra O'Brien Dot Delta Seventeen, "the Last Human". Jabe lay staring with wide, dead eyes at his face, much of her skin – or bark – blackened and charred by the flames that had killed her as she sacrificed herself to help him.

Which was a little strange, because he knew that she had been completely consumed by those flames. Yet here she was, still recognizable.

His face, as he rose to his feet again, was set in haggard lines; though his current physical appearance was that of a man in his mid to late thirties, now, had anyone been looking at him, it would have been easy to believe he was more than nine hundred years old.

The lines became still more marked as he began to pick his way around the still figures – the only way he could reach the TARDIS – recognizing more and more of them with each pace. Who had brought them all here, and how?

Faces he knew kept coming into his view.

Harriet Jones, killed by the Daleks after using the sub-wave network to alert him to the Earth's 'abduction' into the Medusa Cascade.

Gwyneth, the Cardiff girl from 1869 who had immolated herself to prevent the Gelth invading the Earth through the spatio-temporal rift.

Sorvin and Praygat, the two Tritovores crashed on San Helios, who had tried to help him, only to be devoured by one of the stingrays that had reduced the whole planet and every living thing on it to sand.

Sir Robert McLeish, who had died back in 1879, protecting Queen Victoria from the alien werewolf.

Angela Price, known to her colleagues as Mrs Moore – killed helping him fight John Lumic's attempt to convert the human race to Cybermen.

In a group of three, Lynda Moss and the two Programmers, whose names he had never even known; who had lost their lives helping him resist the Daleks in their attempt to take over Satellite Five and invade the Earth.

Lying close together, there were Bannakaffalatta, Morvin and Foon Van Hoff and – most painful of all for the Doctor to behold – Astrid Peth; none of whom had survived the crisis of the Starship Titanic.

Luke Rattigan, the teenage genius who had given up his own life to take the Doctor's place and save him from death at the hands of the Sontarans.

Mr Rocastle, headmaster of Farringham School in 1913, slain by the Family of Blood. The Doctor could still hear Joan Redfern's voice echoing in his memory, challenging him unanswerably: "If the Doctor had never visited us – never chosen this place – on a whim – would anybody here have died...?" Rocastle, for one, wouldn't have...

It was *so* hard to walk past them all, see their faces, all their open, dead eyes staring at him. Because he knew what they all had in common. One way or another, they'd all died because of him, because of actions he'd taken. Something, or someone, was really hammering home a point...

Given that, there was one face he had expected to see that wasn't there, or at least that he hadn't seen yet.

Jenny, his genetic daughter, extrapolated from his DNA on Messaline, who had been shot stepping into the path of the bullet meant for him.

If the reason for the presence of all those he'd seen was as he suspected, she must be here somewhere, surely. He assumed she was one of the many bodies he hadn't looked at, was trying so hard not to look at.

And he was glad of that.

Too much pain, too much guilt, could break even him.

As he drew near to the TARDIS, he spotted another familiar figure. Jack Harkness. His eyes, like all the others, seeming to be fastened on the Doctor's face.

The Doctor wondered which of Jack's deaths had placed him in this macabre gathering. Then he wondered how Jack could *be* dead, like the rest... But there was no mistaking it. Dead people *don't* look as if they're just sleeping. People *playing* dead don't look truly dead, because the energy of life still animates their cells, and the look is different.

Dead people look *dead*.

And Jack, lying there, was definitely dead.

The Doctor stumbled to a halt beside the TARDIS, and looked past it, toward the light source. An unbearable number of bodies lay along the valley floor, stretching out of sight. Hundreds and hundreds of them. Surely there couldn't be quite so many! Not for the reason he suspected. Perhaps Kamelion was out there, somewhere. Sara Kingdom... Katarina... Adric...

"Quite a roll call, huh?"

The voice coming so unexpectedly from behind him made him start violently, and spin round to face the speaker.

Jack Harkness. Not dead after all.

He was on his feet, fastidiously brushing limestone dust from his greatcoat. He glanced up and saw the Doctor looking at him, and gestured at the massed ranks of dead bodies surrounding them.

"It's kind of impressive, in a perverse sort of way," he went on, casually. "This score you've racked up."

"What score?" said the Doctor, hoarsely.

"Us, of course," said Jack, as if surprised at his obtuseness.

"And who – exactly – is 'us'?" the Doctor asked, studying him closely.

The question he was furiously trying to answer in his own mind was: Was this really Jack Harkness?

It certainly looked like him: the dark hair, the blue eyes, the movie star good looks, the blue RAF greatcoat – and the holstered pistol on the hip under it. The North American-accented voice.

And yet...

There was something about that voice, an extra quality to its tone, that wasn't quite normal. It was almost as if – as if two people were speaking at once. One here, the other very distant and quiet, little more than a whisper – but both speaking in unison.

The Doctor couldn't suppress a shudder of disquieting recollection. That concept had awakened a memory he usually tried to keep buried, because it was so disturbing to remember how very scared he'd been.

Not just scared, actually.

Terrified. Truly terrified.

His encounter with the unknown entity that had possessed Sky Silvestry on the planet Midnight. It had first echoed all his words, then begun to speak in absolute unison with him – and then ahead of him... It had captured him, rendered him completely helpless, incited the other passengers on the shuttle to kill him.

And it had so very, very nearly succeeded.

He couldn't have prevented it; he'd been totally powerless. The only reason he was still alive was because someone else had saved him. The Hostess. She had realized what was happening and trapped the entity that had become Sky Silvestry before sacrificing herself to kill that being. He owed his own continuing life to a woman whose name he still didn't know to this day.

He always tried to avoid that memory, because he couldn't remember another occasion, either before or since, when he had been so helpless, so without control over his own destiny, so *afraid* – for himself, his own life.

And there she was. The Hostess.

He could have sworn he hadn't taken his eyes off Jack, but he found he was looking right at her.

Coincidence...?

She lay on her back, her arms outflung, the strong, beautiful bone structure of her face still showing the strength of her character, even in death. And like all the others, her eyes seemed to be staring directly into his.

"Us? Oh, we're the fall guys," said Jack sardonically. "The ones who get taken in by the charisma. So we believe you when you tell us everything's gonna be all right, *you're* gonna save us. We do what you tell us. And that's why we die. Because we *listen* to you. We *believe* the myth. And this is where it gets us."

The Doctor so wanted to deny it! But, despite the multitude of words spinning around in his brain, somehow he couldn't find the right ones to do it. The ones that would convince himself, let alone Jack...

Jack looked at him, and snorted derisively.

"Hah! Can't argue, can you?" he said, that weird double-voice quality ladling extra mockery onto the question. "The man who never stops talking. Can't talk his way out of this one! The Time Lord who strides godlike through time and the universe making life and death decisions for everyone else. Arbitrarily wielding the power to save and to damn. '*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings!*'" he suddenly declaimed, spreading both arms in a gesture that encompassed all the dead in the valley. "*Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!*"

He dropped his arms and looked at the Doctor again.

"So – make you proud, does it? Seeing your handiwork all laid out in one place like this? Hundreds of us? *Thousands* of us? Gotta hand it to you – you work on a scale like no-one else, ever." He spotted a tear coursing down the Doctor's cheek. "Hey, look at that! Crocodile tears! From the man who pretends to care so much, but what he really does is *this*." He gestured at the surrounding bodies again.

Despite his deep distress, the Doctor was also focusing on that strange voice quality of Jack's.

"Why are you here, Jack?" he asked, ignoring the next tear trickling down his face. "What's this about? Why are you doing this?"

He was asking, not only because he wanted an answer, but because he wanted to hear Jack's voice again. Or, to be strictly accurate, not Jack's; rather, that distant whispering dual voice seconding everything he said.

Or – was it the other way round? Was Jack speaking not his own words, but somebody else's?

Back to the original question – was this really Jack Harkness at all?

“Hey, I’m the logical spokesman for everyone, don’t you think?” Jack said, his face wearing an expression close to a sneer. “Most of us just get to die the once on account of you. Me, I’m *special*. ’Cos I get to do it over and over. I’m *privileged*. I’m the guy gets to die for you on a *regular* basis.” His lip curled.

The Doctor stared at him without expression, his mind racing as it analyzed the sounds he was hearing. Now that he was paying it attention, there was no doubt. It was the faint, faraway voice that was leading the conversation, Jack’s voice that was seconding it. So closely that they still almost sounded as one. But they weren’t. The difference could only be measured in fractions of milliseconds, but it was there.

His eyes narrowed. Jack looked at him strangely, as if realizing what he was thinking, then smiled. A mocking smile. He didn’t speak, but nevertheless the Doctor heard, in his mind, the faint whisper.

“Clever, clever Doctor...”

Then Jack was speaking again, walking forward to stand in front of him.

“So since I’m here, I get to deliver a message. From all of us. Specially for you, Doctor.” Again he spread his arms out toward all the bodies in a gesture of inclusiveness. “This is to let you know what we think about what you’ve done to us.”

Before the Doctor could react, the outspread right hand closed into a fist, and drove savagely straight at the Doctor’s face.

The punch, delivered with all of Jack Harkness’s considerable brawn behind it, sent the Doctor crashing against the TARDIS, the back of his head making contact with stunning force.

Arms spread wide, hands wilting from his wrists, he slid limply down the side of the TARDIS and into darkness.

As he did so, there was a very faint awareness of a strange buzzing sound, before everything faded completely.

Chapter 4

The Girl Who Loses People

Finn felt as if she’d been walking forever through the swirling grey fog in uncanny silence; almost as if she’d never done anything else, existed anywhere else. Had never been free of this feeling of unease, perpetual perturbation.

If only she could find the Doctor!

She’d overcome her initial reservations about calling out, and every few minutes she stopped and yelled, at the top of her voice, “DOCTOR!” But without any reply.

As she walked, she began to get a gradual feeling that something about her environment was changing. The mist was growing darker, as if she was approaching something that was cutting out what light there was. She stopped, and hesitated, but there was still nothing else to do but go forward. She walked on, warily, into the deepening gloom.

Suddenly it was as if the mist had completely vanished, as if she’d stepped through some boundary. Where she now stood was completely black. She could feel a surface under her feet, could see her own body when she looked down at it, as if a spotlight were trained on her. But there was no visible light source. There was nothing to be seen but a blackness so complete it was positively disorienting; for the first time in her life, she was experiencing the full truth of the concept ‘no points of reference’.

It was extremely unnerving to apparently be standing on nothing at all...

She fervently wished the Doctor was with her; if that were so, maybe she wouldn’t be feeling so afraid.

Then, almost imperceptibly, a faint sound began to impinge on the silence.

At first she couldn’t make out what it was.

Gradually it started to become recognizable, familiar. It was the sound of an engine; a large one, like a lorry, a truck engine.

As the muffled roar grew in volume, she realized she could hear more than one; there were at least two, maybe three vehicles, apparently heading toward her through the dark.

And then another sound was added to the mix. Rain. She could hear rain. Pouring rain, hitting a hard surface of some kind.

What was going on?

Then her puzzled expression began to dissolve into horror.

She'd realized what that combination of sounds meant.

"No..." she whispered. "No. No! NO!" Her voice rose in increasing desperation and denial. But it made no difference.

Out there, in the dark, emerging out of gloom, came the first lorry; a huge articulated vehicle, well over forty feet long, its sides glistening from the invisible rain, its engine roaring loudly. It seemed to be about fifty yards away, relative to where she stood, so she could see its full length, and close behind it the second, just like it.

And between the two, every detail of it clear to her view, was the small white car she'd been dreading to see.

Worse still, everything seemed to slur into slow motion, so she was forced to witness it all in stark detail.

Through the car's windows she could see her mother beating at the glass, her mouth distorted with terror; behind her the more shadowy figure of her father, gesticulating desperately at her, as if exhorting her to help them in some way. In the back, her grandparents clung to each other with wide, terrified eyes and open mouths, imploring her to do something, to stop what was about to happen.

But she couldn't move; couldn't even speak. Something was paralyzing her instinctive reactions, so she couldn't even call out, or run towards them.

And it didn't allow her to shut her eyes so as not to see the moment when the second lorry aquaplaned into the back of the first, crushing the car between them, drawn out into exquisite agony by the slow-motion action; she had no choice but to look at, linger on, the faces of her family as they died.

Suddenly everything seemed to return to normal speed. The locked vehicles slid away to her left, back into the darkness. She could no longer see them, but she could still hear the clash of metal, the squealing of skidding tyres – and the screams. She couldn't shut out the screams...

Once the sounds, too, had faded to nothingness, she found she could move again. Which meant she could bring her hands up to cover her face, her fingers made wet by the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Then a voice spoke. A man's voice. Saying her name, softly, tauntingly. Almost singing it...

"Fi-inn... Oh, Fi-inn..."

At the sound of *that* voice she froze, her hands still covering her eyes. Not him! *Please*, let it not be him! Not – *him*...

There came a soft chuckle.

"It's no good, Finn. I'm here. You can't hide from me. So you might as well look at me. I'm not going away. You have to hear me. You don't have a choice, you know."

Her heart contracted with revulsion and fear. But he was right. She had no choice. She had to face him. The man she'd hoped she'd never see again.

She slowly dropped her hands and raised red-rimmed eyes to look at him. Him, and what was around him.

He was standing between the middle two of four beds, all placed in a line, like in a hospital ward. No – not beds. Mortuary slabs. The dead bodies of her family were laid out on them, covered to the shoulders by white sheets. Their eyes were closed; their skin, where it was visible, was ashen grey and terrible to look at. She raised her eyes so as not to have to do so – but that meant she had to look at *him*.

He stood between her mother and her father, hands extended to touch each, almost possessively. His face wore a mocking smile.

"Did you think you'd never see me again?" he challenged her.

As he spoke, she subliminally registered that there was a slightly strange quality to that far too familiar voice. Like a whispering echo. But she couldn't think about that now. Not while trying to emotionally deal with his presence.

"You should have known better," he taunted her. "I'll always be in the background. You'll never be free of me. I'll always be there, in the back of your mind, ready to surface when you least want me."

He looked at her father, then at her mother, then back at her.

"Losing them made you so easy for me. You had no emotional defences. You were so, so vulnerable. So easy to deceive." He grinned. "You really thought I loved you, didn't you? Really thought I cared." He emitted a derisive snort of laughter. "Ohhh, Finn! What a naïve little fool you were! And are!"

Once again, she was helpless to respond. She couldn't speak; something prevented her. She could only listen. And suffer.

"So I thought I'd just remind you about that. That you're a fool. A fool who's lost everyone. And you always will be."

Not everyone, she contradicted him fiercely, in the silence of her own mind. *There IS still someone who cares about me. Really cares. Not like you.*

He sniggered.

"Oh, I can tell what you're thinking," he said with casual cruelty. "But you're wrong. Or you soon will be. You're a loser, Finn. You lose *people*. So you'll lose him, just like you've lost everyone. It's only a matter of time. Remember that. Everyone. Except me. I'll *always* be here. As long as you live."

He fell silent, and went on smiling at her in that deeply disturbing way.

Her eyes closed in rejection of him and everything he had done to her, everything he was saying.

When the silence persisted, she opened them again.

He was gone; everything was gone. There was only blackness in front of her and around her.

Then another sound began to become audible. Another voice. Calling her.

With a leap of her heart, she responded to this one. A leap that combined both joy and fear.

It was the Doctor's voice, and he was calling to her.

But desperately. For help.

She couldn't see him, but she ran forward into the darkness in the direction of his voice.

"Doctor! Doctor, where are you?" she shouted.

"Here! I'm here! Help me, Finn! I can't hold on!"

Suddenly she saw something in the blackness. What looked like the rim of a precipice, isolated in the gloom. She ran toward it, and knelt by the edge.

Below her an earth cliff face stretched down into endless darkness. It didn't feel stable; even her slight weight this near the edge was making crumbs of soil loosen and trickle down.

And some three feet or so below her, clinging desperately to a small, wizened shrub of some sort growing out of the cliff face, was the Doctor. He looked up at her with an agonized, white face.

"Finn! You've got to help me!" he gasped. "This thing's giving way! Give me your hand, quick!"

She instantly went down full length on her stomach and stretched down toward him, while he strained upwards with one long arm, trying to reach her. But he was just too far away. Their fingertips brushed, but she couldn't stretch far enough to enable him to get a grip, no matter how she strove to extend her reach. And she could feel the earth edge crumbling under her weight. Earth trickled down in increasing quantities, falling on his face and making him gasp and blink the granules out of his eyes.

"Hurry, Finn! I'm going to fall!" He sounded desperate. She could see the shrub starting to pull out of the earth surface against which he hung, flailing feet dangling below him.

She was afraid, very afraid; she had a thing about heights, and the cliff plunged so far below, out of sight...

But this was *the Doctor* needing her!

She threw all caution to the wind and sacrificed the precarious safety of her position to lean further out, further down, feeling more earth give way under her as she did so. But at last he could reach her hand; he gripped it with his own, just as the shrub pulled completely away from the cliff face.

Instantly she knew his weight was going to be too much for her.

And she could see on his face the terrible moment when he realized it, too.

No matter how hard they strove to grip each other's hand, his was inexorably sliding out of hers. She tried to bring her other hand down to clutch him with that one, too, but it was too late.

Their anguished eyes locked as their hands slid apart, and stayed locked as he fell backwards into the bottomless pit below, disappearing from her sight, swallowed by the blackness.

"DOCTOR!" she screamed, stretching rigid fingers futilely into the darkness below. "*DOCTOR!*"

"*Finn-n-n-n-n...*!" His own despairing cry Doppler-shifted beyond her hearing into silence.

He was gone. Utterly gone.

She'd failed him. When he really needed her, she'd failed him. Hadn't been able to do what he needed her to do. She'd lost him, and it was her own fault.

She let out a huge, choking gasp. Then another. And then the tears *really* came.

For a while she lay there, sobbing her heart out, her face distorted and made ugly by grief.

She'd lost him. She'd lost the Doctor forever. Just as *he* – the man who so appalled her – had prophesied. Just like everyone else she'd ever cared about.

So she did the only thing left. She didn't even bother to get to her feet. Her fear of heights felt irrelevant as she simply rolled sideways, to the edge of the cliff, and over it. Following him into the darkness.

For a few moments she felt a terrible falling sensation. And was briefly aware of a strange, distant buzz.

Then she felt nothing at all.



Chapter 5

The Universe Become Hell

The Doctor came back to consciousness to realize that he was no longer where he had been. Instead of the limestone valley, he was back in the grey mist.

He climbed to his feet once again and stood for a moment, thinking hard about what he'd just – apparently – experienced, and the implications.

He looked about him, but there was nothing to be seen save the mist. He frowned briefly, then, fighting down the increasing sensation of unease that the swirling grey roused in him, strode forward again. He had an idea it didn't much matter which direction he took.

What did matter was finding out who, or what, was behind what was happening to him. Presumably if he gave them enough opportunity, they'd reveal themselves. And he'd find out what part that machine he'd been investigating played in it all.

So – onwards, and face the next thing. Whatever it turned out to be.

He realized the colour of the mist was changing from grey to black, just as he registered the fact that the surface under his feet had changed, too. He looked down.

He was now walking on a thin strip of metal grating, a walkway no more than three feet wide, without side bars. It had no visible means of support.

He poked a foot cautiously over the side of the grating. There was nothing there, no surface, only empty space. He lay down full length, and reached down with his hand as far as it would go. Nothing. The same was true of the other side.

He stood up again, tried turning and walking back the way he had come, but it didn't take him long to realize he'd passed the point at which he'd last been on the grey surface; it seemed that the walkway was now all there was.

So he turned again, and followed it forward in the original direction, surrounded by nothing but featureless blackness.

What seemed a long time later, he realized that the walkway was about to come to an abrupt end. A few yards further, and it simply stopped. Again he experimented with his foot, over the end; again there was nothing below the grating.

He considered what to do. If he couldn't go any further in this direction, perhaps he should try the other way after all.

But when he turned, he saw to his horror that the grating behind him had vanished, as if suddenly severed by an invisible knife. All he had to stand upon was a length of walkway no more than three feet by six.

The rest was, quite simply, gone.

He felt a lurch of fear in the pit of his stomach. Which made him a little angry, because he knew something about that feeling was wrong; it wasn't natural to him to feel like this, no matter how dire the circumstances. Something was artificially inducing fear in him.

So he set his teeth and chose to ignore it.

And froze in surprise, as he turned to face forward again.

There was the TARDIS! Motionless, standing on nothing, like the grating under his feet.

But more than a hundred feet away from him – completely unreachable.

As he stared at it, he became aware of a faint, sibilant whispering sound – whether in his ears or inside his head, he couldn't tell. Gradually it grew louder, and he could identify it.

Laughter.

Someone was laughing. At him. At his predicament.

"Who are you?" the Doctor shouted. "What do you want?"

"Why, I want to thank you, Doctor," chuckled the Voice.

"Thank me for what?" snapped the Doctor.

"For my existence! I wouldn't be here without you. I was dormant, but you've woken me. Oh, I owe you such gratitude for that!"

That voice – the Doctor realized it sounded familiar. *Who?*

Then he identified it.

It sounded like Professor Yana! The man who had not known he was the Master until he had opened the fob watch that restored his Time Lord nature and memories. Was the Master behind all this?

Yet there was still that strange double quality to the voice, as there had been with Jack.

"Who are you?" the Doctor asked again, angrily.

"Ohhh, I'm not going to tell you *that*," said the Voice, smugly. "I'm going to see if you can work it out all by yourself. See if you can recognize me despite all the guises I can use. Oh, it's going to be such *fun* to see if you

can do it! All the things that are going to happen to you in the meanwhile, Doctor! All the clues I'm going to give you! And while I'm waiting, I can laugh at your pathetic little efforts to escape me. Because you never can, you know. You're *mine*, now. I will be your Lord! And Master! For as long as you live! Ohhh, and how *long* you live, Time Lord!"

The last words struck a chill through the Doctor's defiance.

"All right – if you won't tell me that, tell me where I am. Where is this place?" he challenged.

"This?" The Voice counterfeited astonishment. "Why, Doctor, this is the Universe!"

"What do you mean?" the Doctor asked suspiciously.

"What you see all around you. This is all that is left of the Universe. You thought you'd stopped Davros triggering the Reality Bomb, didn't you? Thought you'd saved everyone."

The Voice paused to laugh mockingly.

"Poor, deluded Doctor! There were too many alternate universes," it went on. "You succeeded in one, but there were, of course, countless others. One of them a universe in which you were not present. A universe in which the Reality Bomb exploded. And from *that* one it spread throughout all the parallel universes, all the alternate dimensions. To here. All of reality is gone, save for this little bubble in which you still exist. On Malcassairo you were closer than you'd ever been to the end of the universe. Now you're far beyond that. Let me show you the limits of your existence as they are now. As they will be, from now on!"

As the Voice spoke, a shiny transparent sphere, like an enormous soap bubble, suddenly came into being around the Doctor and his fragment of walkway, enclosing both him and the TARDIS.

The Doctor looked around him, wildly.

"Yes, look at it, Doctor," the Voice gloated. "The new confines of your existence. Enjoy it! Savour it! No suns, no stars, no moons, no planets. No worlds for you to visit. Nowhere to travel to through time. Just as well! Your TARDIS forever out of reach. No people, no living beings of any race. History, gone!"

It chuckled maliciously before it went on.

"The Face of Boe told you 'You Are Not Alone'. No longer true, Doctor! Now, 'You Are *Forever* Alone'! Just you, with nothing to do and nowhere to go. For all eternity. And can you even escape by dying? How can you know? Perhaps your personal reality is now fixed, frozen in this one moment of stasis. Perhaps you are trapped forever in your own personal hell! In *Hell*, Doctor!" it ended, with a venomous snap.

The Doctor held himself still, trembling with fear and frustration. He wanted to believe the Voice was lying, but he couldn't dismiss the terrible, terrible doubt filling his mind; the doubt infecting him with a resistless fear that what he was hearing was the truth.

That he'd always be here, locked in this bubble, unable ever to do anything again. For time without end.

The Voice was right. For him, this was Hell.

If it was, he wasn't staying.

As the Voice began to laugh again, first softly, then rising in volume and malice, he walked to the very end of the grating, and looked downwards.

Then he stepped off.

And once again, with that strange, abrupt buzz sounding briefly in his ears, fell into blackness, mind and body both.

Chapter 6

"Get Out Of My Life!"

Gradually, causing her a certain amount of surprise as the reality of the fact filtered through, it penetrated Finn's consciousness that she was not, after all, dead.

Instead she was lying on her face, her left cheek pressed against a cold, hard surface. She forced her eyes open; she was back in the swirling grey mist. With a groan, she sat up and looked around her.

What now? What had happened to her? How could she possibly have survived the fall down the cliff? But obviously she had. And perhaps – she suddenly realized something important, with mounting hope and excitement – perhaps, since she was still alive, the Doctor might be, too!

But where was he? Certainly not here. She was alone in the mist.

She stood up, cupped her hands around her mouth, and yelled, “Doctor! Doctor, where are you?”

Utter silence greeted her call.

She had to find him! But which way should she go? She had no way of telling where, in the featureless murk, he might be. She bit her lip, wondering what to do. Then she shut her eyes, spun herself round a few times until she had no idea which way she was pointing, opened her eyes again, and walked off in the direction she was facing.

A short while later a faint brushing whisper of sound made her look down at her feet. She realized she was treading on grass, short, yellowish, wiry-looking grass. All of a sudden everything seemed to grow bright around her. At least, bright compared to the mist... When she looked up, startled, that had vanished, as before.

She was standing on the top of a hill in the middle of an expanse of moorland. Sweeping curves of land, falling down under mantles of browning bracken and black-brown dead heather to boggy, waterlogged valley bottoms. It must be winter, for the vegetation to be such colours. The sky was covered with an unbroken blanket of leaden grey cloud. There was not a sound to be heard; no wind, no birds, no people – nothing. The air felt damp, as if it had been raining recently.

How had she got here? *Why* was she here? Where *was* here?

She looked around, but couldn’t see a single living thing. At first.

Then, looking down the slope of the hill on which she stood, she saw a figure.

A tall, slim figure, clad in a brown trench coat, hands in trouser pockets, standing with his back to her. Apparently contemplating a stretch of waterlogged sphagnum moss in front of him, the bright green a vivid splash of colour in the otherwise drab landscape.

She expelled a gasp of joy and began to run down the hill, careless of the risk of falling on the slippery wetness of the grassed slope.

“Doctor! Doctor! Are you all right?” she shouted as she ran.

Oddly, he didn’t react to the sound of her voice; didn’t react at all until she was only a few feet away. Then he turned, with what looked strangely like reluctance, to face her.

It was instantly clear that something was profoundly wrong.

Because at sight of her, he immediately recoiled, his face a picture of repugnance.

“Oh, not *you* again!” he said, in a tone of intense disgust, his lip curling in distaste. “I was hoping I’d got rid of *you*.”

Finn stumbled to a halt, her happiness abruptly choked off, her mouth dropping open in shock. Surely he didn’t mean that!

“Doctor?” she ventured uncertainly. “What’s the matter? Are you all right?”

“I might be, if *you* didn’t keep turning up everywhere I go,” he said, with every evidence of extreme irritation. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“What –? I don’t understand –” she began, confused, but he overrode her.

“No, you *don’t* understand, do you? Not even with some of a genius’s mind in your head! And *still* you don’t get it. Oh, it takes real talent to have access to the most brilliant mind in the universe and still be so *stupid*, doesn’t it?” His eyes flayed her with contempt and scorn.

She felt tears welling up at the cutting sarcasm.

“What’s wrong?” she said, choking back a sob. “What have I done to make you so angry?”

“Ohhh, how long have you got?” he demanded, starting to walk around her at an ominous, slow pace, so she had to keep turning to face him. “The fact that you cling worse than flypaper? That you’ve got my mind in yours, so we’re linked whether I like it or not? And I don’t! Talk about invasion of privacy! It wasn’t *my* idea to give

away my personal secrets to some complete stranger! How can I ever be sure you can really be trusted with them? Of course *you'll* tell me you can, but why should I believe you?"

"But you can! I've never said a word to anyone! I *promised* you!" she protested.

"Yeah – so *you* say." He dismissed her desperate assurance with scorn. "And even when I decide in a moment of weakness to drag you around with me...! I've travelled with a lot of people in my time, and some of them have been brilliant. Really brilliant. But *you*! You're not a *help* – you're a *liability*. You can't even *run* at a decent speed! You're *useless*! Hear me? *Useless*! And I'm fed up of it! Fed up of you hanging round me like an infatuated teenager!"

"Doctor...?" she pleaded, her voice cracking in the middle of the word over another sob.

"*Doctor...?*" he mimicked cruelly, and uttered an exclamation of disgust. "How did I ever get saddled with such a pointless, useless –" He cut himself short, and stood glaring at her with angry, resentful eyes.

Suddenly he took a swift pace toward her, and his bearing was so threatening that she instinctively took a step backward.

"Yeah, that's it," he agreed in a low, contemptuous voice. "Back off. Go away. Get away from me. And *stay* away from me." He took another stride toward her, and again she retreated.

It was at that moment she became aware of the faint, whispering double quality of his voice, the way she'd heard it before when *he* – the man she couldn't bear to think about – had taunted her. But she had no attention to spare for it now, with the Doctor advancing toward her so menacingly.

"Get out of my head, Fionnula Thornton," he snarled. "Get out of my head." He took another step. "Get out of my *way*." Another step. "Get out of my *LIFE*!"

As she took her next trembling pace in retreat from him, her foot caught on a tussock of vegetation, and she stumbled backwards. Suddenly the ground under her feet was soft and yielding, and she couldn't keep her balance. She fell back onto a spongy surface that gave under her with a soggy splash. She flailed her arms to try to find something she could cling to, only now aware of the danger she was in.

She'd fallen into the sphagnum bog! And she was sinking into it!

"Doctor! Help me!" she gasped, wrestling to find something to hold on to.

But when she looked at him, he was just standing there, hands in his pockets, regarding her struggles with a chillingly cruel smile on his face.

And he obviously had no intention whatever of doing anything to help her.

Maybe – maybe he'd even deliberately backed her into the bog! He'd kept circling her as he spoke, until her back had been to it, and he could see she was unaware of its relative position to her as she began to retreat from him...

What *could* she have done to suddenly make him hate her so much? she wondered briefly. But only for a moment. Her body's instinctive reaction of panic as it sank into the muddy softness of the bog was now overriding everything else. Her desperately clutching hands found nothing to cling to, no refuge, no safety.

"*Doctor!*" she screamed. That is, she tried to scream, but her throat had closed up and it came out as no more than a terrified whisper.

He just stood there, looking at her, his head slightly on one side, as if observing an interesting experiment.

"Doctor! What's happened to you? This is *cruel*! This isn't who you are!" she gasped, her voice tight with terror as she felt herself sliding further and further down into the bog.

"No?" he said musingly, as if considering a completely new concept. Then his eyes fastened on her face again, and he smiled, unpleasantly. "Well, perhaps you don't know me as well as you think you did. Had you thought of *that*?"

Her mind was an incoherent jumble of terror and astonishment, as the surface of the bog touched her neck, her chin. She could hardly move her arms now that her shoulders had been absorbed by the quaking cover of mud and sphagnum.

But beyond even her body's rejection of imminent death, she just couldn't grasp the idea that he really was going to let her die. He wasn't going to save her! He was going to watch her sink, and suffocate, and not lift a finger to stop it.

The Doctor. The Doctor was going to do *that*.

The mud was filling her mouth, making her splutter and choke, and try to spit it out. But there was nowhere to spit it out to, as the bog closed in over her head.

"Bye, bye, Finn," she heard him say distantly, as the mud began to clog her ears. "Perhaps now you'll leave me alone, eh?"

And just for an instant, as if from very far away, she heard another voice, also whispering mockingly, "*Bye, bye, Finn...*"

The very last thing she saw, before the mud covered her eyes, was him waving goodbye to her. Cheerfully. With a delighted, self-satisfied smile. As if –

But she never completed the thought, as the distant buzz sounded again and thick, cloying darkness enclosed her mind as well as her body.

Chapter 7

The Blue Veil

The Doctor came to again in the mist. He lay there for a moment, gathering his thoughts, analyzing his experiences so far. Then he got to his feet, swaying slightly, and looked around him. As ever, the mist was blank and featureless.

There must be a way of finding out what was happening here. If only he could work out what it was! But he still didn't have enough data. Though he was beginning to see a pattern in what was happening...

Perhaps this time he'd just stay where he was. See if anything happened if he didn't move from this spot. On each previous occasion he'd taken the initiative, left the mist, walked away from his initial position. Perhaps if he didn't, the something or someone doing all this would have to come to him, instead; be forced to break cover in some way.

Decisively, he folded down to sit cross-legged on the grey surface, determinedly ignoring the incipient dread that he felt each time he was in this environment, and waited.

*

Finn became conscious of the fact that she was lying on her back on the cold, grey surface yet again, surrounded by the mist.

For a moment that was all she could register. Then memory came flooding back, forcing her to re-live the terror and the despair and the horror of the appalling way she'd thought she was dying. She'd always had a secret fear of death by suffocation of some kind.

But even worse was the recollection of the psychological horror of the Doctor's words, his tone, his expression...

She rolled onto her side, and for a while she lay there simply crying, her whole body shaking with distress.

After a while she calmed down, and propped herself up on one hand, wiping her pale and tear-streaked face with the other.

Then she sat up properly, and began to think.

All right – perhaps it was true; though he'd never given her the slightest indication of it, it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that the Doctor might resent her having his mind in hers.

Though if he really felt like that, she reasoned, he could have taken it away from her at any time. And he hadn't...

But since she had it, she might as well use it. Try to work out what was happening. She couldn't make connections like he could, or at the same speed, but she could try to use logic the way he would. And maybe some fact, some memory of his would be triggered if she did.

She reviewed her recent experience, striving to assess it dispassionately. Which was hard. Very hard. But as she did so, one thing became blindingly clear.

That *hadn't* been the Doctor.

It *couldn't* have been the Doctor.

Because the Doctor would never behave like that.

Even if it was true that he didn't want her around, resented the link between her mind and his, he would never – *never* – have resolved the situation by *killing* her; he would merely have done what she'd already concluded – simply taken it away from her. He would never have chosen to watch her die in terror, slowly suffocating. And *enjoyed* it...

It was simply inconceivable. Out of the question. *Impossible*. Couldn't be. Full stop. Period, as Jack might have put it.

So – not the Doctor, then.

But if not, who had it been?

No answer to that, yet.

But there had been that strange double-voiced quality whenever he spoke, like a distant whisper. And those last words from that whispering voice. Who – or what – was that? Bear it in mind!

Another thing: if she'd been in her right mind, she'd have known straight away it wasn't him, for all the reasons she'd just listed.

But she hadn't been in her right mind. She hadn't been starting from a level playing field.

Because every time she woke up in this mist, there was that underlying sensation of crawling trepidation, unease, disquiet, infiltrating her mind and her emotions.

The question was, Was that on purpose? Not a natural by-product of this strange environment? Was somebody deliberately infecting her with fear before she faced each new situation? What purpose would it serve, if that were true? To make her more susceptible to the emotional intensity of each sequence of events?

She didn't know. But what she did know was that each time, so far, terrifying and distressing though each experience had been, she hadn't yet died as a result. Instead, she'd been brought back into the mist. Still alive. Restored to default.

Perhaps there was some way she could use that knowledge this time.

She got to her feet, and began to walk once more into the whorls and vortices of the mist.

*

The Doctor had been sitting motionless for some considerable time before he began to sense that the mist was thinning around him.

So he was right! Since he hadn't gone to meet the next thing, whoever or whatever was behind all this had had to change the *modus operandi* and bring it to him. So either it didn't want, or couldn't afford, his not being involved in what was happening. Whether that would turn out to be a useful datum, he'd have to see.

Meanwhile, what was happening this time?

As the mist vanished, he found he was sitting on the floor of a hall. A hall of gargantuan proportions, as if built for giants; its ceiling loomed hundreds of feet above him, the walls soaring up dizzily to meet it. It appeared to be constructed of polished, ochre-coloured marble, if the surface on which he sat was any guide. Massive pillars of smooth marble lined the walls, equidistantly spaced, ascending majestically to the ceiling.

He wasn't surprised to see the TARDIS standing not far away from him, its dark reflection indistinct on the shining floor.

He got to his feet and went over to it to try the door, but with no more success than before. As he'd suspected.

He stepped back from it and began to rotate in a slow circle, surveying every detail of his surroundings.

In front of him, hundreds of feet away, a huge entranceway punctured the far wall of the hall. Immense double doors, flanked by two of the monolithic pillars, filled it.

But as he turned and saw what was at the other end of the hall, he lost all interest in everything else.

He started to walk toward what he saw, scanning it with intent, assessing eyes.

The entire far end of the hall toward which he was progressing was not made of the marble. Instead, it looked almost as if it was made of light; liquid, pale blue light. Its opaque surface was perfectly flat, yet gave the impression of rippling, as if it was a veil of water – except that water would never naturally defy gravity to rise in a vertical surface like this.

As he neared it, he looked at it more attentively. It no longer seemed to be opaque; at least, not entirely. There seemed to be shapes in it. More and more, as he got nearer. Shadowy, indistinct outlines that seemed to be human.

He stopped about ten feet from the veil, and surveyed it. The shapes inside it, a shade between grey and pale blue, were motionless, save for the slight illusion of movement imparted by the rippling effect. He tried to make them out more clearly; were they human, as they looked to be?

Then one of the shapes moved closer to the plane of light.

The movement seemed somehow to disrupt the veil, partially dissolving the opacity of its surface; the effect was like a pebble having been thrown into a pond, with the resulting waves of motion reducing the interference of the blue light, making it clearer what lay on the other side.

The Doctor found he was looking at Rose Tyler.

His hearts lurched within his chest, but he didn't move; he waited to see what she would do.

He was looking at her, but she wasn't looking at him. She was staring straight in front of her, past him, as if he wasn't there. The pale blue colouration of the veil made her look somehow blurred in a way he couldn't define, while at the same time every feature was distinct. He didn't bother to analyze the phenomenon; he was too busy staring at her. She stood motionless again, for so long that he dared to take his eyes off her and look at the others around her.

As in the white valley, all people he knew. But a different subset this time. These were all the companions who had travelled with him. Travelled with him, and either left him, or been left behind by him, throughout each of his regenerations. He knew them all, but his searching eyes picked particular faces out of the crowd, once he could tear his gaze away from Rose.

Harry Sullivan! Dear old Harry. With Sarah Jane Smith beside him, as you'd expect. Nyssa, and Tegan Jovanka, Vislor Turlough close by. Donna Noble. Ian Chesterton and Barbara Wright. Jamie McCrimmon, whose name he'd appropriated when he and Rose had been introduced to Queen Victoria. Mickey Smith, standing next to Martha Jones. Ace McShane, pyromaniac *extraordinaire*. Liz Shaw. Leela, her hand, as ever, ready on the haft of her knife. Jo Grant, as he remembered her before she became Jo Jones. Peri Brown. Jack Harkness – again. Even the Brigadier – Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart – resplendent in his UNIT uniform.

And all the others, too – they were all there, every companion who'd ever travelled with him. And all of them not as they were now, but as they had been when they travelled with him.

Had they been snatched out of their own times to be here? Or –

With another lurch of his hearts, he saw someone else he recognized, and took an instinctive step forward.

Finn! Finn was there, too!

But none of them were looking at him; they were all gazing straight ahead of them, out of the pale blue haze, with the same fixed stare as Rose.

The Doctor tore his eyes away from Finn and looked them over collectively, frowning anxiously, waiting for something to happen. They wouldn't all have been gathered together and displayed in this way for no purpose. Sooner or later, one of them – perhaps all of them – would communicate, speak to him.

Thinking back to his experience in the valley, he wondered, with a certain amount of trepidation, what they would say when they did.

The uncomfortable stand-off went on for some time, but the Doctor – for once – was determined not to be the first to speak. Let someone else make the first move.

But his eyes kept returning to Finn, standing like a statue behind the rippling liquid surface.

Why it should matter to him that she was there any more than any of the others, he wasn't sure; they were *all* important, they were *all* dear to him, every *one* of those friends behind that veil of blue light.

But Rose, and Sarah Jane, and now Finn – those three, more than anyone else, mattered to him just that much more, in their different ways and for different reasons.

His eyes had just gone back to Rose when she moved again, so suddenly it almost made him jump.

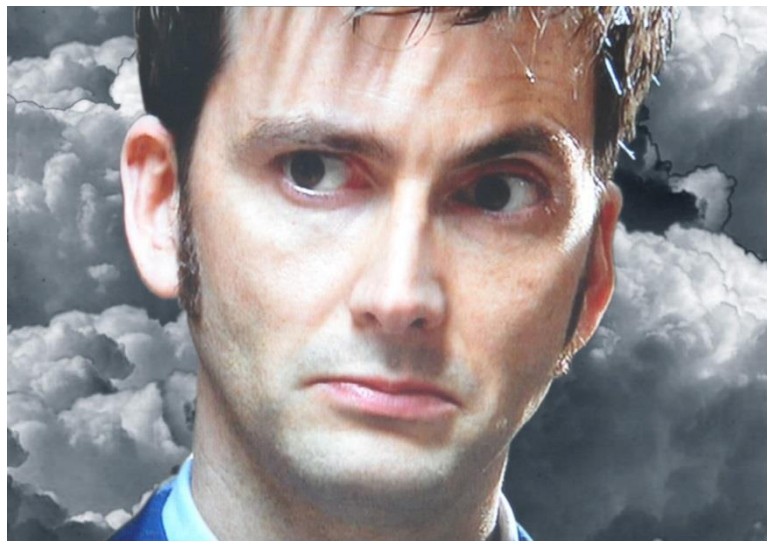
She took another step closer to the rippling veil between them. Then another.

He became aware of other movement. Sarah Jane, too, was taking slow, deliberate paces, wending her way through the other still motionless companions. Martha also was on the move, and Jack. Finn. And Donna.

One by one, they joined Rose in a line right against the plane of light. Then, together, as if at a signal, they stepped through it, and their eyes ceased that blank stare, to fasten on his.

The Doctor scanned their expressionless faces, and decided to take the initiative. He rose up once on the tips of his toes, rocked back onto his heels, and stuck his hands into his trouser pockets.

“Hello, everyone!” he said expansively, as if he'd just strolled into a room where he was meeting them for a social gathering. “Nice to see you! How are we all? Keeping well, behind our blue veil, are we?”



Chapter 8

Recriminations

There was no response. He ploughed on.

“Well, you're a friendly bunch!” he said lightly. “What, nothing to say? I assumed if you'd gone to all this trouble to see me, it must be because you had something to say! But not a peep out of any of you! Come on!” he exhorted them roundly. “*One* of you start the ball rolling! Don't be shy! What's on your minds, then?”

He waited to see who would speak – and whether that whispering other voice would be audible when they did.

“Doctor,” said Rose, in a flat voice.

And there it was! The other voice, leading hers, as he'd expected.

But he still had no way of telling – any more than he had with Jack in the valley – whether she, or any of the six people with their eyes fixed on his face, was really who she seemed to be, with something or someone controlling her; or whether that same unknown something or someone was simply using her – their – physical appearance to get to him.

In more ways than one.

“Rose!” he greeted her gaily. It was straining all his acting ability, projecting this air of lightheartedness, while she – while all of them – fixated on him with those staring eyes. “Lovely to see you again! How’re Jackie and Pete? And little Tony? And how am *I*? The other me. Living up to expectations, I hope?”

“Oh, yeah, you’re doing that all right,” she agreed, scornfully, the other voice whispering in the distance. “Right here and now. Playing silly word games while everyone else goes to hell in a handbasket. Oh, yeah, you’re right on top of things, you are.”

“We-e-ll, I’m pleased to see you, too,” he said, with just a slight edge of his real feelings filtering through into his voice.

“Oh, I’ll bet you are!” she challenged him. “When you thought you’d got shot of me after all! You know, it’s funny. I thought you and me, we were gonna be for always. Remember? But were we? Turns out not, dunnit? I went through all that to get back into the same reality as you, just so’s I could find you again. So we could be back together again. But what happens? You get the chance to get me back, and whaddya do? Dump me back into the alternate universe! Just walk off and leave me stuck with a second-best! Oh, yeah, you’ve lived up to expectations, all right.”

It was hard, so, so hard, not to respond to her accusations. Especially since there was a core of truth at their heart. He pulled off a casual shrug, managed to turn away from her and look at Martha. “And what about you, Martha? Got something you want to say?”

“Why would I want to say anything to you?” Martha shrugged sourly, the whisper reinforcing her words. “I never mattered to you. *She* did,” and she pointed an accusing finger at Rose, who tossed her head in response. “It was always *her*. Second best? That was *me*. All the time I was with you. All the things I did – never counted for anything with you, beside what *she* did. So, no, I don’t think I’ve got one single thing I want to say to you, Doctor.” She folded her arms in a gesture of rejection, and stared at him defiantly.

“But I *have*,” said Sarah Jane at her most formidable, the whisper making her sound doubly so. “Cos I’ve been thinking about that conversation we had, when I said you could’ve come back for me, and you said you couldn’t. I swallowed it at the time, but I’ve been thinking about it since then. And you know what? I don’t buy it. There wasn’t one single thing that *really* stopped you coming back for me after you’d been to Gallifrey. But no, you decided to set a precedent. Which you later used on Rose, it seems, since it worked with me.”

She and Rose looked at each other; Rose nodded slightly.

“You dump us,” Sarah Jane went on. “Just dump us, and don’t come back for us. Even though you could, no matter what you say. Shrug us off, and don’t look back. What did Davros say? ‘*The man who keeps running, who never looks back, because he dare not, out of shame.*’”

She shook her head incredulously.

“I never thought I’d agree with Davros about anything. But you know what? He was right about that! Because who would you see if you did? Me! *Us*! All of us! Still, at least there’s one thing – I can get professional satisfaction out of it. Because I’m a journalist, and I spend my life exposing the truth. And I’ve finally exposed the truth about you, Doctor! Job done!”

The Doctor stared back at her, trying to keep his expression unreadable despite each emotionally bruising attack.

“*Et tu, Jack?*” he said, switching his attention to the man beside her. “Got anything to add to our earlier conversation? The one you punctuated with a punch?”

“Hope it got the message across,” Jack said with an air of satisfaction, the whisper reverberating under his words.

“Oh, it did,” the Doctor assured him, rubbing the side of his face.

"Yeah, well. What everyone else's said – goes for me in spades," Jack assured him, looking at him from under lowered brows. "Gotta give you full marks for consistency, Doctor. Thought you were just pickin' on me. But I guess not. Seems I'm just one of the many. Second best. Dumped. Definitely some themes emerging there! Except not just the once. Oh, no! Again and again. So thanks. For keeping on rubbing it in. Appreciate it."

The Doctor nodded, disregarding the heavy sarcasm. And turned to Finn, waiting silently.

"You, Finn?" he asked, inviting her to speak, dreading what she might say. "What's on your mind?"

"Self-esteem," she said in a low voice, so close to a whisper that that other voice almost sounded louder than she did. "How very easy it was for you to destroy mine. You know, I thought it was such a privilege that you took me on a couple of trips in the TARDIS. Really made me feel like somebody. Only I'm not, am I?"

Her eyes stared into his with a poignant, desolate expression full of hurt, that seemed to burn into his soul.

"Everyone else – they all got to travel with you for quite a while. You asked them to go with you on a full-time basis. But not me. I'm just good for day trips. Or for when you're bored and you feel like having someone around for a short while. But not for the long term. Just every now and again. When you happen to feel like it. I'm not good enough for the long haul, am I?"

She shrugged.

"But don't worry. Got the message, Doctor. I know my place, now. Where you rank me in importance. How you really think of me. So – thanks."

For some reason this accusation hit him harder than all the others. He simply hadn't thought that what he was doing might seem that way to her. He'd thought he was allowing her to get on with her own life; she'd always seemed so grateful for his visits, never asked for more than he'd offered. It had never occurred to him that she might feel belittled, devalued by his not asking her to travel with him on a longer term basis...

He fought down his profound distress, keeping his face impassive, and turned towards Donna.

"And what about you, Donna?" he enquired, trying to ignore the pain of his emotions. "You've never been short of things to say. Anything in particular you want to get off your chest?"

Like Rose, Donna wore an expression of disdain. Something she was very – in fact, extremely! – good at, at the best of times. Not that he'd in any way classify this as 'the best of times'. No, this was hard. Very hard. But he maintained a bright smile on his face and waited for her reply.

"Just wanted to tell you what a wonderfully thrilling life I've got now," she said caustically. And there, again, was the whisper. "But at least now I'm not with someone who risks my life on an hourly basis, and then what does he do for thanks? Takes my memory away from me! I mean, those were the best times of my life. And what did you do? Took it all away from me. Yeah, thanks for that, Doctor!"

There! There was the giveaway! The Doctor fought to keep any hint of his sudden relief and satisfaction out of his eyes, continuing to gaze at Donna as if hanging on her every word.

"Doing what you always do," Donna went on, biting. "Not allowing other people to make their own decisions. 'Cos of course you're the only one who's ever right, aren't you? Maybe I'd rather've kept all that stuff in my head, and died. Rather than go back to leading a dead dull life where nothing ever happens. Didn't ask me about that, did you? Never gave me a choice. No way! Just waded in and did what suited *you*. Why was that, I wonder? Didn't want me on your conscience along with all the rest of it, maybe? But I'm beginning to think you've done me a favour. Wiping you out of my mind. Saves me having to hate you for it, *Doctor!*" She just about spat his own name at him.

And that was when he heard the Voice. Laughing at him again.

His accumulated distress abruptly transmogrified into a towering anger at the sound.

"You're wrong!" he snapped at Donna. "You're *so* wrong! All of you! Wrong! *Wrong!* WRONG!"

He looked up and down the line of inimical faces staring back at him.

"Whoever you are – *whatever* you are – you aren't my friends. Not the real ones. Because they'd never say these things. Because they're not what they really think! Whoever's using you to say them – *he's* wrong! Because I know you – I know *them* – better than that!"

None of them moved or replied, and the Voice laughed even louder.

“Oh, Doctor, you are absolutely priceless!” it chuckled. This time, it no longer sounded like Yana. Yet the speech pattern was the same; it was definitely the same entity speaking. “There is just so much scope for using you against yourself! You’re *such* a treasure to me! But” – it calmed down, grew serious – “I admit, you are right. These are not your real friends. Tell me what gave it away.”

“Donna,” he said. “The real Donna wouldn’t know I’d taken her memory away. And if anything had restored it to her, she wouldn’t even be here. Because she couldn’t. It would destroy her. So that can’t be her. Ergo, none of them are who you tried to make me believe they are. Did you really think I wouldn’t spot that?” he concluded scornfully.

“Ah-h-h!” breathed the Voice in a sigh of satisfaction. “*Clever, clever Doctor!* Is that what you’re thinking?” Its tone hardened. “Dear me! I’m astonished. You’ve seriously underestimated me. Did *you* think I’d allow something to be so blindingly obvious by *accident*? Not so clever after all, Doctor! Though, I admit, perhaps it was a little *too* obvious; a slight error on my part, since I couldn’t be sure quite how clearly your mind would be working in this environment. But you still don’t know why this is happening, or who I am, do you?” it challenged him slyly.

“Not yet – but I will!” said the Doctor defiantly. “I’ll work it out. And when I do, I’ll be coming after you, whoever you are!”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” the Voice assured him. “You won’t need to ‘come’ anywhere to find *me*.”

It paused, and the Doctor furiously tried to work out what it meant by that remark. But before he had time to analyze the implications, the Voice spoke again.

“Oh-h-h, dear! It seems your visit to this particular venue is almost over,” it said with mock sympathy. “I see something interesting is about to happen! Something that I think may” – it hesitated, as if searching for the right phrase – “dampen your enthusiasm...?”

“What do you mean?” asked the Doctor suspiciously.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise,” the Voice demurred. “But, just out of interest, tell me, Doctor – when was the last time you were swept off your feet?”

“Swept off my –?” began the Doctor, but broke off as he saw what was about to happen.

The plane of light, that looked so much like water. It was *becoming* water. Drops were beginning to fall from the top of the wall, hundreds of feet above; became large splashes. What had been a flat plane began to bulge and squirm, as if under intolerable pressure.

The Doctor began to back away, his eyes darting everywhere, watching the swelling excrescences protruding in place after place up and down the gigantic surface.

A huge extrusion suddenly shot forward and engulfed the six figures in front of him, then drew back into the surface; and they were gone.

He barely registered their going. It was only too clear that the wall of water above him was about to give way. He’d never have time to get to the TARDIS; even if he could, he was sure he still wouldn’t be able to open it.

And then the vast expanse burst explosively and spectacularly outward, and he was deluged, smashed savagely to the floor under the sudden weight of water.

Struggling, weighed down by his waterlogged coat, he was swept away – the laughter of the Voice and that brief, distant buzz reverberating in his ears – into blackness.



Chapter 9

Maelstrom

When she emerged from the mist this time, Finn found herself looking at a landscape – or, rather, a seascape – that reminded her very much of the time she'd visited the south coast of Pembrokeshire, in Wales, to see St Govan's Head. The same flat approaches to high, rugged cliffs, plunging down into the sea beating against their base and punctured by ravines into which the incoming water boiled; cliffs pierced by caves and natural arches, waves crashing against them to fly up in huge plumes of white spray. Except that Pembrokeshire didn't boast an unhealthy, sickly yellow sky. Or a livid, purple sea. Where on earth was she now?

Although that was clearly the wrong phrase to use. Wherever she was, it certainly wasn't on Earth...

As she scanned the horizon before her, something caught her eye. What was that, about a mile off the shore? A huge, dark disc of some sort – but what? Then she realized what she was looking at.

The vortex of a vast whirlpool, a maelstrom. Even from here she could see its revolving motion, pulling the water around it into its giant maw. The sheer scale of it made her shiver; she was profoundly glad she wasn't anywhere near that! If you got caught in that current, there'd be no coming back, ever...

She turned her head slowly from left to right, scanning the horizon before her. At first she didn't see the object standing on the other side of the ravine to her right. But its dark shape suddenly obtruded into her peripheral vision.

No! Not just 'dark'!

Blue!

Blue and rectangular!

Her head snapped round.

Behind, swirling furiously as if angry at its confinement, the grey mist provided a blurred background that reached high up toward the alien yellow sky, stretching away into the distance like a wall confining everything to a strip a couple of hundred yards back from the cliff edge. But there, clear of it, near that same edge, was the TARDIS!

It was not more than sixty feet away in direct distance, but it would be a journey of at least a hundred yards to get to it, if she traversed around the ravine, from which the sound of the boiling sea below rose up. Though she had no intention of going anywhere near that edge, nor any other. Her innate fear of heights was waiting to pounce if she tried any such thing.

She had barely taken the first eager step when abruptly she halted again.

Emerging from the wall of mist was a tall, lean figure in a brown trench coat.

Her heart thudded violently in her chest at the sight of him. Was it really the Doctor, this time? *Her* Doctor? The real one? Or another counterfeit?

He hadn't seen her; all his attention was apparently focused on the TARDIS, toward which he was making at speed. Well, she might as well find out.

"Doctor!" she shouted.

His head shot round, and he too braked to a sudden halt.

"Finn...?!" she heard him say, loudly and incredulously. "Finn, is that you?"

She felt jubilant – his voice was the one she recognized; this time, there was no whispering echo seconding his words!

"Well, of course it's me!" she said, gay with relief. "Don't tell me there's more than one of *me*! Hope not, anyway!"

She realized there was something odd about the way he was holding his head as he looked at her; as if he was listening for something. Her jaw dropped as she realized why. It must have been happening to him, too!

"You're listening for that whisper, aren't you?" she said. "Tell me you can't hear it. *Please* tell me you can't hear it!"

His shoulders relaxed, and he straightened as if a load had been lifted from them.

"I can't hear it," he confirmed. And again, with growing delight, "I can't hear it! It *is* you!" He abruptly frowned at her. "How did you get here?"

"I've no idea," she shrugged happily, revelling in the joy of being able to see him, speak to him. Surely everything would be all right now he was really here! "I don't even know where 'here' is! Do you?"

"Not a clue," he admitted. "But I'm working on it."

"Of course you are!" she confirmed, then laughed. "Hang on – I don't know why we're shouting at each other across a hole in the ground like this! I'm coming round to you!"

She made a gesture indicating her path around the ravine, and started to run inland. But then she slowed and came to a halt again, staring into the mist where it swirled close to the head of the chasm.

A strange sound was coming from within the roiling grey vapour. She stared at the mist, alarmed, then across at the Doctor. He was staring in the same direction; clearly he could hear it, too. And it was growing louder; a sort of repeating slow thump edged with a whirl, like the downbeat of huge wings.

"What's that?" she demanded nervously.

"Dunno," he said. "Stay where you are. I'll come to you."

But before he could move, the source of the sound emerged from the mist.

A huge creature, something like a bird, but not any bird that the Doctor was familiar with.

It was roughly the size of an Andean condor, with a wingspan to match, but it looked more as if it was covered with fur than feathers, dark red fur that streamed back in long, flowing strands from its body and wings. And it had no eyes. Just hollow blank sockets where you would have expected eyes to be.

It must have had some other sense for location of position and objects, though, because it let out a series of shrill, unsettling screams and began to circle them, its head pointing downwards as if it could see them.

The Doctor swallowed convulsively. He wasn't sure if Finn had heard it, but he certainly had. The cries of the bird-like creature were seconded by a formless whisper...

"What is it, Doctor?" Finn called, nervously.

"Don't know," he said urgently. "Just – don't move. Stay absolutely still."

She wasn't sure she could have moved in any case – that background sensation of unease that she'd felt ever since she'd come to – wherever this was – was rising uncontrollably, paralyzingly; she could feel her mouth drying, her throat tightening.

"Doctor – I'm afraid," she said tremulously.

"I know! I know! Just – just don't move!" he repeated, his eyes momentarily flicking away from the circling creature to offer her a reassurance for which he had to admit to himself he hadn't much basis.

None at all, as it turned out. The flight pattern of the creature changed, and it began to fly back in the direction of the mist, gaining altitude with every wingbeat. But then it turned back toward them.

No, not toward *them*.

Toward *Finn*. Targeting her.

It swooped down on her at a phenomenal speed. There was nowhere for her to run to, nowhere to hide. Instinctively, she tried to drop to the ground, turning her back on her attacker, attempting to curl into a ball. But to no avail. The creature flew too fast, anticipated her strategy; before she could complete the move its huge clawed feet had curled around each of her upper arms and scooped her up into the air.

Perversely, for a split second of time, the Doctor's memory replayed one of the first things he'd ever said to Finn.

"You don't strike me as the screaming sort..."

But now, she *was* screaming. Uttering a full-throated scream of terror. And another one. Her sheer, unmitigated fear initially blurred the word she was shrieking over and over. But then he made out what she was saying. The creature circled overhead as if it wanted to be sure he could hear.

"Doctor! DOCTOR! DOCTOR...!"

He watched in horror as it then rose higher into the air and began to head out over the sea toward the whirlpool, Finn dangling below it, hundreds of feet above the livid purple surface of the sea. Her screams were as terrified as ever, but their volume began to fade with distance as it swiftly bore her away over the water.

Frantic, helpless, he ran as near as he dared to the cliff edge, watching the two shapes recede further and further away, merging into one with distance. Then, probably no more than half a mile away, he saw them separate into two again, as a dark speck separated itself from the larger shape of the creature to plunge down into the sea. Distantly, he heard the reverberating cry of the latter, with a strange note of triumph in the whisper beneath it.

And the high-pitched shriek that travelled faintly to his ears as Finn plummeted toward the water.

The creature had deliberately dropped her into the sea from a potentially fatal height. And even if she'd survived that, the ominous dark maw of the whirlpool waited beyond.

Before he could think what to do, a familiar sound behind him interrupted his furiously racing brain. Incredulously, he turned round.

The TARDIS door had swung open.

In none of the previous scenarios had he been able to get into the TARDIS, but clearly this time someone actively intended that he should.

He wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Without bothering to close the door behind him he raced inside, up the ramp, to the console, and began slamming with almost brutal force at the switches that would allow him to manually fly in pursuit of Finn.

It took only a couple of minutes to get the TARDIS to the place where she had gone into the sea. The Doctor hastily set the controls for hovering, ran back to the doorway and flung both doors open as wide as they would go. Then he hung out of them, almost defying the law of gravity, frantically scanning the surface below.

Out here the waves were huge and violent, clashing together and sending gouts of white water shooting into the air. Even if Finn were conscious, there was no chance she was going to be able to swim through them.

His desperate, widened eyes fastened on something in the water, being swung up and down on the huge, swaying undulations.

Finn!

In bad shape. She was conscious, but barely, making little or no effort to even try to swim. When he first saw her, she was floating on her back, but a wavetop swept over her and she rolled without resistance onto her face. For a moment the Doctor was afraid she was just going to go on lying there, face down in the water; but then she moved her head and her arms, and turned weakly over onto her back again.

As he stared down, he became aware of something nagging at his peripheral vision, demanding his attention. Momentarily distracted, he tore his eyes off the girl in the water and up, across the surface of the sea.

And froze for a second in horror, as realization dawned of just how near the whirlpool was, creating its black void in the surface of the sea. It was vast; how big, he didn't stop to calculate. But it was instantly obvious that

the motion of the water was swiftly carrying the almost unconscious girl in that direction. If he didn't do something right now, she'd be dragged into it and lost forever.

"Finn!" he bellowed. "Finn! *Can you hear me?*"

He saw a small, vague movement of her right hand into the air.

"*I'm going to fly down to you!*" he yelled at the top of his voice. "*But you'll have to grab on! Okay?*"

He saw another movement of her hand. He turned and raced back to the console, glancing back anxiously out of the open doors as he gauged height and distance.

The trouble was, the waves were so high, it was difficult to get it right. He was hovering too high! He tried coming down a few feet; he could see her rising up on the swell of the water. If their relative heights stayed like that, she'd have a chance to grab onto the lower edge of the TARDIS's doorway. Biting his lip in concentration, he delicately manoeuvred toward her.

The violence of the swell suddenly thrust her against the sill of the doorway with an audible impact; he winced as he heard it. But she'd got a hold! He could see only her head and shoulders; one of her arms folded beneath her along the sill, the other stretched weakly forward, her hand convulsively trying to find a grip on the smooth surface at the foot of the ramp. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused, and she was clearly hyperventilating.

Worst of all, the Doctor realized she simply didn't have the strength to pull herself aboard.

"Hold on!" he shouted. "I'm coming!"

He was just setting the controls to hold the hover again when he looked up and saw, to his horror, another huge wave heading toward the doorway. He had no time to react, to warn her to brace herself. The wave impacted, deluging over her head and shoulders.

Even over the sound of the water, he heard her explosive grunt as all the air was driven out of her lungs. The force of the blow was too much; she lost her grip and slid limply back into the water, out of his sight.

"NO!" he yelled, and took the TARDIS a few feet back up into the air, so he could locate her again as quickly as possible.

There she was! Quite motionless this time, and floating face down. She must have been knocked completely unconscious. She'd drown before ever she had a chance to be swallowed by the ever-nearing whirling vortex...

He could think of only one thing to do.

He made the TARDIS gain even more height, poised above the water. Then he thrust savagely at the controls, swinging down at a steep angle toward the limp motionless form that he could see through the open doors, rising up and down in the swell. She was nearly at the point of no return, on the cusp of being irretrievably caught by the rotating lip of the vortex.

He was only going to get one shot at this.

Like a ladle scooping into a soup tureen, the TARDIS swung down in an arc toward the floating body, dipping into the surface of the sea, down and up again.

Water came gushing in through the open doors and poured down through the floor grating into the well area below. Drenched electrical circuits reacted by shorting, producing spectacular showers of sparks and clouds of smoke, so that for a few moments the Doctor couldn't see if he'd been successful.

Then the smoke thinned and he could see Finn's limp body lying motionless on the ramp, where the receding wave had left her.

He slammed at the controls on the console with savage energy, making the TARDIS hover where it was.

Then he hurtled down the ramp and skidded to his knees beside Finn.

She was sprawled on her side, facing away from him; he pulled her toward him, turning her onto her back. She felt so cold! Her hair was plastered wetly to her face and neck, and her mouth was slightly open.

But she wasn't breathing.

Moving like lightning, he flicked the sonic screwdriver to its medical scan and diagnostic mode and quickly assessed the results. What he saw made him wrestle his stethoscope out of his pocket to listen for a heartbeat.

There wasn't one.

Quickly he propped her head back and began to administer chest compression and rescue breaths. He knew that death by drowning usually occurs because throat spasm prevents breathing – the victim more often suffocates than inhales water. Hypothermia was an equally dangerous factor – she was soaked and freezing cold.

But right now, oxygen deprivation to the brain was what would finish her.

He kept pausing between bouts of compression to check for a response. But there was none. He worked more and more furiously.

“Come on, Finn! COME ON!” he shouted at her.

Her face didn’t change; she didn’t move, no matter how fiercely he worked on her.

He didn’t want to give up. He couldn’t give up! Not Finn!

But after another couple of minutes his hands dropped to his sides and he looked down at her, his face crumpling. She was as motionless as before.

He’d failed. He’d lost her.

Finn was dead.

He kept looking at her. At her pale, still face. And gradually his own face began to change. Became set and still. Started to grow angry. Incensed.

“No,” he said, deadly quiet. Then, again, louder, “No.”

Then, suddenly, he shouted at the very top of his voice.

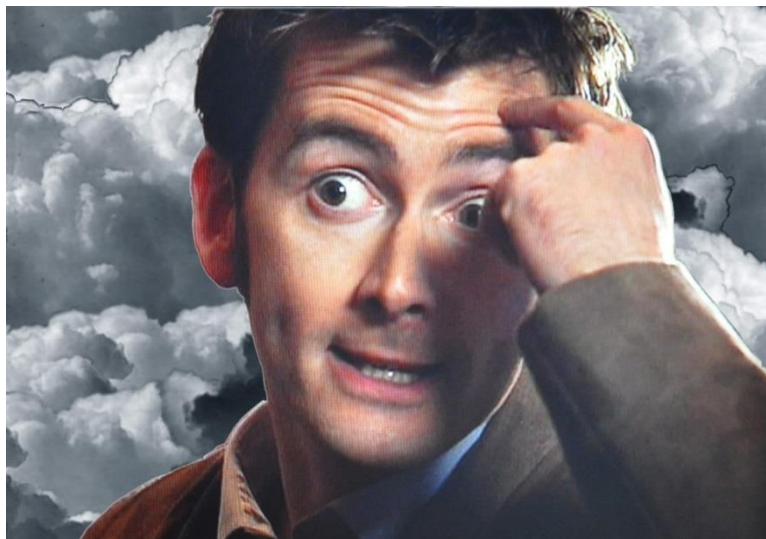
“NO!” he raged, spitting defiance at fate, the universe, everything. “NO! I am NOT losing you!”

And on the word ‘not’, he reared up and with all his might hammered his fist onto the centre of her chest.

Her body convulsed at the force of the blow, and went limp again.

And then – at last! – she drew in a shuddering breath. Then another. Then began to cough, water dribbling out of the corner of her mouth.

The Doctor didn’t wait another second. He scooped her into his arms and headed for the TARDIS’s medical bay, full tilt.



Chapter 10

Debriefing

Her brain seemed to be working so, so slowly. She could hear things, though muffled; her eyes gradually fought to open, but everything seemed blurred. It all seemed too hard, yet something was insisting she process the input, because for some reason it was important that she did. Though, just at the moment, she couldn’t remember why...

Sounds. A background hum of machinery. The occasional thump of moving feet. Every now and again, a low voice, muttering to itself.

Sensations. Lying on her back. Covered by something soft and warm. A comforting conviction of being safe, protected.

Sights. Above her a blurred yellowish-orange expanse, punctuated by lighter spots of some kind. Tall structures rearing upwards. Everything tinged with a greenish light.

What did it all add up to? Why did she get the feeling it was somehow surprising that she should be – wherever this was? Her brain felt so tired, so sluggish.

She tried to speak, but all that came out was a formless hiss of breath.

Even so, there was a sudden cessation of movement and sound from whoever was there with her. Then, an instant later, someone appeared beside her, leaning over her. She couldn't make out their features; her eyes just wouldn't clear. She had an impression of brown clothing, the pale blur of a face, but she couldn't *see*!

She tried to raise her head, but seemed not to have the strength.

A hand was quickly laid on her shoulder.

"It's all right," crooned a voice. "It's all right, Finn. Go back to sleep. You need to sleep. It's all right. I'm here. Go back to sleep. I'm here."

Something in the voice reassured her. She trusted it. She listened to it. Relinquishing the struggle, she sank obediently back into oblivion.

*

She had the feeling that a lot of time had passed, when next she woke. And now her senses were all working properly.

Not bad, for someone who'd almost drowned.

Because this time round, she remembered. That's why it had felt somehow surprising, on the previous occasion. Because she hadn't expected to be anywhere. Not alive. Once again, she'd thought she was going to die.

But this time was different. This time she hadn't come back into the grey mist. The Doctor had rescued her. She was still with him. And she was in the TARDIS.

Which perhaps meant, rather scarily, that *this* time she *had* nearly died.

She decided not to think about that, and looked around.

She was lying on some sort of mattress, placed on the floor on the other side of railing in the control room. Over her was spread a thick white blanket. Over that, most carefully draped, the Doctor's trench coat...

And hanging from the railing were all her clothes. Hung there to dry. *All* of them. And instead of them she had been dressed in a white gown of some sort.

She blushed slightly, then decided not to think about that, either.

After all, knowing the Doctor – well, it had been a medical emergency, and that's exactly how he would have treated it.

Despite appearances, he wasn't human, and sometimes his reactions were disconcertingly different from those of a human; something all too many people had managed to overlook, if some of his memories were anything to go by. Even alien races had made the mistake of attributing totally human thought processes and reactions to him.

In actuality, it probably would never have occurred to him to do anything else other than get her out of her soaked clothes purely for practical medical reasons.

So she dismissed it from her mind.

Or, she tried to...

He might not be human, but she was!

Anyway – moving on... Where *was* he?

"Doctor?" she queried, astonished at how feeble her voice sounded.

Instantly he appeared from behind the opposite side of the console, ran to the railing and vaulted it, and landed lightly beside her, squatting down on his haunches and treating her to the most delighted grin she'd seen in a long time.

"That's more like it!" he announced with approval. "How're you feeling?"

"Well, let's think about that," she said, pretending to consider the matter, her voice gaining strength as she spoke. "Not dead. That's a good start. Very good. I absolutely approve of that. Warm, safe, dry. Also good. And very, very thankful. To you. Definitely good."

He shrugged it off and continued to beam at her.

"What am I doing here?" she enquired interestedly. "Right *here*, I mean. Do you always stow unconscious passengers on the control room floor?"

"Well, I suppose I *could*'ve left you in the medical bay. But I wanted you to be somewhere I could see you when you came round," he explained offhandedly, as if it was a matter of small importance to him; she knew differently.

"I've been trying to get the TARDIS to work," he went on, "but no luck. That is, I was able to fly back to the cliff, but we can't leave. Won't dematerialize. Still, at least this time I could get inside."

"What d'you mean?" she asked, her brow creasing.

"Never mind that now. What I want to know is, what have I told you about flying off with strange birds?" he suddenly scolded her, for all the world as though they'd had many and lengthy discussions on the subject. "*Don't* do it again!"

"I'll try not to, I promise," she said, trying with all her might not to break out into a smile. She sat up, and felt a moment of dizziness – he saw it, and put a steadying hand on her shoulder – but it quickly passed.

His face grew suddenly still and serious, and his huge, dark eyes searched hers as if he needed to confirm she really was there. Then he tipped forward onto his knees and enfolded her in an almighty hug.

"I was so afraid I wasn't going to be in time," he murmured. "I was so afraid that –"

"I know," she reassured him in a whisper. "I know. But you were. So it's all right. You were. That's what matters."

His grip tightened for a moment.

Then he released her and dropped back to sit facing her, knees drawn up under his chin and restrained by his clasped hands.

"Right!" he said briskly, with a complete change of mood. "Catch-up time. What's been happening to you? How did you get here?"

"Where *is* here?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"I don't know," he admitted. "I did what I sometimes do – fed a few random numbers into the navigation system, just to see where they'd take me. Found myself in an enormous and completely empty city. And a pretty derelict one. But I found a machine in one of the buildings still powered up. I took a look at it – sudden burst of light – found myself somewhere else. In a grey mist. What about you?"

"I was at home, just reading. Then I suddenly got that feeling I get when you arrive, but not full blast – more as if you were in the vicinity, but distant somehow. Instead, this big black funnel opened up and swallowed me. Then, like you, I was in the mist."

"When was this, exactly?" he demanded. "Do you know? What was the date?"

A brief mental image of the clock on the mantelpiece reading 9.40 pm flashed through her mind. She offered the requested information without any real hope that it was going to be of help, but he instantly leapt up and ran to the console to consult some sort of chronometer. Then he came back and re-seated himself beside her, his lips moving soundlessly as he did what were evidently some complex mental calculations.

"Yes!" he suddenly burst out. "Yes, it fits! You got taken to the mist when I did. Well, almost. Only a couple of minutes or so behind. So we were both brought here at just about the same time."

"But why? I mean, I can imagine someone being after *you*, but why me, too? What do I contribute to proceedings?" she asked, mystified.

"Oi! Don't under-rate yourself," he scolded her, and went back to the original theme. "So what happened to you then? After you got here."

Her face fell into bleak lines.

"A couple of very unpleasant encounters," she said reluctantly. "Not counting the one I've just had, of course," she added, attempting to introduce a lighter note.

"What, exactly? Tell me," he ordered. "Everything that happened."

"You tell *me*, first," she countered. "Did the same sort of thing happen to you?"

He nodded without speaking.

"All right," she agreed. "I'll tell you mine, if you tell me yours."

He looked down at the floor, then nodded again, albeit reluctantly.

"I walked out of the mist into some place completely dark," she began. "And saw my parents' deaths played out in front of me. Except that I could see their faces. And my grandparents. Hear them screaming..."

She paused to take a deep breath.

"Then – I heard a voice." The Doctor looked up alertly at that. "It was odd. It was – someone I knew. Used to know. But he sounded strange. As if someone was whispering along with him. And that kept happening with every voice I heard after that – until I met you here. You didn't have the whisper."

The Doctor nodded.

"So whose voice was it?" he asked.

She looked away, biting her lip, and he noted the slight shudder that passed through her body.

"A man I met. Not long after my parents died. He made me believe he – cared about me. Turned out he was a confidence trickster. Emotionally. He took complete advantage of me, and I never realized it until he turned on me and made it plain. Slapped me in the face with it. I didn't think I could be any more hurt than when they died. Turned out I was wrong about that."

She stopped, and swallowed hard.

The Doctor, listening, heard words echoing in his mind; the ones Jack Harkness had spoken just before the Doctor had sent him on his way after they'd left Kvitverden.

"Something Finn told me. Said she hasn't been lucky in relationships. You'd know a thing or two about that, yourself. Maybe you owe it to her to find out what she meant..."

Well, now he had. And it was brutal in the extreme to witness her distress at the recollection, the difficulty she had speaking of it. But in spite of that, because it was him that had asked it of her, she was ploughing on with her explanation.

"Anyway, he was here. Somehow. Reminding me of all that hurt. Telling me I'd never be free of him. Telling me I'd lost everyone, and I always would. Even you."

Before he could protest, she raised a hand to silence him, and went on.

"Then I heard your voice. What I thought was your voice. You were in danger. You were about to fall into a chasm. You were shouting at me to help you. But I couldn't. I couldn't hold you. And you fell."

Her eyes were luminous with unshed tears as she looked at him.

"You've probably deduced from this last little episode that I suffer from acrophobia, big time. But in spite of that I threw myself down there, too. Because I thought I *had* lost you, as well."

The Doctor couldn't suppress a reaction to that; knowing just how intense her phobia of heights was, how deep must her despair have been, to make her willing to face dying in that way?

"And because I'd let you down," she continued. "You're always there, with the right answer, doing the right thing, whenever *I* need you. Then, for once, *you* needed *me* – and I couldn't help you. You've never failed me, but I failed you. And I thought I'd let you die because I'd failed you. Because I wasn't any good when you needed me to be."

She wiped abruptly at the corner of one of her eyes, and then tossed her head, avoiding his troubled gaze as he absorbed all the implications of what she'd told him.

"So what happened to *you*? Where did the mist take you?" she asked.

"Nowhere, at first. Took the TARDIS, though. It was there with me, and then it just dematerialized, all by itself. Had no idea where it'd gone. If I'd ever find it again."

He could tell by her face that she knew what his reaction to that must have been.

"Then I was in this valley. And there was the TARDIS again. Surrounded by dead bodies. All the people who've ever tried to help me, and ended up dead because of it. Even Jack. Except that he came to life – you know, as he does" – he tried to inject a brief element of humour into the grim narrative – "and did his best to rub salt in the wound. Before punching me unconscious. Next thing, back in the mist. This time, I was trapped in a sort of sphere. With the TARDIS, but I couldn't get to it. And there was a voice. Telling me that I was trapped forever. Alone. That the Universe was gone. Everything and everyone."

He paused to draw a deep breath before continuing.

"So I – well, anyway, I ended up back in the mist again. And this time I saw everyone who's ever travelled with me. And they were all blaming me for what happened to them, in various ways. Donna. Jack. Sarah Jane. Martha. Rose."

He looked at her with dark eyes.

"And you."

Chapter 11

The Thing The Doctor Can't Say

"Me," she said – not denying or rejecting, just taking it on board. Then she looked at him directly. "Well, I trust you realized it wasn't really me. Because I can't think of a single thing I want to blame you for." There was the merest hint of reproof in her voice that he might think any such thing of her.

"Well, in the end, of course I did," he said, avoiding a full explanation. "Then the Voice came back. And I ended up back in the mist. This time – well, you know what happened."

He looked down at the floor for a moment, then remembered something.

"Hang on – you said you had a *couple* of encounters. What about the other one?" he pressed. "What happened there?"

Finn took a deep breath. Even though she'd known this was coming, that didn't make it any easier now the moment had arrived. She expelled the breath rather shakily.

"This isn't going to be easy for me to say," she began, carefully. "And it won't be easy for you to hear. So there's something I need to say first. Or to remind you of. 'Cos I'm sure you know this perfectly well already."

She hesitated.

His eyes, huge and dark, remained fixed on her face.

"So –?" he prompted, after a few moments. "What is it I need to be reminded of?"

"That some of the things humans fear aren't" – she cast about for the right word – "*reasonable*. Or even real. We've got a lot of totally irrational fears that aren't based in any way on reality, on what's actually real. We know that with our conscious minds. But our subconscious – that's got its own set of rules, and sometimes they don't seem to bear much resemblance to the truth. It makes things up that aren't true, and then behaves as if they are. Makes our conscious minds think they're true, and messes us up, doing it."

She looked at him anxiously.

"And this – what I'm going to tell you – this is one of those things. Something that I know – *I know!* – isn't anything to do with what's really real. Okay? With me?"

He nodded, but possibly not entirely honestly; his brow was creased in an expression of perplexity. Clearly he had no idea what she was going to come out with.

She took another deep breath.

"I – saw *you*. What I thought was you, at the time. And – well, I ended up drowning in a bog. Never mind how. But you – you behaved as if you *hated* me. You resented me having some of your mind, so bitterly. You yelled at me to get out of your life. Told me I was useless. You repudiated me in the strongest possible terms. You rejected me. Completely and utterly." She had to take a deep breath before she said the final word. "Terminally."

It had become harder and harder to speak the words she had to say; her voice had grown increasingly hoarse. It was a sort of relief to fall silent – but no relief of any kind to see the look on his face; by her use of that final word he'd grasped what she hadn't said – and she hoped she'd never see such an expression of anguish on his face again. Ever.

Suddenly he leaned forward and seized her shoulders with painful force.

"*Never!*" he said, through clenched teeth. He shook her, twice, and his dilated eyes glared absolute denial into hers. "NEVER! *Do you hear me?* NEVER!" he shouted, giving her another shake.

He sounded as if he was furious with *her*, but she understood him better than that.

She brought her hands up to cover his where they gripped her shoulders, her eyes filling with tears – and yet smiling at him at the same time.

"*I know*," she said, trying to reassure him. "I KNOW, Doctor. I KNOW."

His eyes, full of anguish, searched hers with a kind of desperation.

"I'd *never* – you're too... You're..." He didn't complete any of those sentences, but she tightened the grip of her hands over his.

She knew what he was trying to say.

And equally, knowing him, knowing his mind, she knew why he couldn't – and probably never would – bring himself to say it.

"I know. I *do* know," she repeated, and smiled at him again, ignoring the tears rolling down her cheeks. "What I saw is *not* true. It's *never* been true. It wasn't really you! But I told you – humans are irrational, remember? And I'm only a human, Doctor. You know that." Her smile became rueful.

His eyes continued to search hers, but gradually his expression relaxed, and he managed a rather lopsided smile in return.

"Yes. Yes, you are," he agreed quietly, humour and affection beginning to triumph over his distress. "You are so *wonderfully* human, Finn Thornton!"

"So come on, then!" she exhorted him. "*Think*. Work it out! Work out what's going on. *Why* this is happening to us. Then tell me what I can do to help. Yeah?" She gave his hands one last squeeze, then took hers away to wipe her wet face.

The Doctor suddenly pulled her to him in one swift, savage hug. Then he leapt to his feet, spun away from her, and strode back to the console.

"Right, then!" he said, his face and voice both back to normal, as if what had just passed between them had never happened. "Next thing we do is find the Voice. Then we find out what it's after. And then we stop it doing whatever it is it's doing to us. Right?"

"Nope, wrong," Finn contradicted him, rising from the makeshift bed and picking up his coat, draping it carefully over the railing alongside her own clothes.

He looked at her, taken aback.

"The *next* thing I *do* is get dressed," she informed him. "*Then* we find the Voice."

She waited for a few seconds, looking at him with raised eyebrows, waiting for the penny to drop. Then, as he continued to stare at her blankly, she did an imperative twirl with her right forefinger.

"Well, come on! Where're your manners, Doctor? Turn your back, please...!"

Comprehension dawned. And she decided she was always going to treasure the look on his face as it did.

"Oh! Ah! Right!" he said, and hastily obeyed her rotating finger.

Which meant he didn't see her laughing silently at him as she reached for her clothes.

A couple of minutes later she rejoined him at the console.

"I've got a lovely set of bruises right across my lower ribcage," she informed him, rubbing the area in question cautiously. "I'm going to go all colours of the rainbow before long, by the look of it. I take it the fact that it doesn't actually hurt is your doing?"

He grinned at her. "There's a lot of very clever stuff in the medical bay," he said complacently.

"Well, I'm duly grateful," she said. "So! Now! Voice hunting. How're you going to go about that?"

The Doctor frowned.

"I told it I'd be coming to find it. But it said I wouldn't need to *come* anywhere. As if it'd be wherever I was. If that's true –"

He broke off abruptly as something happened that startled them both.

On the console, controls started operating, apparently all by themselves. The Time Rotor started to rise and fall. The TARDIS, completely independent of the Doctor, was in flight.

The Doctor stepped back from the console, his hands raised in the air, as if to emphasize it was nothing he was doing. He and Finn looked at each other, momentarily wordless. Then he began to examine the new settings of the controls. Finn watched him in silence, not wanting to break his concentration.

Eventually he raised his head and looked at her; his expression was difficult to decode.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I have no idea where we're going," he said. "I ought to be able to tell where our destination is. But there's nothing showing. No readings. Nothing." He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"Looks as if you're right, then," said Finn slowly. "It's where you are, somehow. It knows what you're thinking. Or saying. Can't be coincidence we're on the move as soon as we start talking about finding it. Must be *it* flying the TARDIS."

"Unless this is one of *my* subconscious fears," said the Doctor. "Somebody else controlling the TARDIS, not me."

Finn looked at him helplessly, unable to offer reassurance.

The next moment they found themselves being violently shaken as the TARDIS suddenly started to vibrate and shudder, as if they'd hit something. Finn staggered back and clutched at the railing as she felt herself fetch up against it; the Doctor fell awkwardly against the pilot's seat and went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

Finn thought for a moment that she was seeing double. She had a momentary impression of dual versions of the control room, two separate images that merged back into one. When they had, the vibrating gradually subsided.

The Doctor bounced back to his feet and stared at the Time Rotor, now quiescent. They were no longer in flight.

"I didn't like the feel of that," he began, frowning. "Felt worryingly familiar... Just like when –"

He didn't get to finish.

With a suddenness that made Finn jump, someone stepped out from behind the opposite side of the console.

He was quite tall, blue-eyed, his close-cropped hair accentuating the strong bone structure of his face and making his ears a little too prominent. He was wearing a dark T-shirt and trousers, and sported a black leather jacket.

"Hullo! Nice of you to pop in, but if you don't mind, I've got a quick couple of questions for you," he said brightly, in a marked Mancunian accent. "Question One: what you doin' in here? Question Two: how'd you *get* in here?" He paused, and then added, "Oh, and just for the record – Question Three: who *are* you?"

There was no seconding whisper when he spoke – so was he who he seemed to be?

Because Finn realized she knew who this was. The Doctor's own memory was flashing the answer up in her mind. But if he *was* who he seemed to be, the associated knowledge that surfaced to support that memory told

her that this meant they were quite likely in considerable danger. Confused, she looked at the Doctor anxiously. He was looking thunderstruck.

“Oh, not again,” she heard him mutter under his breath.



Chapter 12

A Temporal Collision

“Come on, then!” the other man challenged, hands on hips.

“We-e-ell,” began the Doctor slowly, pulling at his right earlobe. “Answer One: not quite sure yet, though I’ve got a nasty suspicion about that. Answer Two: got a nasty suspicion about that, too – I *think* the TARDIS just had a temporal collision with itself. And Answer Three...” He paused, and looked at the other man with a quizzical expression. “I’m you. You’re me. As I used to be.”

The Ninth Doctor looked him up and down, then shook his head.

“Always said regeneration’s a dodgy process,” he muttered. “And who’s this?” he added, looking at Finn. “Where’s Rose?”

“Oh, Rose is fine,” the Doctor reassured him. “Living happily ever after. This is Finn.”

“Finn?” the Ninth Doctor repeated, raising his eyebrows at her. “Shark’s Finn or Mickey Finn?”

“It’ll have to be shark, won’t it?” Finn retorted. “Cos you seem to be *taking* the mickey.”

The Ninth Doctor grinned.

“Oh, she’s good,” he approved. “Nice snappy comeback. Like it. Fantastic.”

“Brilliant,” the Doctor agreed, twinkling at Finn.

Then the Ninth Doctor fixed him with intent blue eyes, suddenly serious.

“Okay, then,” he said. “You’re me. So what you doin’ here? Apart from doin’ your best to trigger a temporal anomaly that’ll blow a hole in the Universe?”

“I think that’s what someone else is trying to do,” said the Doctor. “It’s a long story – haven’t got time for all of it – but we’re having a bit of a problem with someone sending us places we don’t want to be. And this is definitely one of them. For obvious reasons.”

“Why do they want to blow a hole in the Universe?” enquired the Ninth Doctor.

“Again, long story, but basically – they need to make me afraid,” said the Doctor, simplifying ruthlessly.

“The prospect of the TARDIS being destroyed makes *me* afraid, that’s for sure, never mind what else gets blown up! Especially with us in it,” Finn interjected.

The Ninth Doctor looked at her and nodded.

“Okay,” he said, eschewing further explanation. “So how’re you planning to stop ‘em?”

“Well, something like this happened to me once before,” said the Doctor. “And this is what I did last time...” He began racing round the console, manipulating various controls.

“What d’you mean, it’s happened before? Go round having lots of temporal collisions, do you?” enquired the Ninth Doctor, watching him keenly.

“Well, my fault, really,” said the Doctor. “I left the shields down. The TARDIS merged with itself earlier in its own timeline.”

“Oh, great!” snorted the Ninth Doctor sarcastically. “I can see you’re gonna be a really safe pair of hands! Does my brain totally freeze up by the time you get custody of it?”

“Oi!” said the Doctor, looking momentarily annoyed. “I don’t make a habit of it! Although,” he admitted, “there was that time when a Graske managed to... Anyway,” he went on hurriedly, “I fixed it. Doing this.” And he threw one last control with a flourish and a broad smile.

Which immediately vanished as the sonorous tolling of a bell began to sound.

“But that’s the Cloister Bell!” said Finn, as another of the Doctor’s memories forced recognition on her.

“Yeah, thanks, Finn,” snapped the Doctor. “Never have known that, if you hadn’t said.”

“Yeah, but what I mean is, why’s it sounding, if you’ve sorted the problem?” Finn persisted, brushing aside the sarcasm.

“‘Cos he hasn’t,” said the Ninth Doctor sardonically. “*All the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order*’, p’raps?”

Under other circumstances Finn might have found the Morecambe and Wise quote rather funny, but not this time. The Doctor certainly wasn’t laughing. Given the expression in the Ninth Doctor’s intense blue eyes, even he wasn’t amused by his own witticism.

The Doctor threw him a sour glance, then hurried round the console again with an air of growing anxiety, checking what he’d done.

“But this is right!” he protested, throwing his hands in the air, mystified. “This solved it last time!”

“Looks like somebody’s moved the goalposts on you, then,” observed the Ninth Doctor, arms folded.

“Come on, come on, come *on*!” the Doctor shouted at himself in rising frustration. “*Think!* What’s different?” He was beginning to get really worked up, really anxious. Really afraid...

And while the Cloister Bell continued to toll ominously, the Ninth Doctor simply stood and watched.

Suddenly alerted by that realization, Finn looked at him with narrowed eyes. He seemed to be taking the prospect of the imminent destruction of the TARDIS and its occupants – including himself – remarkably calmly. Too calmly. As if it didn’t matter. While the Doctor was wildly trying every control on the console in an effort to stave off disaster, the Ninth Doctor was just standing there, arms folded, looking on but not doing anything to help.

Something about this wasn’t right.

“Why aren’t you trying to help him?” she said to the Ninth Doctor, suddenly.

Struck by the challenge in her voice, the Doctor stopped his furious manipulation of the controls and looked at her quickly, realizing she had a point. Then he switched his gaze to his predecessor, waiting for the answer.

The Ninth Doctor hesitated for an infinitesimal fraction of a second, then shrugged.

“Not my problem, is it?” he said carelessly. “I’m long gone by the time this happens to you. It’s all in my future. You’re just gonna have to sort it out in *your* present, aren’t you?”

Finn and the Doctor looked at each other, and she shook her head at him. He read the message in her eyes – *something’s wrong here* – and nodded slightly.

“Really? And since when did I stop caring about the consequences of temporal anomalies?” he asked, walking slowly toward his earlier self, who drew himself up alertly, as if facing some sort of menace. “Come to think of it, if this happened to me when I was you, how come I don’t remember it happening? Why don’t I remember meeting me when I was you?”

The Ninth Doctor jerked his head back slightly, as if to avoid a threat. His face was that of a man thinking furiously, trying to come up with a convincing explanation.

“Dunno,” he said quickly. “Maybe you’re going to wipe my memory of this whole thing. Wouldn’t want me remembering I’ve met a future me, would you? Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve wiped me own memory of meeting meself, would it?” he added with a shrug.

“Ah, but –! Given the circumstances, I’m not *going* to memory-wipe,” the Doctor demurred, equally quickly. “So the question stands! And that goes on to beg another question. Why don’t you care if you and I – and the TARDIS – all suddenly blow ourselves out of existence? That’s normally the sort of thing that tends to matter to me. And it always has done. Even when I was *you*.” He quirked a challenging eyebrow at the Ninth Doctor.

Who neither moved nor spoke, just stared back at him from under lowered brows. The Cloister Bell continued to toll balefully. Finn looked from one Doctor to the other, nervously.

“In fact,” persisted the Doctor, getting ever closer to the other man, “could it be that you aren’t me at all? Are you getting cleverer? Like turning the volume of your whispering echo right down? Trying to make us think it’s not you?”

For a few moments more, the Ninth Doctor continued to stare at him wordlessly. Then he began to laugh. A dual sound. His own laugh – and that of the Voice.

“Dear, oh dear, oh dear!” they chorused together, the Ninth Doctor’s Mancunian accent still predominating. “Took you long enough, didn’t it? But, hey, just in time! ‘Cos you haven’t been able to unravel the temporal anomaly, have you? So here we all go!” The Ninth Doctor’s face broke into a manic grin. “Bang, flash, wallop, eh? Bye-ee!” He waved a hand in farewell, cheerfully.

The TARDIS was beginning to vibrate again. Finn jumped as sections of the console began to blow into clouds of sparks and smoke. The Cloister Bell began to sound more urgent.

“What? No, *no*, NO!” shouted the Doctor, staring furiously at the Ninth Doctor.

“Yes, *yes*, YES!” the Voice retorted. The Doctor realized that the Ninth Doctor hadn’t spoken this time. This was solely the Voice responding. “Think of it as a new experience, Doctor! Feeling what it’s like to be blown into your constituent molecules! Knowing the TARDIS will be doing the same around you! And unable to prevent your closest friend from undergoing the same experience, the same *agonizing* pain! Yes, *yes*, YES, DOCTOR!” it repeated in a roar.

“Doctor, look!” Finn gasped, grabbing hold of his sleeve and pointing.

Something uncanny was happening to the Ninth Doctor. His eyes were changing. Beginning to glow with a blue-white light, beams of which came stabbing out like lances. In fact, every part of his skin, where it was not covered by his black clothing, was beginning to glow the same way, getting brighter and brighter, until it was impossible to look at him. He had become a molten, featureless figure of bluish white light, wearing a black leather jacket.

The Doctor registered a crucial recognition of something that was happening as he shielded his eyes from the unbearable light. But he didn’t have time to think about it. The two merged TARDISES had reached critical mass within their temporal anomaly. They were about to blow.

The Doctor swung round and snatched Finn into his arms, as if that way he could shield her from the intense pain they were both about to feel. Knowing, even as he made the attempt, that he couldn’t.

Even above the combined aural chaos of the exploding console, the violently shaking control room, and the continuing toll of the Cloister Bell, they could hear the Voice laughing again.

Then everything shattered into an all-encompassing burst of white light and piercing, excruciating, unbearable pain.

Once again, a faint buzz of sound. And blackness.

Chapter 13

Amygdalae in Overdrive

Finn groaned, and opened her eyes for a moment, only to be greeted by a view of swirling grey mist. At the sight of it she instantly closed them again, trying to shut out the knowledge that the nightmare was not yet over, and lay still, exploring her sensations.

This was worse than any of the preceding occasions. Her body seemed to be retaining a memory of the agony of being blown apart, like an echo; though it was fading fast, even that echo still hurt, subsiding down to a throbbing ache throughout her whole body, and especially in her head.

She groaned again, but this time things were different.

Because a hand was laid on her shoulder.

She fought her eyes open again, and moved her head slightly, so she could focus upwards.

The Doctor was kneeling beside her, looking at her with concern.

"Doctor..." she said in a feeble whisper.

"It's all right," he assured her. "It'll pass. Did with me. You'll be all right in a moment."

He helped her to a sitting position, and after a few moments he was proved right; she did feel better. She put a hand to her aching forehead, then looked at him, trying to muster a smile.

"We made it, then," she said hoarsely, with a weak attempt at flippancy.

He nodded.

"That's the upside," he agreed. "But the downside is we're back here again." Then he smiled slightly. "Still, at least we're together. First time that's happened."

"First time we died together, as well," she pointed out. "Maybe that's why."

He acknowledged the reasoning with a forward movement of his head.

"Can't think of anyone I'd rather die with," he offered, more cheerfully.

She emitted a brief snort of laughter.

"That's possibly the oddest compliment I've ever been paid!" she observed, her voice growing stronger again. The ache in her head was receding. She looked about them at the slow, liquid movement of the mist.

The Doctor made another gesture with his head, which, in association with the expression on his face, she interpreted as '*you're welcome*'.

"So that wasn't really you. Him. Whatever the right word is. That wasn't the real Doctor-before-you," she said thoughtfully.

"What d'you mean – 'whatever the right word is'?" said the Doctor slightly indignantly. "*He* wasn't *me*." He sniffed dismissively.

"Don't get snippy! Unravelling the use of first and second person in a conversation between two versions of you gets very difficult to follow sometimes, I'll have you know," Finn pointed out lightly.

The Doctor made a sideways movement of his head, conceding the point.

"Well – what now, do you suppose?" Finn asked.

"Don't know," said the Doctor, getting to his own feet and helping her to hers. "But I did notice something that might turn out to be quite important."

"What?"

"Back along, the Voice said it was going to give me clues," said the Doctor thoughtfully. "And it gave me one there. That blue-white light. I've seen it before."

"Where?" Finn demanded.

"It was the same colour as the light in the machine I told you about. The one I was in when I was transported here."

"How does that help?"

“Not sure, yet. But it means that there’s something important about that machine. Key to solving this. And I need to work out what it is. If only I could’ve had a longer look at it!” The Doctor ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. “If we could just get back there –!”

Finn looked around at the mist again.

“I can’t see the TARDIS,” she said, slightly anxiously. “Didn’t you say it was somewhere nearby, everywhere you went?”

“Yeah, but apart from the first time, not in this mist,” said the Doctor. “So maybe it’ll turn up in a while. When we end up wherever we’re being sent this time.”

Finn took a deep breath and threw her shoulders back.

“Well, maybe we’d better find out where that is,” she suggested. “What do we do? Just start walking?”

“Usually works,” the Doctor agreed, silently thinking how proud he was of the way she was responding to this impossible situation, so far beyond any experience she’d ever had in her life before.

“Okay, then,” she said, sublimely unaware of his thoughts. “Better go.”

She began to walk forward, and with his longer legs it only took a couple of strides for him to catch up with her. But she was evidently still feeling the emotional repercussions from what had just happened; without speaking, as if almost unconsciously needing reassurance and comfort, her hand instinctively reached out and sought his. He accepted it, and they walked hand in hand through the swirling grey in silence.

“It’s getting brighter,” said Finn after a few minutes. The Doctor nodded without speaking, and they went on until the thinning mist suddenly evaporated around them.

The Doctor abruptly dropped Finn’s hand and took a step away from her, staring at their new environment.

“Doctor? What is it?” Finn asked him.

“This is the planet I landed on,” said the Doctor, sounding bewildered. Or at least puzzled. “The same place I landed. But it’s different.”

“Different, how?”

“There are people,” he said, staring around him.

Finn looked about her. As the Doctor had when he’d first stepped out of the TARDIS, she saw the vast concourse, the buildings lining it as far as the eye could see, the harsh shadows thrown by the dual suns. But he’d said the city was empty, derelict.

This was anything but.

The buildings were whole, sound, functional. And hundreds of people thronged up and down the concourse, some solitary, some in pairs, some in groups. The way you’d see in any major street in any large city on Earth. They also looked like perfectly ordinary human beings, the same as on Earth, though the clothing styles were strange to her.

As she turned to look behind them, shading her eyes from the glare of the northern sun, she saw the TARDIS, standing only a few yards away from them.

“Doctor,” she said, and when he turned to her, she indicated with a movement of her head where he should look.

He nodded, and went to try the door. Which, once again, refused to open.

“I was expecting that,” he said, as he came back to stand beside her. “Apart from the once – well, you know when” – he skipped hurriedly over the memory, for her sake – “I haven’t been able to get inside.”

“Presumably the Voice wanted to heighten the tension of the situation, which is why it let you fly to get me,” said Finn levelly. “Every time, for both of us, it’s been cranking up the maximum emotional response to the situation, hasn’t it? Even though so far none of them have apparently been ‘real’ situations. How’s it being done, do you think?”

“Something must be stimulating the amygdala,” said the Doctor thoughtfully. “The part of the brain that records experiences that trigger strong reactions. In this case, apparently, the fear reaction. And it keeps triggering that reaction every time we think we’re experiencing things we’re afraid of. Even though they turn out not to be real.”

“Yeah? In that case, feels like *my* amygdala’s been in overdrive ever since I got here,” Finn muttered.

“So each time, when we’ve been driven to the edge by what we’ve seen, we get thrown back into the mist and it starts all over again.” The Doctor continued to pursue his own line of thought. “An ongoing cycle that we can’t break out of, because every time we get resurrected back to face a new nightmare.”

“But who’s the Voice? Or what? What does it want?”

“There are quite a number of species who feed off dreams,” said the Doctor thoughtfully, not answering the question directly. “Mostly non-corporeal ones. The Vishklar and the Bodach, for a start. But species who do that tend to manipulate dreams, control them. And this *can’t* be dream manipulation.”

Finn started to ask him why not, but he swept on.

“So that can’t be what’s happening here. But it might be manipulation of something else. Though, not entirely, perhaps. And certainly not at the outset.”

“Make sense, please!” Finn pleaded. “What is happening?”

“Well, as far as I can tell, our own minds are coming up with the concepts – the things we’re afraid of – and we’re probably creating the visual environment for each episode,” the Doctor said. “I don’t think that part of things is being interfered with, or imposed on us. Or it wasn’t at first.”

“But *isn’t* the Voice behind all this?” she asked, mystified. “It’s whispering behind everyone else, every time.”

“I – don’t think so,” said the Doctor slowly. “It’s watching it all, and it joins in whenever it feels like it. Sometimes puts words into other people’s mouths... And it did say something about making it obvious that some of what’s happened isn’t real. But I don’t think it caused it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t think it was here, to start with. I didn’t hear it at first, not when the TARDIS disappeared. It didn’t come on the scene until the next time. And it thanked me for waking it up. Said it wouldn’t have existed without me. As if it hadn’t been there all along. As if it didn’t, or couldn’t, react until there was something to react *to*. Me. And you.”

“But hasn’t it been manipulating things since then? I mean, it’s been talking to us directly. Not just echoing other people’s voices.”

“Ye-e-es,” agreed the Doctor slowly, looking away from her and scanning all the people streaming past them with an air of sudden distraction. “It’s certainly been exploiting the situation for its own ends. Whatever they are. Still don’t think it’s the root cause.”

“Then who? And why? The Voice – or someone! – must be getting *something* out of all this. Things don’t generally happen for no reason, if my understanding of the way the universe works is anywhere close to accurate,” Finn challenged. “So what’s the payoff from us living out our fears? Some kind of psychic energy? Or just kicks?”

“Still working on that one... Look,” said the Doctor, his tone suddenly changing from vague preoccupation to purposeful attention, still looking around him at the passers-by, “does anything strike you about these people?”

Finn turned and looked at the general scene.

“Such as what?” she enquired.

“Look at their faces,” prompted the Doctor.

She looked again. And began to see what he meant.



Chapter 14

Diagnosing The Problem

Normally, in any large group of people, you'd expect to see a range of expressions; depending on whether the person was happy, sad, thoughtful, impatient, expectant, anxious, content – all sorts of possibilities.

But as she looked more closely, she saw that these faces all shared a common expression. Many had their eyes fixed on the pavement, avoiding her regard; the ones who did make eye contact did so for a fleeting moment only, before hurriedly averting their gaze. There was a tenseness about their body language, a sense that they were trying to avoid something. It all added up to just one thing.

She looked back at the Doctor, and he arched his eyebrows at her significantly.

"They're afraid," he agreed, as if she'd spoken aloud.

"Of us?" she queried, surprised by the concept.

"I don't think so. But of someone. Or *something*..." The Doctor suddenly stepped out toward the nearest passerby, a dark-haired woman apparently in her fifties.

"Hello!" he said brightly, employing all his very considerable charm. "I wonder if you could tell me –?"

The woman flicked him one quick look, then lowered her head and hurried on past without speaking.

The Doctor tried again – this time a young couple who looked as if they might even still be teenagers, walking hand in hand.

"Excuse me – could you help? I need to know –"

But the result was the same – a quick, almost furtive glance from both, then a quickened pace, effecting a hasty escape.

The Doctor thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and looked both ways along the concourse, pursing his lips.

"Doesn't look as if anyone plans on talking to us, does it?" he asked rhetorically.

Finn didn't reply immediately, and he looked at her quickly, wondering why not. Her attention seemed to be centred on something further along the concourse; he followed the direction of her gaze.

"Hello," he said slowly. "Who's that, then?"

"That's what I'm wondering," said Finn. "He seems to be taking a lot of interest in us."

"He's the only one that is," retorted the Doctor.

Some way off, standing stock still among the otherwise moving throng of people, stood a man of indeterminate age. He was wearing a loose, voluminous full-length robe, and was staring at them fixedly.

"Doctor," said Finn in an odd tone of voice. "Does anything strike you about the colour of what he's wearing?"

The Doctor looked again.

"Why?"

"I'm wondering if we're getting another colour clue," she said. "You can probably tell better than I can, but – isn't that the same shade of grey as the mist?"

He glanced at her, momentarily startled, then peered at the man again; he hadn't moved, was still looking straight at them.

"You're right," he agreed. "It is. Let's see if *he's* willing to talk to us."

He began to stride toward the man, Finn hurrying to keep up with him.

But something strange was happening. The man never moved; just stood still and continued to look at them. But no matter how many steps they took toward him, they couldn't draw any nearer. However far they walked, he remained at the same distance from them.

The Doctor stopped, gritting his teeth in frustration. The man tipped his head to one side and wagged a finger as if in admonition, but the Doctor had the distinct impression that what he was actually doing was laughing at them.

"How's he *doing* that?" Finn demanded. "Why can't we get close to him?"

The Doctor didn't answer.

He tried hard to look more closely at the man's features, but somehow couldn't focus on them; similar to the problem he'd had looking at Rose behind the blue veil, but worse. The man appeared clearly defined until you tried to concentrate on any one part of him. Eyes, nose, mouth, hair, chin – you just couldn't see them properly. It was as if his physical appearance kept slipping out of your vision if you tried to look too directly, the way a wet bar of soap would slip out of your hand if you tried to grip it too tightly.

Yet it was perfectly obvious when his mouth split apart into a wide smile, and he crooked his finger at them as he turned and began to walk further southwards along the concourse.

"Where's he going?" Finn tried a second time to get a response out of the Doctor.

"I've got a pretty good idea," said the Doctor grimly. "Come on." He followed the beckoning finger, Finn obediently trotting in his wake.

For a few minutes, they followed the man in grey, threading their way through the crowds. But as they drew nearer to what the Doctor knew must be their destination, it became obvious that those crowds were behaving oddly. He stopped, Finn beside him.

"Why's everyone squeezing over to the left like that?" she asked.

The Doctor watched the crowd's behaviour. As Finn had said, everyone – whether they were walking northwards or south – was gravitating toward the left side of the concourse, even though that meant their pace was slowed almost to a crawl as they all crammed together, trying to stay only within a very narrow, invisible corridor.

Not one of them cast so much as a glance at the building on the right, which had a large clear space in front of it; all kept their eyes steadfastly averted.

The only person in that space was the man in grey, who had stopped and was looking back at them again.

"Don't know," said the Doctor. "I'll ask."

"Think anyone'll talk to you this time?" Finn enquired sceptically.

The Doctor's face wore a look of determination.

"Oh, yes," he assured her.

He looked over the faces of the people heading in their direction, choosing his target carefully. He settled on a short, balding, middle-aged man who looked particularly nervous, and stepped in front of him, completely blocking his path. When the man, who still didn't look up, attempted to step around him, the Doctor moved into his path once again. An attempt to get round him to the other side met with the same result. At last, the man was forced to look at him.

"Why are you avoiding that building?" the Doctor demanded.

"I don't know what you mean," the man mumbled, refusing to follow the direction of his pointing finger as it stabbed at the structure in question.

"Yes, you do," the Doctor contradicted him ominously. "You're going to tell me why you're keeping as far away from it as you can."

"I can't!" the man whimpered, evidently in great emotional distress.

But the Doctor refused to relent. He suddenly grabbed the lapels of the man's jacket-like upper garment, and pushed his face alarmingly close to the suddenly widened eyes.

"Yes – you – can," he said in a low voice (which Finn decided would have had her instantly spilling everything she knew, if he'd used it on her!). His eyes glared almost maniacally into the other man's. "You're going to tell me, and you're going to tell me now. *What are you all so afraid of?*"

The man's face crumpled as if he was about to burst into tears; he was shaking like a leaf in the Doctor's grasp. But he finally summoned up the courage to speak.

"*We're afraid our dreams will come true!*" he burst out. Then, as the Doctor's hold on him loosened in surprise, he jerked himself free and hurried away, vanishing into the anonymity of the crowd.

As the Doctor turned, watching him go, he found the man in grey in his line of sight. Who had evidently been watching the whole thing, and was smiling more widely than ever.

"Doctor, what is this place?" Finn asked, looking from his face to the building and back again.

The Doctor looked at the huge black edifice for a moment or two before replying.

"It's the building I went into when I first got here. The one with the machine in it... What did he mean?" he suddenly burst out. "*We're afraid our dreams will come true.*" What does *that* mean?"

"Maybe *he's* ready to tell us," said Finn. "He wants us to go in, by the look of it."

She nodded toward the man in grey, who was beckoning to them once again. Then he faced toward the building and walked into it through the black glass doors.

Frowning fiercely, the Doctor strode after him, Finn doing her best to keep pace.

Once inside the reception hall, the Doctor looked about him for any sign of the man in grey, but it was as empty as before.

"Where's he gone?" Finn asked.

"This way," said the Doctor decisively, and marched toward the central corridor, just as he had done before. Finn faithfully followed him as he retraced his earlier route to the machine.

This time the room was fully lit and fully functional. But it was still completely empty. There was no sign either of the man in grey or anyone else. The machine itself also appeared to be in use, though there was no-one in it. All the spotlight bulbs were at full strength, pouring their blue-white light onto the empty couch.

The Doctor stood surveying everything through narrowed eyes, comparing his memory of the room with what he was now seeing.

"Is that the machine?" asked Finn, eyeing it warily.

The Doctor inelegantly grunted an assent, still scanning for any discrepancy between it and his memories of his first encounter with it. Then he found one.

"Hang on –" he began, and took a pace toward it as he spoke, but it was as if he had walked into a wall. He virtually bounced, as red flashes spread over an invisible surface in front of them.

"Ah, ah, ah, Doctor!" The Voice suddenly sounded in their ears, with a reproving tone. If it had been corporeal, Finn would have expected to see it – or him? – wagging an admonitory finger at them. "I've granted your request for another look. But that's all you may do. Look – but not touch."

"How'm I supposed to work out what's going on if you won't let me get close to it?" the Doctor demanded in frustration.

"Oh, there's enough information here for a man of your intelligence to put together the pieces, I'm sure," said the Voice smoothly. "But I expect you'd like to be left alone to think about it for a little longer. So I'll leave you to it, shall I?"

Silence fell once it ceased speaking. That is, silence apart from the loud, almost piercing hum of the malfunctioning machine. Finn rubbed behind her ears at the locations of her mastoid bones; the pitch of the sound being emitted was causing her some discomfort.

"Enough information?" muttered the Doctor, in the tone of a man indignant at being patronized. He put out an exploratory hand in the hope that the forcefield, or whatever it was, had also gone, but angry red flashes burned in response.

“What were you about to say before that happened?” Finn asked, hoping to divert his anger into more positive channels.

“What?” said the Doctor, as if he had no idea what she was talking about.

“You said ‘Hang on’,” Finn reminded him. “Sounded as if you’d spotted something. What?”

“Oh! Yes!” he agreed, suddenly remembering. “The lights.”

“The lights?” Finn raised her eyebrows in incomprehension.

“Yes, the lights in the machine,” said the Doctor, pointing.

Finn looked at the spot bulbs broadcasting their blue-white light into the interior of the machine.

“What about them?”

“Watch carefully,” said the Doctor.

Finn stared at the lights. And suddenly saw what he meant.

She started to speak, but he shushed her.

“Keep looking,” he said.

So she did. And it happened again. And then again.

Every little while or so, the light level of the bulbs dipped, ever so slightly. You’d hardly notice it if you weren’t watching for it.

And it made her think of something she’d somehow managed to overlook until now.

She looked quickly at the Doctor.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” she demanded.

“Depends what you’re thinking,” he pointed out.

“I’m thinking about that strange little buzz I heard every time things went black. Every time before I woke up in the mist again. You heard it too?” It was phrased as a question, but she’d obviously already deduced the answer.

“Yup,” he agreed, looking pleased with her in the way a teacher would be pleased with a pupil who’d suddenly come out with the right answer. “And what did it sound like to you?”

She thought about it.

“Like...” She looked at him with growing excitement. “Like an electrical short! The sort of buzz you hear when something shorts out!” She looked at the machine again. “So you think –”

“The light fluctuations and that sound are caused by the same thing.” The Doctor finished the sentence triumphantly. “Something’s broken, and it’s somehow interfering with the function of that machine. Which I’m pretty sure is for some sort of medical treatment.”

“So...” Finn concentrated hard. “So – does that machine –? I mean... Oh, let me think a moment!” She clutched at her temples in frustration at her inability to think as quickly as the Doctor.

He watched her, waiting to see if she’d come to the conclusion he’d already arrived at, waiting to see if his mind in hers would come into play.

“It all kicked off when you went into the machine. But everything that’s happened to us since, hasn’t happened in reality,” she said, slowly feeling her way along the line of reasoning. “So it’s all happened only in our minds. Otherwise we wouldn’t still be here. Each time we were confronted with scenarios that concentrated on the things we’re most afraid of, whether consciously or not. And each time it ended with that buzz and being put back into the mist. So” – she was getting there, slowly but surely – “that machine must be meant to deal with some sort of psychological treatment. And – and it keeps going wrong – which is when we hear the buzz – and instead of doing whatever it’s supposed to do, it keeps throwing us back into another scenario...?”

She trailed off uncertainly, as if doubting that she’d got anywhere close to the truth.

The Doctor smiled broadly and put his arm round her shoulders to give her a quick shake of commendation.

“There! You *are* brilliant, see?” he said. He looked at the machine again. “I think it’s meant to help the patient identify whatever the problem is, by probing their mind and creating a fictional scenario that expresses it. And then it’s supposed to come up with a treatment that addresses the problem. Except that it keeps shorting out before it can come up with the treatment phase. Probably creates a positive scenario of some sort, to counter the

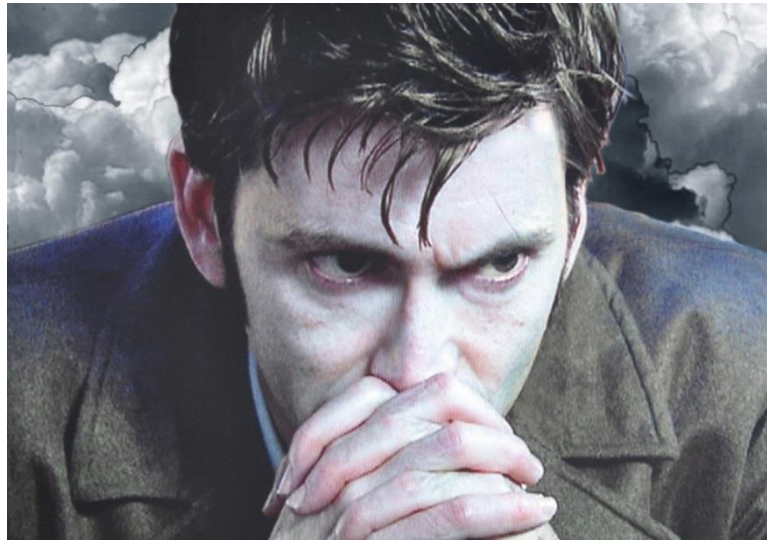
negative. To rewire the relevant pathways in the brain. But it never gets that far. Just keeps looping. Because there's no-one left to repair it."

He looked inordinately pleased with his reasoning, and looked upwards, as if he expected to somehow see the Voice there.

"Well? 'Sthat it? Have we cracked it?" he asked loudly.

There was no reply.

"*Further deponent sayeth not*," he muttered, scratching the back of his head energetically. "Looks like we're still missing a bit of the puzzle. But *what*?"



Chapter 15

"We're Afraid Our Dreams Will Come True"

"Dreams," said Finn suddenly.

The Doctor looked at her quickly.

"That man you spoke to," she went on. "He mentioned dreams. Lots of psychologists on Earth use dreams as a diagnostic tool, don't they? Perhaps that's what the machine's programmed to look at, and interpret."

"Maybe," said the Doctor slowly. "Maybe!" he repeated, in growing excitement, as he thought about it more. But then he looked puzzled.

"But he said, '*We're afraid our dreams will come true*'."

Finn looked at him oddly.

"So?" she asked.

"Well, why would people be afraid that their dreams would come true?" asked the Doctor, his brow creased in a perplexed frown.

Finn continued to regard him.

He noticed it, and lifted his eyebrows at her enquiringly.

"What?" he wanted to know.

She seemed about to speak, hesitated, then started again, still with that odd expression on her face.

"I take it that Time Lords don't dream, then," she said.

The Doctor blinked at her.

"Well, no, we don't," he admitted. "Not like humans do. That's why I said it couldn't be dream manipulation. We don't sleep in the same way. And we don't need to do it often. Or for long. So we don't dream." He looked at her. "How did you know? Did my memories tell you that?"

"No," she said flatly. "I knew it because if they did, you'd never have asked that question." She regarded him quizzically. "It sounds as if you know intellectually that we dream. But you obviously don't know from personal experience what it *feels* like. Emotionally, I mean."

"I thought it was one of the things that humans aspire to most," said the Doctor, watching her closely, as if he was testing her reaction to his words. "Doesn't everyone want their dreams to come true?"

Finn looked at him almost pityingly.

"No," she said, definitely. "No, they don't. Come on, Doctor! You're cleverer than that! So you must know better than that. Or is your genius circuit on the blink all of a sudden? Because I'm sure that, really, you know perfectly well that what people want is for their *daydreams* to come true. The waking dreams that *we* create, that we fill with the things we *want* to do or to be or to happen. *Those*, we can control."

Her eyes changed for a moment, as if she was looking at something inside her soul, not at him. Then she focused on him again, and her expression was sober.

"But if our *dreams* came true, we'd go *mad*. Insane. We'd never cope. Because the things we dream about most are to do with fear, or pain, or anxiety, or being abandoned – oh, all the other negative emotions. Sometimes," she conceded, "dreams are emotionally neutral, or even about good things – but the majority just *aren't*. If I'm anything to go by, we dream most about bad things, unhappy things, even terrible things. Things we fear."

She looked at him bleakly.

"Personally, I've never woken up and been happy for the rest of the day because of a good dream I've had. But I can't count the times I've woken up and felt down, sometimes for hours, because of a bad dream! Remember what I told you about the subconscious? How it messes us up? That's one of the ways it uses. And when it ups a gear, bad dreams become nightmares. And heaven help us if *they* came true! So – no. Nobody in their right mind would ever want their dreams to come true," she concluded, her eyes sombre.

He nodded silently, acknowledging the truth of what she was saying.

"Right," he said slowly. "You're right." He thought back over what they'd both experienced. All negatives. She – loss, betrayal, rejection, feelings of inadequacy, death by suffocation, fear of heights; he – feeling responsible for others' deaths, living endlessly in an empty universe, being rejected and blamed by his friends, the destruction of the TARDIS forever, being helpless to save Finn herself from danger and pain. And death.

"Which might even explain why the city – the real city – was abandoned," he went on. "When the machine malfunctioned, maybe it started to broadcast somehow. Affect the whole population, instead of just specific patients using it. And for some reason they couldn't fix it. Or else they were so terrified by the experience they just fled. And never came back. Perhaps they're all somewhere else on the planet, staying out of range, where they know their dreams are normal..."

Then the anomaly in the theory occurred to him, and he frowned again.

"But hang on a minute! I *don't* dream!" he exclaimed. "If it's basing its diagnosis on dreams, how could it work on me?"

Finn looked at him almost guiltily.

"No, you don't dream," she agreed. "But I do."

They looked at each other with mutual realization.

"Our link. My mind in yours," said the Doctor slowly. "Whatever's causing this must have followed the link from my mind to yours. Found some of my fears there. As well as your own. Buried in your subconscious. Whatever it is that causes you to dream – it must have extrapolated that back through the link to my mind. Exploited it to bring to life whatever we both fear most. And presented it to both of us as if it was reality."

"I'm sorry, Doctor," said Finn forlornly.

"What for?" he demanded.

"For being human. I told you I was only too human. But not so wonderfully, after all. I never thought having your mind in mine could be dangerous for *you*. Look at what's happened to you because of it! I'm so

sorry! Perhaps you wish you hadn't let me keep your mind, after all." For a moment, she looked almost ready to cry.

He stepped forward and gripped her shoulders, forcing her to meet his eyes.

"Finn, listen to me. Because I *mean* this. NEVER. I'm *never* going to regret it. Ever. And I'm *never* going to take it away from you. *No matter what*. Hear me?"

He gave her a sharp little shake, to emphasize the point. Then, to hide the feelings the look in her eyes provoked in him, he whirled away and began to pace up and down, thinking hard.

"But that still leaves another question," he announced. "Who, or what, is the Voice? Where does it come into all this?"

"Yes!" Finn seconded him eagerly, glad to be distracted from the emotional peak of the previous moments. "Because if what's been happening is the result of a machine malfunction, that's just something" – she searched for the right word – "*impersonal*. But the Voice is an intelligence of some sort. Isn't it?"

"You're too kind, young lady!"

They both instinctively looked upwards as the Voice spoke, in tones of heavy sarcasm.

"An intelligence of *some sort*...?" it went on, indignantly. "Well, well – I suppose you're too ignorant to know any better," it conceded, suddenly switching to an air of condescending magnanimity. "After all, even with his mind in yours, you're probably not *capable* of working out who I am. Even *he* hasn't been able to deduce it, so far. You're clearly in need of more clues, aren't you, Doctor?" That last question definitely contained an element of threat.

"Let's just go through the ones I've already got, first, shall we?" said the Doctor belligerently, thinking furiously. If he could give the Voice the answer, perhaps Finn would be saved from yet another scenario of fear...

"Oh, by all means," said the Voice, generously. "I'd be happy to hear your *précis* of the situation. I'm sure it will prove quite fascinating! Please commence...!"

"You haven't always existed," began the Doctor. "You told me you were dormant, and I'd woken you. You only came into existence after I'd been drawn into the diagnostic process the first time. The machine takes concepts in dreams, either from the conscious or the subconscious, reformats them, and delivers them to the patient, as reality. But it's malfunctioning. And somehow, because of that, it's created you. You've become 'real'. Insofar as the concept means anything here! Something outside of me, or Finn. Though you must have already been lurking in the subconscious of one or the other of us, in some form or another. And you've been watching. Monitoring. Learning how to manipulate our minds, through the link Finn has with me. Using her human ability to dream against both of us."

"Bravo, Doctor! I'm impressed! You've come a lot closer to the truth than I'd imagined," the Voice applauded. "Your ability to override and adapt to fear is also much stronger than I'd imagined. Even the young lady is proving more mentally and emotionally durable than I'd expected. You're becoming quite a challenge, both of you."

The Doctor did his best not to react to that, but inside, it had provoked another frisson of fear. Not for himself, but for Finn. Was the Voice working toward another, even worse scenario into which to plunge the pair of them?

"So tell me what I don't know," he demanded. "Have you got a name?"

"Of course I have a name!" the Voice assured him. "Just like you, Doctor! But you're the only one who knows what mine is. Except that you don't know that you know it. Not yet, anyway. I wonder if you ever will?" it mused. "Ah, well – time will tell!"

"What is it you want with us?"

"Ah! Now there's a thing! What *do* I want with you? What do I want *from* you?" the Voice asked meditatively. "What's the right word for this, I wonder? Diversion? Recreation? Amusement? Or is it, perhaps, research, of a sort...? No, no – I know just the word!" It paused, then delivered the answer like a blow. "*Entertainment!* Entertainment, Doctor! *Endless* entertainment!"

Finn looked at the Doctor in alarm. He caught her eye, then looked away, unable to offer any comfort.

“You see,” the Voice continued gleefully, “your consciousness – and hers – are both trapped within the machine’s diagnostic procedure. So there’s no way out. Your bodies, in their respective locations, are both helpless, because your minds are *here*, unable to direct them. You cannot escape, because you cannot act. So you’ll continue in the cycle of diagnosis, unendingly, facing setting after setting of terror and fear and unhappiness. Will your minds die when your bodies die, as they eventually will? Or will they be caught in the machine forever, independent of your corporeal selves? I’m finding speculation on that point quite fascinating.”

Finn stared at the Doctor in horror. She couldn’t imagine how they were ever going to escape, if the Voice was telling the truth. But was it? She hoped the Doctor would storm back with an instant contradiction.

But he didn’t. He just stood staring upwards, his eyes huge and dark, his expression frozen.

“Well, I can see I’ve given you more than enough to reflect on for the time being,” the Voice went on magnanimously. “So I’ll give you a moment or two to gather your thoughts. Then I think I’ll see how you get on with a small dilemma I’ve extrapolated out of what I’ve seen so far. It should be very” – it paused – “*interesting...*”

It began to laugh, softly, then louder and louder. Then the laughter faded, as if travelling into the distance, until it diminished into an ominous silence.

Chapter 16

Mazed

The Doctor turned to Finn and opened his mouth to speak, but events overtook whatever he’d been about to say.

Everything around them suddenly shook. Not physically – Finn felt no movement – but visually. Shook, and evaporated into the grey mist. They were no longer standing in the room with the machine, but on the familiar hard, grey surface, surrounded by the eddies and whirls of the achromatic vapour.

“‘And there it was, gone’,” remarked the Doctor philosophically. “Wonder what’s coming now? A ‘dilemma’... Hmm.”

“It said it was going to extrapolate?” Finn said nervously, half-stating, half-querying. “Extrapolate what?”

“The data it’s already got from our reactions,” said the Doctor thoughtfully. “It’s been watching what’s come out of our own minds, and now it’s decided it’s going to play with us. More than it has been already, that is...”

He caught sight of Finn’s expression, and took her shoulders.

“Remember, we’re not dead,” he reminded her firmly. “We’ve kept thinking we’re going to die and we haven’t. So no matter how terrible it is, we *will* come through it. I promise you.”

Finn gave him a tremulous smile, and nodded.

“I know that intellectually,” she assured him. “But I’m sorry – I can’t help reacting to it emotionally. It still makes me afraid to know there’s something else to be faced. That might be even worse than what we’ve already had to deal with.”

“Course it does,” said the Doctor, giving her a little shake of encouragement. “But it doesn’t matter, being afraid. Being afraid’s all right. Absolutely normal! It’s what you *do* about it, or do in spite of it, that matters. And you know something?” He smiled directly into her eyes. “I think you’ll be *brilliant*.”

She gave him another, rather lopsided, smile, as if to say *I hope you’re right*, and squared her shoulders.

“So now what?” she asked. “Do we stay here, or go to meet it?”

The Doctor gave her a wide, beaming smile, and another small shake, hoping it would convey how very proud of her he was. Then he dropped his hands from her shoulders.

“Let’s go and face it, shall we?” he asked. “Together?” He put out his hand.

She put her hand in his, took a deep breath, and nodded, though with obvious apprehension.

“Come on, then,” he said, gently. “Allons-y?” He pronounced the phrase without any of his usual flourish, more as if he was putting forward a suggestion.

“Allons-y,” she agreed, with a faint smile.

They began to walk forward together.

After a few paces, the Doctor gestured at the mist. It was already thinning. Whatever the Voice was planning for them was clearly imminent.

The Doctor took a tighter hold on Finn’s hand, and looked at her.

“We’re going to come through this, remember?” he said, fixing her with intent eyes. “No matter what.”

She summoned up a smile for him.

“Of course we are,” she said, using every iota of self-control she had to keep her voice firm.

He grinned at her.

“That’s the spirit!” he said approvingly, and led her onwards.

They emerged from the mist onto a small platform of some kind, bounded by a waist-high barrier. Finn had an impression of being at one end of a huge enclosed space, but not a cave or cavern; above them and all around, at the far edges of the space, it was the grey mist that roiled slowly, defining the boundaries. But this time it was not pure grey; there was a lurid orange glow punctuated with flashes of white reflecting on it from whatever lay below, out of their sight beyond the barrier.

Still holding her hand, the Doctor led her forward so they could see over the barrier to what lay beyond.

Finn gasped, and clutched more tightly at the Doctor.

“It’s all right,” he reassured her. “I’ve got you.” He knew her fear of heights was a real and profound one; out of everything she’d undergone, it was the only thing he knew of that had drawn a scream out of her. So he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

Because here was another height for her to grapple with.

The platform was poised above one end of an enormous maze. They were high up above it, so they were looking down on its entire layout, which was that of a square perhaps a mile in length along each side. As far as could be seen from this distance, it seemed to be constructed of some plain, hard material, with smooth, high walls, and was filled with the most complex labyrinth of passages that the Doctor, for one, could ever remember seeing.

Tiny figures could be seen wandering along its corridors or standing in dead-end rooms. Scattered throughout the whole thing there were what seemed to be silent explosions, centres of fire with flames reaching high above the walls, casting the orange glow they could see on the surface of the surrounding mist. In other places flares of intense white periodically burst into life and then subsided. Curiously, a patch of what looked like black fog seemed to be randomly roaming the passageways.

And from everywhere arose a collective, deeply disturbing sound. It was muted by distance, but its components were clear. Screams of terror, and desperate, panic-stricken weeping.

“I think Dante Alighieri might just recognize this place,” said the Doctor grimly.

“Dante, as in ‘Dante’s Inferno’?” Finn had to swallow hard before she could ask the question.

The Doctor nodded, his eyes intent on the maze.

“I have a nasty feeling we’re going to have to navigate that,” he said.

“You should always take notice of nasty feelings, Doctor.” The Voice suddenly broke in on them. “They so often turn out to be true harbingers, don’t you find?”

“Just cut to the chase,” the Doctor snapped rudely, his eyes remaining fixed on what lay below. “What’s happening this time?”

“Tut, tut! Impatience does not become you!” the Voice reproved. “However, I can see you don’t want to waste any time. What you see below you is a labyrinth I’ve created specially for you. For both of you, that is,” it amended. “Given its dimensions, I thought of calling it the ‘Square Mile’. But I’ve now had a happier thought – much more descriptive of its function. That, Doctor, is the ‘Scare Mile’!” It chuckled at its own wit.

“What’s it for?”

“Oh, but as I said – it’s for *you*! Filled with endless variations on the personal horrors of both of you. If you take the correct route, you’ll encounter no problems. But if you should take a wrong turning – oh, so easily done! Who knows *what* you might suddenly find yourself facing? And I can assure you, nobody in there has managed to take the correct route yet. Can’t you hear them? Literally lost souls? It’s so terribly sad, isn’t it?” it mused, insincerely.

“‘The correct route’,” said the Doctor, fastening on the phrase. “So there *is* a way out?”

“Oh, there’s always a way out, Doctor. There’s been a way out all along. You just haven’t realized it, for all your celebrated genius!” the Voice said scornfully. “But will you find the way out *here*? I wonder!”

“What – what’s that moving dark patch?” Finn managed to ask, her mouth very dry.

“That?” repeated the Voice with a rising intonation, as if giving the phenomenon consideration for the first time. “Why, my dear, that is – or perhaps I should more correctly say, those are – Night Terrors! That’s what I’ve decided to call them – quite appropriate, as I’m sure you’ll agree if you come across them. And I’ve created them specially for *you*!”

Its tone changed, became darker.

“They move in a pack, in the dark – the place everyone fears, because it’s where all unseen things lurk! They’re quite invisible, you know. And of course the unseen can be so much more terrifying than the seen...! Their role is to divert you from finding the way out. If you’re lucky, you won’t encounter them. But will you be lucky? I very much regret to tell you no-one else in there has...”

It momentarily aped solicitude, then became more ominous again.

“And if they get on your scent, and hunt you –! Who knows what they’ll do to you, once they’ve tracked you down? They don’t like to give up a victim once they have one, you know! You may never stop screaming for the rest of your life!”

“Shut up!” the Doctor snapped angrily, keeping a tight grip on Finn’s hand. “Shut up and just get on with it!”

“Not without pointing out one more thing that you should be aware of,” said the Voice, momentarily petulant, as if the Doctor was spoiling its fun.

Then it resumed its light, playful tone.

“You see, so far you’ve survived every encounter with fear that you’ve had. The machine has fail-safes in its programming, to prevent actual fatalities among its patients, whatever they experience in its care. But” – the Voice grew even lighter in tone, teasing – “do I know something you don’t know? Have those fail-safes ceased to function during the time you’ve spent in it? It had to happen at some point. Has that point arrived? Can you afford to take risks on the assumption that you’ll be restored, as you have every time before? Or, next time, might you really die? Your minds here, your bodies elsewhere? How can you tell? It’s a quandary, isn’t it?” it mused, caricaturing sympathy.

Finn glanced at the Doctor; he was now looking as grim as she’d ever seen him.

“And I would advise – I really *would* advise – that you stay together,” the Voice suggested in a tone of false concern. “Because if you get separated – well, I’ve no doubt *you’re* capable of remarkable feats of escape, Doctor, which I’m sure will prove most entertaining. But you, Fionnula Thornton? Oh, dear, oh, dear,” it said dolefully, in the manner of someone shaking their head doubtfully. “I really don’t think *you’ll* survive on your own... Do *you*? So *do* be careful, won’t you?”

“Don’t waste your time trying to undermine her,” the Doctor said flatly. “She’s got my mind in hers. She’ll come through this. Just like I will.”

“Well, we shall see,” said the Voice, dripping with counterfeit benefit of the doubt. “And now I think it’s high time you were on your way. So I’d better say goodbye to both of you, hadn’t I? In case you don’t survive” – it took on the accent of an old-style American B movie announcer from the 1950s – “*The Nightmare of the Scare Mile*’ ...!”

Then silence fell. The Voice was gone.



Chapter 17

The Brink of the Abyss

Before the Doctor and Finn had had time to do more than exchange a glance, they were taken by surprise.

The platform under their feet suddenly seemed to drop away from beneath them, with a swooping sensation that had them both grabbing at the railing for support. The Doctor quickly pulled himself forward enough to look over the edge.

They were plummeting in apparent freefall toward the ground at a terminal speed.

The Doctor didn't let that worry him; he was sure the Voice had no intention of imperilling them just yet. But it was, he decided, a very good thing that Finn had closed her eyes, so she couldn't see the speed of their passage. Even so, she must know what was happening, and it would inevitably have an effect on her readiness to face further threats. The Voice couldn't have picked a better way to weaken her mental resolve than by exploiting her body's physical reaction to this particular fear...

Sure enough, even as the ground came rushing up to meet them, the platform suddenly slowed and halted with only a few inches to spare.

The Doctor stood up, and carefully reached down to put a hand on Finn's shoulder. She was crouched on the floor of the platform, eyes still shut, clutching at the barrier with both hands, and panting as if her lungs were about to burst out of her chest.

At his touch she looked up at him, her now open eyes wide and staring. The Doctor gave her a little smile, and after a few seconds he could see her making a supreme physical effort to relax, try to come back to normal.

"I've never wanted to go on a fairground ride in my life," she said weakly after a few moments, using her grip on the barrier as a lever for getting to her feet. "I think I've just had my opinion confirmed." She tried to summon up a smile in return, but it was a mere travesty; even with her hold on the railing, she looked unsteady on her feet.

The Doctor hopped lightly over the barrier and helped her over it, and let her stand for a few moments, regrouping, while he looked about them.

The platform had deposited them into a rectangular chamber with no entrance; the only exit appeared to be a pair of doors in front of them, at the moment firmly closed. The dark grey walls were smooth and featureless and rose twenty feet or more above them; no possibility of escape by climbing. Overhead loomed the orange-tinged grey mist.

With an abruptness that startled both of them, the platform suddenly rose into the air and shot upwards, vanishing out of sight into the mist.

"Ah," said the Doctor calmly. "No going back that way, then."

"Doesn't look like it," Finn agreed, struggling to match his tone.

She stayed where she was while he strode forward to examine the doors, but there was nothing to be learned from them; they were rock solid, and he was in no particular hurry for them to open in any case.

“Doctor,” said Finn, very quietly.

He looked round quickly, and came back to her. She looked at him with eyes in which several emotions were visible, the uppermost of which was anxiety.

“I’m worried,” she said.

“Well, of course you are!” he agreed. “Who wouldn’t be? Could be anything in there!”

“I know that,” she said, with forced patience. “That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Not?” queried the Doctor, arching his eyebrows in surprise, but doing his utmost to seem lighthearted.

“What’s the problem, then?”

“I’m worried I’m going to hold you back,” she said, even more quietly. “Be a hindrance. Stop you from getting out of here somehow. Because if I get into trouble, you’ll help me instead of escaping yourself. You might end up dead because of me. I’m worried I’m going to let you down somehow.”

He looked down at her with grave, dark eyes.

“You can’t let me down,” he said, exuding quiet confidence. “Not possible. Because you’re the person you are. You. Finn. Fionnula Thornton. And even if that weren’t enough, you’ve got me. Twice over.” He reached up and double-tapped her forehead with his middle finger, and smiled at her. “Easy, see?”

He took her face between his hands and looked steadily into her eyes. Then he leant down and planted a kiss on her forehead.

“So – all right?” he asked.

“I can’t help feeling that ‘all right’ is a rank exaggeration in the circumstances,” she said, a little tremulously, trying to smile. “But I’ll say ‘Yes’, shall I? Even though it’s not true?”

“Yeah,” said the Doctor, with an encouraging grin. “You do that.”

He dropped his hands from her face and turned round to look at the doors again, but they were still motionless and closed.

“Why don’t they open?” Finn asked. “What’s the point of keeping us waiting here?”

“Oh, to rack up the tension, I expect,” said the Doctor. “Except that this is you and me we’re talking about here, so of course it isn’t working.” He grinned at her.

She could tell how hard he was trying to defuse the situation for her, and couldn’t help but smile back.

“Of course it isn’t –” she began, then jumped as the doors suddenly and silently slid open.

“There you are, see?” said the Doctor quickly. “No more waiting, no more tension! Sort of...” He went to the threshold of the doorway and peered around. “So – what’s in here, then? Shall we go and see?” He turned back toward her and held out his hand, waggling his long fingers in invitation.

“As if we had a choice!” she retorted, coming to join him and letting him take her hand.

“Best foot forward, then!” he encouraged.

“That puts me in mind of something I read once,” she said, her eyes darting everywhere for potential threats as the Doctor began to lead her into the featureless grey corridor ahead of them, but trying to keep her tone light and conversational.

“What’s that, then?” he enquired, doing much the same.

“About the leader of some unnamed South American country who’s supposed to have said, ‘One year ago our country stood on the brink of an abyss. We have since taken a decisive step forward’...”

The Doctor couldn’t help chuckling, and he swung their joined hands back and forth joyously.

“See?” he said. “You’re *you*! *That’s* what’ll see you through this!”

“Oh, and I suppose *you’ll* have nothing to do with it?” she challenged.

He didn’t reply; they’d come to their first junction.

There were three possible routes, one ahead, one each to right and left. All of which looked absolutely identical. Finn wondered how the Doctor would choose which way to go.

But he seemed in no doubt.

"This way," he said, pulling her to the right.

"How do you know?" she asked nervously.

"Oh, I had a good long look when we were up above," he said. "Memorized the layout. Mazes aren't actually that difficult, once you've got the fundamental principle. I mean, when it comes right down to it, you can do the wall-following thing and still get out of any maze eventually. Except that I don't think that'd be a good idea this time. Probably find ourselves somewhere that didn't qualify as 'the correct route'." He raised his eyebrows significantly at her. "But don't worry," he added, with infectious confidence. "I know the way."

Which gave added weight to the Voice's warning that they shouldn't separate, Finn realized. The Doctor might know the way – but she wouldn't. And she had an ominous premonition that the Voice had every intention of contriving some means of parting them just as soon as it felt like doing so...

But she kept the thought to herself. Either the Doctor was already very well aware of the possibility, in which case to point it out would be utterly superfluous; or it hadn't occurred to him, and not for anything would she want to add to his worries.

She thought of another question she wanted to ask.

"The orange and white flares we could see," she said. "What do you think they are?"

"The orange ones, probably what they look like. Something to do with fires or explosions," said the Doctor. "And I spotted someone in one of the dead ends. There was a white flare – then they were gone. So perhaps that's what happens when someone's personal scenario ends. Pouf! Over! Gone in a flash! Literally."

She didn't find that a comforting explanation, but she didn't say so.

As they rounded the next bend in the corridor, their attention was caught by a figure ahead of them. This stretch of passage ran some fifty feet or more in a straight line, but with branches running off it on both sides. At the far end, a woman was hesitating by a turning that led off to the left.

"No! No!" shouted the Doctor, gesticulating with his free hand. "Don't go that way!"

Too late. The woman had already stepped forward and vanished from sight.

The Doctor began to run, pulling Finn along with him; he clearly had no intention of physically letting go of her, even if it did slow him down.

Together they skidded to a halt by the opening, and looked in.

The corridor in which the woman had found herself was a dead end; it opened out into a wider, square space, where she stood with her back to them, looking about her anxiously.

"Get out of there!" the Doctor yelled at her. She turned and looked at him blankly, as if she'd already been through too much and couldn't react quickly. Slowly she came back towards where they stood. But then she jerked to a halt, as if she'd walked into a plate of glass, though nothing was visible. Clearly, having gone in, she wasn't to be allowed escape.

She looked at them out of dazed eyes, and turned back, moving sluggishly, to survey the confines of the square again.

Suddenly Finn pointed.

"Look!" she exclaimed.

Chapter 18

Night Terrors

The Doctor followed the direction of her forefinger with his eyes.

At the far end of the room – if it could be called that – the wall was sliding upwards. When the gap was about eighteen inches high it stopped, creating a black, shadowed access into whatever lay beyond.

Not for the woman to get out.

For something else to get in.

Staring hard into the black space, Finn became aware there was movement in the shadows; a disturbingly sinuous, writhing movement. She had a horrid premonition of what the woman was about to face.

The woman, too, was staring into the blackness, and her body was becoming rigid and tense. She began to back away, but came up against the same invisible barrier as before. Her body language became more and more desperate as the black slit disgorged its population into the room.

Snakes.

Hundreds of them.

All sizes and colours.

Boas, pythons, vipers. Garter snakes. Adders. Cobras. Kraits. Anacondas. Rattlesnakes. Mambas. Fer-de-lance.

Every conceivable species of venomous and constricting snake, in a huge writhing mass, undulating out of the darkness toward their terrified victim.

They could hear her moaning with fear, the volume rising with each utterance, as she tried to claw desperately at the invisible wall trapping her. The first snakes were within inches of her feet when she first screamed. And having started, she didn't seem able to stop. One high pitched shriek after another reverberated out of the room, the resulting air vibrations visibly agitating the snakes.

"Don't scream!" the Doctor shouted. "It'll only make it worse!"

But the woman was beyond hearing him. The smaller snakes were climbing up her body; she tried to tear them away, but there were too many of them, twining about her legs, her waist, her chest. The venomous ones were striking wherever her flesh was exposed; the larger constrictors were beginning to curl around her body. Her screams were beginning to weaken.

The Doctor pulled at Finn's hand.

"Come on," he said dully. "There's nothing we can do for her."

Wordless with horror, Finn let him pull her away from the opening, so they couldn't see any more. After a few moments, they were aware of a white flare behind them.

The Doctor stopped, and turned to her.

"This probably won't help," he said. "But don't forget she probably wasn't real. The Voice has created this whole thing specifically for *us*. So she was probably a complete fiction, just put in here to show us what might happen if we go wrong. So *anyone* we see in here is probably not real either. Okay?"

Finn nodded, acknowledging the logic of his reasoning. But the emotional impact had been too harsh for her to dismiss it so quickly. And he'd used 'probably' a few too many times to be truly convincing...

The Doctor looked at her, and gave her hand an almost painfully hard squeeze.

"Nothing like that's going to happen to us," he said with absolute conviction. "I'm not going to let it. I promise."

She looked at him, and nodded. But she still couldn't speak.

Silently, the Doctor led her along several more corridors, their route twisting, turning, doubling back, leading forward. Sometimes they passed dead-end turnings like the one the woman had gone into, with their own tortured captives. They didn't linger by any of them, but Finn found image after image of horror being imprinted on her retinas, on her memory, unable to ignore or banish them.

A man wrestling underwater, hopelessly entangled in a net, clouds of oxygen bubbles being expelled from his open mouth. Humboldt squid, sea snakes, sharks, barracuda and moray eels were circling him, octopuses clinging to his legs and climbing his body.

Another man, trapped in a volcanic chamber in which magma was inexorably rising and would soon engulf him.

A woman stuck, like a fly, on a huge web, too huge to have been woven by any real spider, surely...! At least, it looked as if it was a woman, but her jerking body was invisible under a seething mass of spiders of all sizes and colours. She'd opened her mouth to scream – but the spiders now filled it...

And others. So, so many others. Desperately Finn kept willing herself to blank out from her mind the stream of images that filled it. But she kept failing.

And wherever they went, whether they could see anything or not, they could still hear the screams, the shrieks, the pleas, the sobbing...

Notwithstanding the Doctor's theory that none of these people were real, the emotional effect on her was still devastating. Witnessing so much fear, so much distress and terror, real or not, set against a constant aural background of screams and weeping, was really beginning to get to her, despite the Doctor's expressions of confidence in her. She was so thankful that he seemed to be guiding them through this terrible place without bringing down on *them* any of its horrors.

But in the back of her mind, she kept hearing the Voice warning them not to separate, because she'd never survive on her own. She was sure that was an outcome which was definitely on the Voice's agenda for her, even if the Doctor made no errors of navigation. In her own mind, the only question to be settled was how events would be manipulated to achieve it.

In another long stretch of corridor, the Doctor paused, and looked at Finn.

"How're you doing?" he asked.

"All right," she assured him, untruthfully. And he knew it. "You?"

"All right," he agreed, equally untruthfully. And they both knew it.

"Well, everything's relative. I suppose we are 'all right' – when compared to some of the alternatives currently on offer," she said with the ghost of a smile.

He nodded his head briefly and tweaked her hand, as much as to say, '*You'll do*'. Then he looked up and down the empty corridor, his face abstracted and intent.

"I keep thinking about what the Voice said," he announced abruptly. "*There's been a way out all along. You just haven't realized it.*" What did it mean? What am I overlooking that it thinks is so obvious?" He ran his fingers through his hair, frustrated.

After a few moments of silence, Finn spoke.

"Nightmare. He called this a nightmare. There's only one way out of a nightmare that I know of," she said slowly.

The Doctor looked at her sharply, as realization dawned.

"When it gets bad enough, a protective reflex kicks in, and you wake yourself up," he said, equally slowly. "Screaming..."

They looked at each other wordlessly for a few moments.

"So, somehow, I've got to find a way to create a nightmare so bad that I'll wake myself up to get out of it." He pursued the unnerving line of thought remorselessly. "Trigger the reflex."

Given the situations he'd already been through without that happening, it was going to take something pretty special to achieve it, Finn thought. And she wasn't convinced she'd survive anything that terrified the *Doctor* that much...

She involuntarily glanced both ways along the corridor.

"But how –" she began, then broke off as her brain processed what her eyes had seen.

"Doctor!" she exclaimed, pulling him round to face the way they'd come.

Above the tops of the walls, a column of dark mist was visibly heading their way.

"Night Terrors," said the Doctor, his hand unconsciously tightening around hers as, in a reversal of the previous manoeuvre, he pulled her round to face forward again. "Come on – run!"

Hand in hand, they pelted along the corridors, the Doctor still unerringly sure of his route. But repeated glances snatched over their respective shoulders confirmed to them both that the mist was relentlessly tracking them. The pack had found their trail, and was clearly going to stay on it no matter where they went. And sooner or later, inevitably, it would catch up with them.

At the end of another long stretch of corridor, the Doctor was startled when Finn suddenly dragged him to a halt. She was panting hard, and had to gather her breath before she could speak.

“Doctor, this won’t work,” she said, between gasps. “This is what I told you might happen. Holding you back. You staying with me instead of saving yourself. This is what I was afraid of. It’s not how we’re going to get out of this.”

“I’m not leaving you!” he said promptly, immediately sensing where her thoughts were leading and trying to outflank her.

“Yes, you are,” she contradicted him. “You need to find the way out of this for both of us. You can’t do it with *them*” – she gestured back at the nearing mist – “on your back. You’ve got to go on. And I’ve got to stay here and distract them long enough for you to rescue both of us.”

“I can’t leave you to *them*!” he protested wildly, even though in his heart of hearts he knew she was right. “You heard what the Voice said about them. *You go on – I’ll stay!*”

She shook her head firmly, though her face was full of dismay.

“No good,” she said. “I’m not the one where the machine is. I couldn’t disable it, even if I did break myself out of this. *I* can only save *me*. *You* can save *both* of us. And that’s the only solution I’m going to accept, hear me?” She stared into his eyes without wavering, driving home the point. “It’s *got* to be you. And you’ve got to go *now*. Before they catch up with us. And they’re going to be here any moment.”

Here was the dilemma the Voice had foretold. The Doctor hesitated, caught on its horns, his face a picture of agonized indecision. Another fear of his own, identified by the Voice and exposed to him with stark, relentless clarity – being forced to desert someone he cared about, leave them to face a horrible death, alone.

“But there’s no guarantee I’ll succeed!” he protested rapidly. “If the Voice was telling us the truth about the failsafes – I might be leaving you to die! If I abandon you here, and I don’t –”

She shut off his words with a finger placed against his lips.

“But you’re going to,” she said simply. “It’s our only chance. So you’re going to do it. You’re going to be utterly brilliant, and find a way. For both of us. You’re my only hope. And you’re my confidence, Doctor. Always will be. And even if I don’t make it” – her voice, her face, her body language, all attested incontrovertibly to the truth of what she was telling him, *her* truth – “I don’t regret any of it. Not *any* of it! I wouldn’t change a thing. Even now. It’s all been worth it. *You’re* worth it! Everything. No regrets, Doctor. Not for me. And not for you. Not ever.”

Silenced, he looked at her with anguished eyes. Then he threw his arms around her and hugged her to him for a brief, intense moment.

The next instant he’d released her and was sprinting to the turning in the corridor. He paused there for a split second, and their eyes met for what might be the last time ever.

Then he was gone.

Now Finn could drop the front she’d kept up for his sake, allow the tears of grief and fear to spill down her cheeks, as she turned to face whatever was coming toward her. Whatever it was, she had to give him as much time as humanly possible, no matter what it took, no matter what it cost her.

The far end of the corridor was dimming as it became wreathed in tendrils of darkness. Gradually all the light of her surroundings was being swallowed into that advancing blackness, broadcasting its invisible aura of terror as it progressed. All light, all sound seemed to be vanishing into it; the constant screams arising from the maze were gradually becoming muffled, beginning to dim into obscurity, like the walls of the corridor, the roiling grey mist high overhead.

Finn trembled violently, though she stood her ground as the blackness advanced silently. The Voice had been right. There was nothing more frightening than what you couldn’t see. Every instinct she had was screaming at her to run, and run, and run.

But that wouldn’t help the Doctor.

Which was when she realized that, in spite of what she’d just been thinking, the Voice had been wrong, after all. Because there *was* something more frightening than what you couldn’t see.

It was fear on someone else’s behalf. Someone who mattered to you more than you did yourself.

So she schooled her rebellious body to stand still as the blackness closed in around her.

At first she felt nothing.

But then she began to feel soft, delicate touches all over her skin – *through* her clothes, as if they weren't there. Touches as if unseen fingers – or tentacles, or claws, or mouths – were exploring her body, deciding what to do with it.

Sobbing with fear, she endured it for as long as she could. How long, she had no idea. But whether it was seconds or minutes, it felt like an eternity of torment.

At some point, it became too much. Even though it had been her resolve to give the Doctor as much time as possible, she simply couldn't override her automatic reactions any longer. She succumbed to the terror, and tried to obey the dictates of her instincts.

Only to find she no longer had the choice to run. It had been taken away from her. She couldn't move.

Whatever the unseen horrors were going to do to her, she was powerless to prevent them.

As soon as she tried to move, it seemed to act as a trigger. As if the attempt to flee had enraged her unseen tormentors. The touches suddenly grew stronger, more numerous, as if more and more unseen creatures were surrounding her. More painful. She felt cuts, slashes, punctures, injections of venom. Claws, teeth, nails, stings, mandibles, fangs. Pain, then agony, rising above a threshold of suffering such as she could never have imagined.

But she was completely paralyzed, could not move any part of her body.

Except her mouth. That could still open, to let out scream after raw-throated scream.

But even then, as the blackness full of invisible mouths swallowed her entirely, her last coherent thought, before her mind entirely disintegrated, was of the Doctor.

Chapter 19

“Is It Over?”

Then her whole body convulsed, and she let out a loud, hoarse gasp in reaction, staggering and then abruptly halting, bolt upright and panting wildly, as if she'd just been shoved against an invisible, hard surface.

As her abused senses struggled to make sense of her new situation, it slowly began to penetrate her consciousness where she now was; her brain sluggishly began to resume its normal functioning, to process the information intelligently.

She was standing in her own sitting room. In front of her own sofa. A mug of still steaming hot chocolate standing on the coffee table beside it. The clock on the mantelpiece still reading 9.40 pm – only to flick over to 9.41 even as she looked.

She couldn't take it in. It was too much to comprehend. The transition between horrifying, screaming death and utter normality was too great, too sudden. She stood absolutely stiff, locked in catatonic-like immobility, while her brain fought to reconcile the two experiences, confirm her current state of being.

Gradually the difficult adjustment progressed. Her body began to come down from its peak of 'fight or flight' rigidity. She became aware of feeling her heart pounding wildly. An hysterical sob escaped her. Then another.

She put one hand to her mouth, the other to her chest as if to keep her pounding heart from bursting out of it. She could almost hear its beats aloud between her gasping breaths.

Then she heard another sound.

A wheezing, groaning sound, climbing rapidly in volume.

Her skin began to rise into goose bumps, and the familiar telltale, odd sensation in her head grew in intensity, keeping pace with the rising amplitude of the noise.

The TARDIS finished materializing with its customary loud thump, and the door was violently flung open.

The Doctor stood in the doorway, momentarily frozen with one hand on each jamb, staring at her with wide, wild eyes.

They looked at each other for long moments, transfixed, their faces pale, their eyes anxiously searching each other for signs of distress or harm.

Then the Doctor hurtled toward her, to seize her wordlessly in an almost suffocating embrace. She put her arms around him and buried her face in the lapels of his coat, shaking violently. He held her tightly and rested his cheek against the top of her head. She could feel his body shaking, too, panting as if he'd been running. He kept hold of her as if he never meant to let go again.

"Is it – is it over?" she choked hoarsely.

"Yes," he said, his voice muffled by her hair. "I destroyed the machine. No-one's ever going to have to go through that again."

"This is real?" she persisted. "This is really real?"

"Really real," he confirmed. "It's over, Finn. You're safe. No more bad dreams."

She sagged against him, tears of relief streaming down her cheeks.

And as she clung to him, she slowly realized something. Something that her mind resisted – rejected! – as implausible, in view of everything they'd experienced. But it had to be true...

In all they'd gone through since the Doctor first entered the machine on that distant, nameless planet, this was, incredibly, the first time they'd actually been physically together, physically touched.

Because everything else – *everything* else! – had all happened only in their minds.

*

A few minutes later he was sitting beside her on the sofa, one arm round her shoulders, the other stretching out to pick up the still warm mug of chocolate.

"Come on," he encouraged her, putting it into hands that cupped automatically to receive it. "Drink up, while it's still hot. Make you feel better."

She let out a little snort of laughter.

"I think it's going to take a bit more than some hot chocolate to make me feel better after what's just happened," she retorted, but obediently sipped at the warm liquid. And he was right; it did help, a bit.

"What about you? Do you want one?"

"Nah," he declined. "I'm all right."

She cocked a disbelieving eyebrow at him.

"Well, perhaps not as all right as sometimes," he conceded. "But I will be. And so will you. I was right, you see? We *did* come through it. I'm always right, aren't I?" His arm tightened across her shoulders. "Was it very bad?" he asked gently.

"Yes," she said simply, honouring him with the truth. "It was. But did it help?"

"Oh, so much!" he assured her, with more animation. "I had the time to create the environment I needed. Action the solution. Wake up. And completely destroy the machine. Then come back here to find you."

Finn thought about this, and a question occurred to her.

"But you must have cut it rather fine, mustn't you? In my personal timeline, I mean. The clock had only just gone to 9.41 when you arrived. Did it not happen in real time? Or was it all just a subjective passage of time?"

"It's – complicated," the Doctor said slowly.

"Meaning I wouldn't understand it," she said, with a faint smile. "Fair enough. But" – she hesitated before asking the question – "how did you do it? What did you come up with that was frightening enough to wake you out of the nightmare?"

He looked away from her with an expressionless face.

"Let's just say my worst fears are a bit more exotic than most people's," he said, and she knew that was all he was ever going to say on the subject.

They sat in silence, the rain still drumming on the windows, the clock periodically telling over the passing minutes.

"Now that the machine's destroyed," said Finn, after a while, "do you think people will go back to the city?"

“Don’t know,” said the Doctor. “Hope they were just keeping clear of its range. If they realize it’s safe now, maybe they will go back. Hope so.”

“I hope so, too,” said Finn. “You might have changed a lot of lives for the better if they can. As you do!”

The Doctor smiled faintly, but not entirely happily.

Another thought occurred to her, and she pulled up the top she was wearing just far enough to reveal the area of her ribs. The Doctor, realizing what she was doing, looked too. Their eyes met.

There was a horizontal line of bruising across her ribcage, already incorporating yellow and green as well as black and blue. But she felt no pain.

“How’s that possible?” she asked, after a few moments’ more silent contemplation of the phenomenon.

“The relationship between the mind and the body is an incredibly complex one,” said the Doctor cautiously. “You can often get physical symptoms because of what’s happening to you psychologically. Looks as if, psychosomatically, your mind decided that what you were going through was so real, it reproduced the effects on you physically. Unusual result on this occasion, but not entirely impossible.”

“But it doesn’t hurt,” she said. “How can it not hurt, when whatever you did in the medical bay happened only in our minds? How could that effect transfer to reality?”

The Doctor looked at her unfathomably, and didn’t answer.

A further silence fell.

At last Finn reluctantly shifted under the weight of the Doctor’s arm; it was a very comforting sensation to have it round her shoulders, one that she didn’t really want to forego. Nevertheless...

“Well, if it’s all over, I suppose I mustn’t keep you,” she said, with a sigh. “You’ve probably got places to be, people to see, worlds to save, and all that. And I need some sleep. Some *real* sleep. Hopefully without any dreams! I feel exhausted.”

The Doctor withdrew his arm and stood up, then began to pace up and down in front of the fireplace, his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets, apparently thinking furiously about something.

Suddenly he stopped and turned to face her, fixing her with an intent frown.

“What?” she prompted, when he didn’t speak.

“Well, I was just thinking,” he said with an elaborately casual shrug. “You could sleep on the way.”

She stared at him.

“On the way?” she echoed.

“Well, there’s this absolutely beautiful planet in the Gemstone Ellipse,” he explained with a sudden burst of enthusiasm. “I mean, the whole galaxy’s beautiful! I bet you can tell that from the name. You should see it from a distance – the colours! But this planet – it’s called Ametrine. Orbits in a dual sun system. One of the suns is yellow, the other mauve. That’s why it’s called Ametrine. Absolutely unpopulated. No people of any kind. But some of the most wonderful flora and fauna you’ll ever see. Some of the birds there – you’ve never seen colours like it! And the geology of the place! Brilliant! You’ll love it.”

He looked at her again, to see if she’d grasped the implications of what he was saying so circuitously. And from the way her eyes were shining, she clearly had.

“And you could catch up with your sleep on the way,” he concluded, with wide eyes encouraging her to say ‘yes’ to the question he was really asking.

Her face was a combination of so many conflicting emotions even he had trouble identifying them all. But there was no mistaking the one uppermost.

Sheer, unmitigated happiness.

“I’ll just change my clothes,” she said simply. “Five minutes. Then I’ll be with you.”

“Right,” he agreed, casually. “I’ll – er – I’ll see you inside, then.” He made a vague gesture in the direction of the TARDIS.

She flashed him a brilliant smile, and left the room.

But a second later, she was back in the doorway, cocking an eyebrow at him.

“Just one thing I ought to check before we go – is this going to be my *dream* trip?” she asked, with black humour.

The Doctor met her eyes.

“Hope not!” he said emphatically. “Tell me your best *daydream*, and we’ll aim for that!”

“Good,” she said, mirroring his faint smile. “My amygdala is in definite need of some down time.”

She winked at him, and vanished again.

He stood looking at the empty doorway for a few moments, then went into the TARDIS, leaving the door open behind him.

This time he was going to give her the most brilliant trip of her life. Show her the most beautiful places he could think of. Do everything he possibly could to mitigate the worst of the aftermath of what she’d just been through. She deserved it.

She obviously hadn’t told him everything, just as he hadn’t told her everything. The memories of the horrors and the terrors would gradually fade to intellectual recollections, lose their emotional impact with the passage of time.

But he could speed up the process by immediately overriding them with good, positive, happy memories.

So that was what he was going to do.

And – if he was *very* lucky – it might even do the same for him...



Chapter 20

Dream On...

He began circling the console, thinking about some of the other places he’d take her, after Ametrine.

Only to stop, frozen with shock...

“I suppose I must offer my congratulations, Doctor,” said the Voice, with a distinct edge of sourness in its tone. “I really should have taken steps to separate you and Fionnula Thornton before I did. Between you, you’ve conspired to curtail the programme of entertainment I’d planned to enjoy. The one you would both have had leading roles in! I’m not surprised about you, but, I admit, I certainly underestimated *her*. Together, you really are quite a formidable combination, aren’t you?”

The Doctor looked around wildly.

“Oh, you still can’t see me,” the Voice assured him. “But I *am* still here, despite your hopes that I didn’t exist in any reality outside of the machine! And I’m gratified to see that even yet you haven’t worked out who I am. Perhaps next time you will. I shall certainly visit you again at some point. It’s been such *fun*, playing on your fears. Playing *among* your fears! Yes, an experience I shall definitely repeat. Because your mind link with Fionnula Thornton has made you vulnerable to me from now on, even though Time Lords don’t dream –

opened a crack in your mind that can never be closed to me now. And I've learned so much from our first encounter that I can put to better use next time! Though, I concede, I shall have to wait for the right circumstances to occur before I can do so..."

"You'd do better to stay well away from me," the Doctor threatened. "If I ever come across you again, I *will* stop you!"

"Ah, but how will you know if it's me, Doctor?" the Voice challenged. "I showed you but one appearance this time. And you couldn't even make much of that! Was it even my true one? So who knows what I might look like, next time? Any more than either of us know what *you'll* look like, next time? The only thing we can be sure of is that *you* won't necessarily know *me* – but *I* shall always know *you*! After all, appearance can be such a subjective thing, can't it? It can all be just a matter of perception. In fact, if I might coin a phrase –"

It waited for a moment before triumphantly delivering its final *bon mot*.

"It's all in the mind, you know! Or" – it paused significantly – "is it...?" It began to laugh, mockingly.

"I'll stop you!" the Doctor shouted defiantly. "I'm warning you now! I'll find you and I'll stop you!"

"In your dreams, Doctor!" the Voice derided. "*In – your – dreams!*"

Then it was gone.

The Doctor drooped, and fell back heavily onto the pilot's seat, unsettled and apprehensive. The Voice had obviously gained a reality independent of the machine. It was still out there, somehow. And one day it looked as if he was going to have to face it again.

But not yet, it seemed. It needed 'the right circumstances'. Some trigger, not yet identified...

He looked up as the sound of the TARDIS door closing signalled Finn's entry into the control room, and immediately assumed his normal manner. He had no intention whatever of letting her know what had just passed.

"Blimey!" he said, pretending surprise. "I think you're the first girl I've come across who says 'five minutes' and really means it!"

"I didn't want to risk you changing your mind," she retorted, coming up the ramp and over to him. "You might've got fed up of waiting and gone swanning off somewhere else. Without me!"

"As if!" he denied, indignantly.

"As if, indeed!" she riposted. "*I* can't go anywhere without *you*" – she double-tapped her forehead – "but it's perfectly possible the other way round! And usually is!"

"Well, not this time," said the Doctor with vigour, energetically setting the controls. "Uh, could you just press that one?" He gestured at a button near her left hand.

"This one?" she queried, finger hovering.

"Yup," he confirmed with a nod.

She depressed the button as requested, and immediately her face lit up with delight as the Time Rotor began to rise and fall in response.

The Doctor grinned at her.

"Trip of a lifetime! Oh, yes!" he declared with an elaborate flourish. "Ametrine, here we come!"



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: "All In The Mind" is the third 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 January 2011 (see <http://www.whofic.com/viewuser.php?uid=12695>).

Chapter 2: The Implications of Horripilation

- The Doctor and Finn visited Kvitverden in "Ice World" (2 of 7, www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983).
- The Doctor and Rose visited Krop Tor in "The Impossible Planet" and "The Satan Pit" (episodes 2.8 and 2.9, 2006).
- Oh, and for those unfamiliar with the word – horripilation is what's happening when your skin rises into goose bumps!

Chapter 3: Accusations of the Dead

- The deaths of the characters listed in this chapter are from the following episodes:
 - Jabe Ceth Ceth Jafe – "The End of the World" (1.2, 2005)
 - Harriet Jones – "The Stolen Earth" (4.12, 2008)
 - Gwyneth – "The Unquiet Dead" (1.3, 2005)
 - Sorvin and Praygat – "Planet of the Dead" (4.15, 2009)
 - Sir Robert McLeish – "Tooth and Claw" (2.2, 2006)
 - Angela Price (Mrs Moore) – "The Age of Steel" (2.6, 2006)
 - Lynda Moss and the Programmers – "The Parting of the Ways" (1.13, 2005)
 - Bannakaffalatta, Morvin and Foon Van Hoff, Astrid Peth – "Voyage of the Damned" (4.X, 2007)
 - Luke Rattigan – "The Poison Sky" (4.5, 2008)
 - Mr Rocastle – "The Family of Blood" (3.9, 2007)
 - Jenny – "The Doctor's Daughter" (4.6, 2008)
 - The Hostess – "Midnight" (4.8, 2008)
 - Kamelion – "Planet of Fire" (6Q, Season 21, 1984)/Sara Kingdom and Katarina – "The Daleks' Master Plan" (V, Season 3, 1966)/Adric – "Earthshock" (6B, Season 19, 1982)
 - Jack Harkness – hey, just about every episode he's ever been in (from "The Parting of the Ways" (1.13, 2005) onwards)!

Chapter 4: The Girl Who Loses People

- For the initial references to the death of Finn's family, see chapters 17 and 18 of "Ice World" (2 of 7, www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983).

Chapter 5: The Universe Become Hell

- The Doctor encountered Professor Yana on the planet Malcassairo in "Utopia" (episode 3.11, 2007) .
- Davros's plot to explode the Reality Bomb was revealed in "Journey's End" (episode 4.13, 2008).
- The Face of Boe told the Doctor "You are not alone" in "Gridlock" (3.7, 2007).

Chapter 6: "Get Out Of My Life!"

- To find out how Finn has the Doctor's mind in hers (some of it, that is), see "Serendipity" (1 of 7, www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011).

Chapter 10: Debriefing

- Jack's comment to the Doctor quoted here comes from Chapter 17 of "Ice World" (2 of 7, www.whofig.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983&chapter=17).
- Acrophobia is a fear of heights.

Chapter 12: A Temporal Collision

- The temporal collision between two versions of the TARDIS referred to here happened in "Timecrash", when the Tenth Doctor met the Fifth Doctor ("Children in Need" special episode CIN2, 2007).
- "That time when a Graske managed to..." refers to "Music of the Spheres", a mini-episode that premièred at the Royal Albert Hall during "Doctor Who at the Proms", part of the BBC Proms season in 2008.
- For those unfamiliar with the Whoniverse, the Cloister Bell is an alarm that sounds in the TARDIS when an emergency is threatening the TARDIS and its occupants (for example, a paradox, or alternative realities merging).
- Is there anybody in the world who doesn't know about the immortal partnership of English comedians Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise...?! (And in this specific reference, the sketch they did with André Previn?)
- Oh, and for those who don't know, I should explain that a Mancunian is a native of Manchester (England) and environs.

Chapter 13: Amygdalae in Overdrive

- For those who don't generally have the word as part of their daily vocabulary, 'amygdalae' is the plural of 'amygdala'. For those who don't have the word 'amygdala' as part of their daily vocabulary – read this chapter to find out what it is!

www.deborahlatham.co.uk



*'Doctor Who' and all of its elements belong to the BBC.
No copyright infringement intended.*