

CALLING TIME
by Deborah Latham

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Author's Note:

This story, originally published on the "A Teaspoon and an Open Mind" website, has been withdrawn from that site and replaced by "The Fourth Wall". Please see the [References](#) section for a more detailed explanation.



Chapter 1
Fictional Scenarios

Alex thumbed the 'off' buttons on her DVD player and TV remotes to kill the screen, and sat back, analyzing the sensations of emotional turmoil that had resulted from what she'd just watched – a turmoil that seemed no less intense after a second viewing than she remembered from the first, a month before.

The bleakness of the Doctor's face, before the end credits had begun to roll! The recognition of his own hubris in trying to override the laws of time, and save Adelaide Brooke...

She thought, too, about the trailer for what she, what everyone, knew would be the end of this Doctor's story. The brash bravado with which he'd told Ood Sigma why he hadn't come straight there, what he'd been doing in the meantime. It might be inevitable, but make no mistake – he was going down fighting!

She recognized she was emotionally reacting to a fictional scenario as if it was real – that’s what the best, cleverest TV drama did to you, after all – but even knowing that, still she found herself intensely wanting to comfort that tortured soul, remind him of everything that was best about himself, help restore him to his real self.

And that was when she first felt a peculiar, tugging sensation, as if she was being pulled by invisible hands.

It was a feeling that swiftly ran the gamut from unsettling to frightening, and she hurriedly got to her feet, as if that was going to enable her to flee beyond the range of whatever force was exerting itself on her.

But, of course, she couldn’t, and the world proceeded to dissolve around her.

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With the sound of the shot with which Adelaide Brooke had killed herself and the haunting notes of Ood Sigma’s song still echoing in his ears even above the sonorous sound of the Cloister Bell, the Doctor stood at the TARDIS console, staring grimly into a personal inner void.

“NO,” he said, and savagely thrust at the controls.

But as he did so, the note of the Bell changed. Each toll began to drag into a longer and longer note, as if it was being played back on a warped cassette tape.

Then, as the sound protracted and distorted into an ever lower register, he saw – something – coalescing beyond the other side of the console.

By the time the last note sank beyond the threshold of hearing into silence, a shape had solidified.

A human shape, rigid and still, as if in extreme shock.

Incredibly, there was someone in the TARDIS with him.

“What?” said the Doctor.

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She heard the indignant word, and felt a surge of adrenalin, dispersing the last remnants of disorientation as the world re-formed.

She knew that voice! Of course she did!

But equally of course, it was impossible that she could be hearing it.

Likewise impossible that she was looking at the instantly recognizable and absolutely unmistakable inside of the TARDIS door.

Her head snapped sharply to the left. If the wall there was cut away, as reason – if reason could be said to apply, in the circumstances! – demanded it ought to be...

But it wasn’t. The wall continued, whole and intact and seamless, as she slowly pivoted round.

The slim figure in the blue suit impinged on her peripheral vision, but she didn’t look at him directly, not yet.

Requiring the evidence of her own senses in this impossible situation, she abruptly swung round the pillar beside which she stood and ran across to that wall that really, *really* shouldn’t have been there, and pushed against it with all her might.

Solid.

She raised both fists and hammered against it.

“*What?*” said the Doctor, for the second time.

The wall was not only completely solid, it was metal; not wood or plastic or any other material that she would imagine being used for a studio set construction.

She reached out and laid a hand flat against it, and felt a slight but living vibration.

The vibration of the TARDIS in flight...

This could not be real. It *could* not.

A few moments ago she'd been in her own home in Somerset. How, from there, could she suddenly be even in a television studio in Cardiff — beyond belief in itself? Manifestly absurd!

Yet so far, everything was telling her that even *that* was not where she was.

It occurred to her, though, that there was a surefire test — even if it was a test that could make her look very stupid and very gullible, if all this was just ('just'?!) some incredible trick being played on her.

She drew a deep breath, and for the first time looked full in the face of the man standing beside the console.

He was staring at her with those great eyes dark under lowered brows, his expression perplexed and with more than a hint of grimness.

The expression looked completely genuine — but then, even if he was, by rights, who he *ought* to be, it would do, wouldn't it? After all, *he* was just incandescently *brilliant* at what he did.

But if he *wasn't* who he ought to be, but who he *seemed* to be...!

Then that was indeed the way he would look, in the circumstances, with what he'd just gone through, with the Cloister Bell tolling, and now with a complete stranger abruptly transported into his control room.

For even though it was now silent, she had heard the bell tolling, in those few seconds before everything had come back into focus. And it had been a real sound, reverberating through the air — no post-production soundtrack addition by a sound editor!

She hesitated before finally speaking, meeting his mystified gaze with her own. She put a hand to her forehead for a moment.

"I can't believe I'm actually going to say this," she said, with a slightly hysterical breath of laughter, then let the hand drop, and pointed to her left. "Can I open the door, please, Doctor?"

"WHAT?" said the Doctor, for the third time.

"Open the door," she persisted. "Like you did when you showed Donna the Earth forming around the Racnoss ship. You told her the TARDIS protects you when the door's open like that."

"I might just have a couple of questions first," he said, his hands thrust deep into his pockets and still wearing that extremely forbidding expression. "On the subject of who you are, and how you got in here, and how you even *know* about Donna and the Racnoss. You know" — he shrugged in a theatrically exaggerated way — "little details like that."

"Doctor" — his eyebrows momentarily contracted even further as she said his name, as if he wanted to challenge her on how she knew who he was; did that reaction provide further proof that this impossible identification really was correct? — "from where I'm standing, there are just two possibilities for what's outside that door. One of them is merely impossible, and the other one is *utterly* impossible. So I need to open that door, because what I see when I look outside is going to determine the answers I'm able to offer you."

She retraced her steps until she was back where she had been, standing at the head of the ramp down to the door, and looked him straight in the eyes, hoping she didn't sound as hysterical as she felt. "Please?"

He searched her face for a few moments; the grimness was receding, and the perplexity was now mixed with a burgeoning curiosity.

But apparently he suddenly decided to take the risk.

"This had better be good," he warned, gesturing at the door.

"*Whatever's* out there, trust me, 'good' isn't going to come anywhere close to covering it," she said, emphatically.

As she walked down the ramp to the door, she wondered again if she was going to look the biggest dupe in creation. If she saw a floor, a corridor, props, production crew...

But — though her reason kept trying to take refuge in that possibility — don't forget, even if she did, that still didn't explain how she could conceivably be where she was, so instantly and without any apparent means of transition.

And if she saw anything other than that...

Merely impossible, or utterly impossible — which did she want it to be?

She put out her hand and took hold of the door catch, and for a moment stood there, trembling, feeling his eyes boring into her back.

Then, with a small, betraying jerk of her shoulders that he couldn't have missed, she braced herself, and pulled open the door.

It was beyond her ability not to gasp and clutch convulsively at the edges for support.

What an image – any image, even a moving one – will never convey is the sense of sheer *vastness* of the universe.

There was no faking this. She stared at the myriad points of distant light scattered like sand grains over the immensity of the blackness behind, dumbstruck. You can fool the brain up to a point with technical tricks, but beyond that point, you know beyond all conceivable doubt that the results of the data it's receiving and processing and interpreting for you are real and actual.

She looked down, past the bottom edge of the TARDIS, and took an involuntary step backward as a wave of acrophobia came sweeping over her from the measureless depths below.

Everything, everything her senses were telling her was conspiring to confirm that the impossible was, after all, possible.

With a shaking hand, she pulled the door to and pushed it shut, carefully, and leaned her forehead against it for a few moments.

Then she turned and came back up the ramp, aware that if she was looking the way she was feeling, she was probably white as a sheet.

She wrenched her internal gaze back from the void she had just seen, and looked at the Doctor again. She even managed to summon up a wry, if rather tremulous, smile.

“Sorry, Doctor – you must be wondering what on earth is going on. I will try to explain, I promise. But I wouldn't mind betting this is the first time you've ever had anybody in the TARDIS who was more shocked that what was outside it was bigger!”

He was now regarding her with more curiosity than anything else; clearly she had piqued his interest.

Again she put her hand to her forehead, trying to marshal her racing thoughts, and began to formulate them aloud.

“Look, this cannot be a dream, because everything is too clear. In dreams and hallucinations, you deal with concepts and fuzzy images, not explicit sensations and concise sentences and everything seen in sharp focus,” she said slowly, talking half to him and half to herself.

She looked at her hands, those same hands still stinging slightly from being hammered, bruisingly, against the TARDIS wall.

“Your nerves don't feel defined sensations like this. And whatever's possible anywhere else, in the part of the multiverse that I come from, it is *impossible* – and I'm not using the word loosely! – for me to physically be in one place and then instantly in a completely different place. *This cannot happen, where I come from.*”

She paused, slowly reasoning it out.

“Therefore – this is something completely outside my normal experience. So I see no option but to suspend disbelief and go with this as if it's real – and if I'm making a complete and utter fool of myself, it's because I am so completely far out of my normal context as to beggar belief – but that's what I'm going to have to do.”

She let out a breath of laughter and looked directly at him.

“It's not unlike Alice following the White Rabbit, don't you think? She reacted to every nonsensical thing that subsequently happened just as if it was a perfectly logical event that she'd encountered in her own completely normal environment. I think that's going to have to be my working strategy, or I'm not going to be able to deal with this. In point of fact, my disbelief is currently so far suspended as to be positively out of sight!”

She suddenly grinned at him, rather hysterically. “Well, come on, Doctor! It's not like you not to have interrupted by now! You once said – it was to Proper Dave and Other Dave, I think? Oh, no, they'd been taken by the Vashta Nerada by then, hadn't they? – anyway, you said ‘this gob doesn't stop for anything’. How'm I doing in the ‘imitation-is-the-sincerest-form-of-flattery’ stakes, d'you think?”

His curiosity was now most definitely engaged.

“Not bad, actually – but it begs the question, how can you possibly know what I said to them?” he demanded. “There was nobody there but me and them, and they’re dead. As far as I know. And I know a lot. Not everything, admittedly. But a lot. Who *are* you?”

“My name,” she said, “is Alex Allison. Look, let me think about this a moment.”

She shut her eyes and held her head between her hands, struggling for coherent thought.

“For reasons which I hope are pretty obvious, my brain isn’t working too well at the moment, so I can only offer you one even remotely possible explanation about how I know what I know about you. And I have a nasty feeling you’re not going to think much of it! Because, as far as I can see, this can’t be another dimension of the multiverse – not in the usual sense – because, where I come from, *you’re not real*. You’re a created character whose life millions of us follow, in all sorts of media.”

His eyes widened incredulously. Before he could interrupt, she hurried on.

“But in that case this cannot be a divergent universe based on the different outcomes of a series of choices. So, if I’m here, talking to you, there’s only one thing that I know of that could account for that. I must be in a universe that’s been *created* by being imagined. As per Robert Heinlein’s theory. I must be...” – she hesitated before finally saying the words – “in a *fiction*.”



Chapter 2

Working Hypothesis

The Doctor’s outrage and indignation were almost comical.

“WHAT? Are you trying to tell me I’m not *real*? I’m a work of *fiction*? The whole *universe* is a work of fiction?”

“Oh-h-h, you’re real *here*! I can’t exactly argue against that on empirical grounds, can I? I don’t doubt that if you came over here and thumped me – which I have to say you look very tempted to do right now! – we’d both register how real you are, with the bruises to prove it! But it all depends on your viewpoint and your definition of reality, doesn’t it?”

She frowned at him.

“Look, you’re the cleverest man in the room, as usual – *you* account for it!” she snapped, insecurity suddenly goading her into irritation. “One moment I’m in my home, the next I’m in what is to *me* a fictional location, talking to a fictional character, and I’m able to tell him about things that have happened to him *when I wasn’t physically there*. How else can I know things about you that no-one else was there to witness?”

“*One* thing,” he contradicted vigorously. “You’ve mentioned *one* thing. If you think I’m going to accept, on the basis of *one* statement, that I’m –”

“Ohhh, you want more evidence, do you? Right then, listen to this!”

They glared at each other.

“The ultimate proof would be if I was able to tell you your name, Doctor,” she said, leaning toward him in the intensity of her need to win his forbearance, and watching the subtle changes of expression on his face as he reacted to each word she spoke.

“But as far as I’m personally aware, River Song is the only person who knows – or will know – your actual name. And it’ll be no good my citing examples when other people were around, or you’ll think I’ve met them, somehow. So – hang on, let me think about this. Times when you’ve been completely alone... I know!”

She began to tick each new thought off on her fingers.

“When the Titanic hit the TARDIS, and made a breach in the wall, there,” – she pointed to the exact place – “and the TARDIS repaired itself. When you materialized in the storeroom, the first thing you did was open the door and check the outside wall on the left, and give it a couple of raps with your knuckles.”

Next one.

“When you were down in the pit with the Beast under the Sanctuary Base on Krop Tor, before you realized you were speaking just to its physical part, you said, ‘I accept that you exist. I don’t have to accept what you are, but your physical existence – I give you that.’”

Yet another.

“When you came back through the fireplace on the spaceship from visiting Reinette the first time, you found Rose and Mickey hadn’t stayed put, like you told them to, so you stalked off, muttering” – she screwed up her face in the effort to remember accurately – “something like: ‘Every time! It’s Rule One – don’t wander off! I tell them – I do! Rule One! There could be anything on this ship.’ And then you saw the white horse. Who, incidentally, I seem to remember you told to stop following you, because you weren’t his mother! One of your more acute observations, that – not much gets past you, let’s face it!”

One more.

“And – if you think this counts as you being on your own – when you ran into your fifth self, and you were breaking it to him who you were, you said to him, ‘Check out this bone structure, Doctor, because one day you’re going to be shaving it.’”

She looked at him challengingly.

“Those were all occasions when there was no-one else there to report what you said and did, right? Unless the horse spilled the beans, of course!” she added sarcastically.

In other circumstances, it would have been almost entertaining to watch his struggle against the gradual but growing conviction overtaking him.

“And then there’s what’s just happened,” she continued, relentlessly. “You’ve just seen Ood Sigma, calling you to the end of your ‘song’. You said, ‘I’ve gone too far’. Then you said to him, ‘Is this it? My death? Is it time?’. Then you came in here, and heard the Cloister Bell tolling, and you said ‘No!’. And that, as far as I can tell, happened just before I found myself here.”

His face had resumed its grim expression.

“Doctor,” she persisted, “how could I know about things that have happened to you when you were alone, if I’m not telling you the truth?”

“You might be from my future,” he challenged. “I might have told you all these things myself.”

“Well, in that case, wouldn’t I have to be someone you trust *utterly*, to the extent that you’ve told me, word for word, *everything*, every *moment*, every *thought* that’s happened to you ever since you met Rose? So, if we have that kind of a relationship, why would I be trying to tell you a lie instead?”

She looked at him in exasperation.

“I don’t doubt you could come up with a score of wonderfully convoluted alternative explanations, but if the reasoning’s going to get that complicated, why not just go with the Occam’s Razor approach and pick the simplest option – that I’m telling you what I believe is the truth?”

He considered that, then finally nodded, though clearly with profound reservations.

“Okay – I’ll accept it as a working hypothesis for the time being,” he conceded. “But none of this explains why, or how, you could get through the TARDIS defences like this. Although,” he added sarcastically, “I suppose you’re going to try to tell me somebody’s *written* you into here – who, exactly?”

“Ask me one I can answer!” she retorted. “Writers can presumably make anything they want happen in a fiction! But I’ve no connection with your Head Writer, or any of the others, in my reality – we’ve never met, they don’t even know I exist. If it’s any reassurance, mind, he *is* flipping brilliant...”

She thought deeply for a moment, frowning. “Perhaps I’m inside a fiction of my own creation. You know, just before this happened, I was imagining all the things I’d say to you if only I had the chance. And then, a few moments later...” She looked at him with an expressive shrug.

“What you’d say to me about what?” he said forbiddingly, almost warning her off; her, or what she might be about to say.

“About what you’re feeling right now. About why Adelaide Brooke came to die on Earth, and not Mars, because of you – and all the reasons that brought you to that point,” she said, so gently he couldn’t mistake her distress for him.

He threw his head up, and his dark eyes were suddenly tortured, his face almost haggard, and he turned and strode up and down for a few paces. Then he leaned his weight against the rail, with his hands thrust deep in his pockets again.

“If you’re telling me the truth, you know how things’ve turned out. You know the implications of what I’ve just done. I’ve done so many terrible things in my lives,” he said, with an air of suppressed desperation. “I’ve wanted to save everyone, and I’ve ended up killing so many. I want them to live, and instead they die, over and over again. I wanted her to *survive!* I had to walk away, listening to them all screaming and dying, and I *couldn’t bear* it. I know the rules of Time, better than anyone. I’m the last Time Lord – of course the rules are going to start behaving differently, just because I say they should!”

He turned from self-mockery to clutching at his own head, grabbing two handfuls of hair as if he was going to tear them out in his distress.

“How could I ever even have *considered* breaking them? Tried to pretend they *could* be broken and there’d be no consequences?”

He’d started to stride up and down again, gesticulating fiercely as he talked.

“But, ohhh, yes – that’s what I did! The Time Lord Victorious! I was stupid, and selfish, and arrogant, and I pretended I could walk all over those rules and ignore them, as if they weren’t there for a *reason*. How could I have *done* that? What was I *thinking?*”

Suddenly his face crumpled, and he covered it with his hands and dropped to his knees, shaking with emotion.

Instinctively she went down in front of him and reached out to embrace him. His arms went round her, too, automatically seeking the comfort of physical contact in the extremity of his torment, and his slim body shook violently with heart-rending, physically racking sobs of grief.

A grief that had been building over hundreds of years and had never been released until now.

A unique grief that no-one but a Time Lord – no-one but *this* Time Lord – could feel, or truly comprehend.

Her knee-jerk reaction was to say, “Doctor, *don’t!*” – but she bit back the words, because she instantaneously recognized how fundamentally he must need this catharsis.

No words would alleviate it; he must, he *needed*, to go through it, release all those pent-up feelings, and the only help she could give him, she already was, just by being there and being someone he could cling to in this storm of distress.

After a while, the terrible, heart-breaking violence of the sobs began to subside, but she continued to hold him until at long last he fell still and silent. Then she felt him relax his grip slightly, so she let go.

He raised his head to look at her, but although he moved his hands to her shoulders, he seemed reluctant to entirely relinquish the reassurance of physical contact.

They looked at each other gravely for long moments.

“What did you say your name was?” the Doctor said, his eyes still luminous with tears, and making a woeful attempt at a smile.

“Alex Allison,” she said gently.

“Alex Allison,” he repeated, attempting to deliver the syllables with his customary relish. “Nice bit of euphony, there. Alex Allison. It’s a good name – I like it.”

A startling thought struck her, mirrored by the rather extraordinary expression that crossed her face – half astonished, half quizzical.

“Well, you could keep it in mind for the next time you want to name a galaxy...” she suggested in a queer tone, almost as if he’d caught her committing some unexpected act of temerity.

He looked at her keenly, sensing a back story of which he was unaware. “Why – am I likely to?”

“Uh – better not go there, eh?” she suggested gently. “As River would say – ‘Spoilers!’”

They fell silent for a few moments. Then, slowly and gently, she reached out and took the tear-streaked, still anguished face between her hands, and smiled at him with an aching heart.

“Oh, Doctor,” she said. “This face you have now... It’s probably the most expressive one you’ve ever had. Everything you feel – it’s right out there on the surface of your skin! You could give lessons in emotional display to cuttlefish, you could!” she added, with a watery smile, and just for a moment, an involuntary spark of amusement lit his eyes to go with a snatched breath of laughter at her imagery. “You know, I’ve watched this face so often, this *wonderful* face. I’ve seen it showing joy, and enthusiasm, and glee, and rage, and anguish, and fear, and love, and loss, and pain, and so many other things. I tell you, Doctor, you *can’t* see someone experiencing all those feelings and not feel yourself – *connected* – to them – not *care* about them. I can’t, anyway. And I’m not the only one who feels like that – *everyone* who’s been there, watching your life unfold – we *all* feel like that.”

“But look at what I’ve done! I’ve killed so many people,” he groaned. “I’ve been responsible for so many deaths...”

Instantly, she shook her head in a gesture of absolute repudiation.

“No. No, no, NO! Sorry to contradict you, Doctor, but that’s complete stuff and nonsense. Responsible for deaths? Yes, sometimes – *unavoidably*.” She emphasized the word, firmly. “But *killing*...?! I know you told Jenny” – his eyes flashed momentarily at the mention of his lost daughter – “that in the Time War you’d fought and killed, but if you did, I know, you being who you are, it’s because there was no other alternative, none at all. You *hate* the taking of life – *any* life. You’re *the man who never would* – remember? If there’s *any* other way, you nearly kill *yourself* to find it. And when you fight, you fight *against* evil and injustice and death, and you fight *for* free will and peace and *life* – even life for whoever’s trying to destroy those things.”

He was listening with an almost desperate urgency, and shook his head.

“But it’s not me who does the dying. I get other people to do that. I” – he pronounced the word with abhorrence – “*inspire* them to their deaths.”

“Oh, you *really* swallowed that little speech of Davros’s, didn’t you? And here’s me been thinking all these years you’re a clever man,” she said, sarcastically. “You know,” she went on, switching to a conversational tone, “I listened to him preening himself over what was *clearly* a completely imaginary victory over you, simply because he’d asked you how many people had died for you, and because he accused you of taking people and turning them into weapons. He said he’s shown you yourself – do you remember?”

Superfluous question, she thought to herself.

“And he had,” said the Doctor grimly, reliving those moments. “He was right. That’s what I did – that’s what I do.”

“I repeat,” she said firmly, “no, no, and NO! Not in the way he was trying to claim. When you come across oppression and enslavement, of *course* you fight it! You can’t help yourself! That’s fundamental to being you. ‘Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly,’ and so on! But think about all those people who he said died for *you*.”

She leaned forward, willing him to accept her reasoning.

“Why did they die? Because you inspired them to take a stand? Undeniably true for some of them, maybe most of them. But did they die for *you*? Because of *you*? Actually, folks, here’s today’s big news flash – No! They didn’t! Was it *you* who was attacking them? Ooh, look! A second big news flash! No, it wasn’t!”

She stabbed an emphatic finger at him.

“What really happened was that they died in *spite* of you. Davros oh so conveniently skipped over a very fundamental flaw in his reasoning. Look, if you hadn’t been there at” – she searched for an example – “oh, say on the Game Station,

with the Dalek Emperor and his troops poised to invade the Earth. What would have happened to all those people on the station who died?”

The Doctor was silent for a few moments. Then he said, slowly, thinking it out, “They would have died anyway. The Daleks would have killed them all anyway.”

“Right! Whether they fought or not. But because you fought — and Rose, and Jack, and Lynda, and the others who helped you and fought and, yes, they died, buying the time you and Rose needed to defeat them — because of them, Doctor, *how many lived?* Not on the satellite, maybe, but on the Earth, and anywhere else the Daleks might have gone on to from there across the universe — *how many lived?*”

A momentary change of expression that might conceivably have been doubt crossed the Doctor’s features.



Chapter 3

A Man Convinced Against His Will

Alex went on with her line of reasoning.

“And when your friends — your *family*, whom Dalek Caan and Davros called the ‘Children of Time’ — when they did what they did to help you prevent the Reality Bomb from being triggered. How many other humans would have wanted to stop it, and wouldn’t have been able to do a single, solitary thing about it?”

She raised an interrogative eyebrow at him to emphasize the point.

“But what *they* could do, they could do because *you’d* showed them, on countless previous occasions, how to be able to act *effectively* to protect not just their lives, but the lives of others. And because they could, I ask you again — *how many lived?* How many, given that we’re talking about all the populations of the entire universe and across the whole of time? Because what dear deluded old Davros so conveniently omitted to mention is that *you* weren’t the killer — *he* was! And the Daleks! And Lumic and the Cybermen! And the Sontarans! Et cetera, et cetera, ad nauseam!”

Her finger stabbed toward him again.

“How very convenient it would be for all of them if human beings’ only reaction to aggression and suppression was just to run panicking in all directions, and not be able to do anything meaningful about it! But it’s *Davros* and his ilk who make people into soldiers, not you, Doctor — because if *they* didn’t attack, no-one would *need* to defend themselves, no-one would need to fight.”

She drew a breath with which to deliver her last argument.

“And, remember, you always try to make it so no-one dies — not *even* the aggressors! — but when it’s unavoidable you *always* act for the greater good of the greater number. And *that’s* what the people who associate with you pick up from you. And that’s why sometimes they give their lives for others. Because that’s what *you’d* do.”

She let out a wry little laugh.

“You remind me of a character in one of my favourite books, who says, ‘I do but scold at my own infirmities’. It’s really not very reasonable of you to blame them for doing exactly what you’d do yourself, you know.”

She paused, and looked closely at him. Then she sighed.

“Doctor, your expression is reminding me of the old saying, ‘A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still,’” she said despairingly. “I’ve been wasting my breath, haven’t I?”

“No! No,” he said urgently, seizing both her hands and gripping them for emphasis. “Don’t think that for an instant! Never think that! It’s just that... Well, anyway – thank you,” he went on, in a lower voice, after a few moments’ pause. “Thank you for trying to make me feel better about myself.”

“Perhaps that’s why I’m here, Doctor. It’s pretty obvious you’ve got to face some serious stuff soon, or Ood Sigma wouldn’t have turned up. Perhaps, before you do that, a Writer somewhere wants you to be reminded of who you really are, what you really think, what you really stand for. You need reminding that you tried to save Adelaide Brooke because you’ve borne such loss, not because you’re a natural-born control freak.”

She gave him a faint smile.

“Remember that legal defence we use on Earth sometimes? Crimes have been deemed to be committed by some people because ‘the balance of their mind was disturbed’. Yours certainly was, for a little while there – and no wonder! But that’s not the real you, Doctor – and maybe you need to be reminded of that.”

A new thought struck her.

“I wonder if it’s just me who wanted to tell you that, or whether it’s somebody else, using me to be their voice?”

Then the implications of that began to dawn.

“Of course, if that’s true, you do realize it means it’s possible I’m not ‘real’ either, don’t you? I could be just as fictional as you are – *were* – to me!”

For a few moments she looked distinctly unsettled by the possibility, then shrugged.

“But, do you know, right now I really don’t *care* what the answer is to that? The important thing is that if I’ve been able to be of use to *you*, to help *you*, that’s all I care about. Because you’re important to me. And it’s something I’ll be able to remember, and value, all my life – that *I* could do something for *you*.”

“Thank you,” he said again, with a look on his face poised halfway between a grateful smile and deep, deep sadness. “So very, very much.”

She smiled at him ruefully.

“You know, Donna had it absolutely right when she said you needed someone – but not just to stop you. You’ve been hurt so often, you were afraid to risk your heart – or hearts” – she corrected herself with a slight smile – “again, so you tried to isolate yourself, go it alone. It was never going to work, was it?”

She looked at him as a sudden thought struck her.

“Tell me, Doctor – did you ever meet John Donne in your travels? I’ve sometimes wondered. Because his most famous poem describes you with positively uncanny accuracy, don’t you think?”

The Doctor stared at her, then slowly began to recite.

“No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind...”

“Aren’t you, just?” she demanded rhetorically. “And therefore it’s simply not possible for you to try to be an island, keeping yourself at an emotional distance from the rest of us. It doesn’t *work* for you – never has, never will! ‘And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls,’” she concluded the quotation, “‘it tolls for thee’. On this occasion, quite literally!”

They looked at each other, both knowing the other was thinking about the Cloister Bell.

“And any man’s death *does* diminish you – *any* man – *any* one of us ‘little people’.”

He grimaced at the reference, as she’d known he would.

“Look, Doctor, I know you’ve got the problem of seeing people pass out of your life on a scale that a human being never has to deal with, because you live so much longer than we do, and, let’s face it, because of the *way* you live your life – but you *can’t* do without us, you know. Get used to it! And it’s an absolute, surefire, cast-iron certainty that it won’t be long before you find someone to travel with you again.”

His expression changed, suddenly, as an idea struck him.

“What about you?” he said eagerly. “Why don’t *you* come with me?”

She let out a brief bark of genuine amusement.

“Me?! *Hah!* Me, who looks at *least* three times each way before I dare cross the road?”

She became abruptly serious. “Doctor, I’d so love to say ‘Yes’ – you don’t know how much! But, from what I’ve seen, you like – well, you like spirited, decisive, capable, quick-thinking, feisty. I’m none of those things. When *I* get lost in thought, it’s because it’s such unfamiliar territory! I’ve always been an observer of life, not a participant in it – not like you!”

She smiled at him, wryly.

“Life is just a limitless range of opportunities, one enormous adventure, to you, and you get out there and you grab it by the lapels, with both hands. I’m the absolute opposite. I’ve never done anything significant. I never will. *Except what I’m doing right now.* This *definitely* qualifies as significant!”

She let out a quick breath of laughter.

“Besides, look at me” – she gestured at herself with a light-hearted self-deprecation – “I’m *really* not built for all that running you do. Hell’s bells, *Jack* could hardly ever keep up with you! *I’d* need to carry a pair of binoculars just to get a glimpse of your vanishing coat-tails!”

She looked at him sadly.

“If only you knew how much I’d love to be – what I’d give to be – the right sort of person for you, Doctor... But I’m just not. It wouldn’t be fair to you to pretend that I was.”

“But you know so much about me,” he pleaded. “You *know.* You *understand!* That’s what I need now. Someone who understands!”

She looked wistful.

“Doctor, one thing I do know is that when you eventually go to the planet of the Ood, I’m not with you. You go there alone.” She tried to ignore his crestfallen look. “So I don’t know how long I’m going to be here. Let’s face it, I can’t even be sure how I got here in the first place, let alone have any say in how long I can stay! But if there’s any need of yours I can fill as long as I am here, I’ll do it with all my heart, believe me.”

He searched her face intently.

“One of the strangest thing about all of this is that I know nothing about you, but you seem to know everything about me. No, I do know something about you. You really care about me, don’t you?” he said with an air of astonished discovery. “You’re virtually a complete stranger to me, but I can tell – you really do care.” His face was sober. “Trust me, that’s something I need to know, right now.”

“Ohhhh, yes!” she assured him, mimicking his own phrase at him, mischievously. “And, look – because I know this is something that’s worried you in the past – let me just make something clear. Am I in love with you? No. Do I love you? ABSOLUTELY. You’re far from perfect, just like anyone else, and you have some less than loveable qualities, just like anyone else.” She smiled inwardly at his slightly indignant expression. “But – ‘he was a man, take him for all in all,’ as your good friend Will put it. Allowing for all that, I still think you’re a wonderful person, and if we had the time together I would be so proud if you came to think of me as a friend. Truly.” Her eyes suddenly shone with the glitter of imminent tears.

He reached out and gripped one of her hands in both of his.

“Then be proud,” he said. “Because I already do.”

“Look, don’t get me started, you impossible man!” she said, brushing fiercely at her eyes with her free hand even as a delighted smile lit her face. “D’you know, that’s the first thing River said about you, when she found you’d saved her? *She* said you were an impossible man, too! Because you never give up.”

“She said that?” said the Doctor, urgently. “Look, Alex, *this* is what you can do for me! Talk to me! Talk to me about what you know I’ve done, the people I’ve met. Just talk to me!”

“No ‘spoilors,’” she warned him. “I daren’t risk it.”

“No, no, no, no, no, of course not,” he agreed quickly. “But tell me what you can, everything you remember. So *I* can remember it and see it through *your* eyes. I need someone else’s perspective, and I want yours. Talk to me! Please!”

“Gosh! I never thought I’d be invited to out-talk the man of whom virtually his first observation about his new self was that he’d certainly got a gob on him!” Her eyes twinkled with laughter. “Well... all right, then — here goes...” She took a deep breath.

*

And so they talked. For *hours*.

He drank it all in, everything she had to say, as they exchanged their thoughts and their respective memories. Sometimes he was sad, sometimes introspective, sometimes they were rocking with laughter together.

Even if episodically, she felt he was regaining his perspective, the positive, up-for-anything, joyous side of his character, illuminated by lightning flashes of his very own unique brand of *joie de vivre*. As to how long that would last...

Well, she could do nothing about that. That was in the hands of the man who was writing this Doctor to the end of his time.

When at one point they discussed the concept of ‘the Writer’, she said to him: “Writers can be inordinately powerful people, you know. There’s heap big magic in words... Momentary image of you and Shakespeare versus the Carrionites!”

She smiled at the memory.

“But words can bring about so many different outcomes, depending on which ones are chosen, and who hears them. Maybe every multiverse produces countless fictions, all of which are their own reality to the beings in them. Maybe Writers of fictions create Writers in other fictions, who create Writers in other fictions! Potentially, anywhere there’s an imagination, and the owner of that imagination writes down what it produces, they could — well, *anything* could be possible.”

She suddenly looked thoughtful.

“If you take that reasoning in the other direction — I wonder Who wrote the original story...?”

Even the Doctor didn’t venture an opinion on that point.

While he was contemplating the concept, she was thinking to herself, ‘Yes, and Writers are responsible for causing such misery, as well as such greatness. Look at you, and what *your* Writer’s been making you go through — and doubtless *will* make you go through — simply because the man who is you in my world is such a blindingly brilliant and talented actor and the Writer keeps wanting to push the boundaries of what he can do... If all this is true, look at the consequences that’s had for you. What a heavy responsibility he bears, that Writer! — *all* Writers bear...’

But she said none of that aloud.



Chapter 4

Snatches of Conversation

Long afterwards, when it was all over, she found that although she somehow never forgot one single, solitary detail of their conversation, there were particular snatches that stood out in her memory...

*

“That business with Sally Sparrow and the Weeping Angels! It nearly did my head in, trying to work out who was doing what to who between the two of you – and, more to the point, who *started* it! I sometimes wonder why your head doesn’t explode, Doctor.”

“We-e-ell, it was just your standard paradox, really,” he shrugged.

“But surely that’s you and Martha, isn’t it?” she said, innocently. “A pair o’ docs?”

“Ohhhh! Oh, that’s terrible!” The Doctor convulsed into an impression of a folding jack-knife, instantly assuming the contorted expression of a man in extreme pain. “Oh, I’m in *dist-ress!*”

“Oh, hark at you, Mister Master-of-the-Witty-Riposte! If ever I heard a pot calling a kettle black...! Shall I quote you back some of *your* worst puns? ‘Some people are born great, and some have crates thrust upon them’ comes to mind, for a start! What about telling a clockwork droid you’re not winding him up? Or asking Max Capricorn about ‘getting a head in business’? And that timeless classic to General Staal – ‘An intruder? How’d he get in? Intruder window?’ To name but a few...!”

“Yeah, but they were all brilliant, though, weren’t they?” he said smugly.

“I seem to remember that Isaac Asimov, one of the most incorrigible punsters of all time, said that *puns* aren’t funny – having the nerve to *make* them is what’s *funny*,” she challenged.

“Well, if there’s one thing I’ve got lots of, it’s nerve,” he declared with a grin. “Well, nerve and wit. Well, nerve and wit and intelligence. Well, nerve and wit and intelligence and charm. Well...”

*

“There’s something Reinette said to Rose that I don’t think I’ll ever forget, because it expressed a very fundamental truth about you. Like to hear it?”

He cocked an interrogative eyebrow at her.

“She said, ‘The monsters and the Doctor. It seems you cannot have one without the other.’ And Rose said, ‘Tell me about it!’ But then Reinette said, ‘You and I both know the Doctor is worth the monsters’. That is just so true! If a compliment somewhat from left of field...”

Then, while he absorbed that, she added, “And if you’re interested, I can tell you why those robots were stalking Reinette through the time windows.”

“*Can* you?” he said eagerly. “*Why* her? And how do you know?”

“Because I saw something you never did. The outside of the spaceship. The *name* of the spaceship. The ‘SS’... three guesses.” She looked at him, raising her eyebrows expectantly.

“The SS *Madame de Pompadour*,” he breathed. “Ahhh...”

*

“When you were sorting out the Krillitanes... Tell me, did Rose ever see fit to explain why she and Sarah Jane were laughing so hard when you burst in on their little tête-à-tête?”

“Yeah, I did wonder about that...” he admitted.

“Well, I won’t repeat the whole conversation, but in essence they’d been playing a game of “see you and raise you” with their reminiscences, and – I have to say, it was Sarah Jane who asked if you did this! – it was Rose telling her that you still went round stroking bits of the TARDIS. For some reason your sudden appearance on top of that little revelation was too much for the pair of ’em – hence the hysterics!”

The Doctor looked slightly embarrassed, and somewhat more indignant.

“What’s wrong with *that*?” he demanded.

“Not one single, solitary thing, from where I’m standing! She’s beautiful, and wonderful, and – I know this might seem like an odd word, but – I think of her as *loyal*, this gorgeous, fantastic old ship of yours.” She broke off for a long look around the control room, and reached out her own hand to touch the edge of the console with a gesture that he found extremely revealing. “I think she deserves every display of affection you choose to lavish on her!”

“Of course she does!” agreed the Doctor forcefully, with a vigorous nod of approval.

*

“The Trickster called you ‘the man who’s lost everybody’. I know you agonize a lot over the people you’ve lost, Doctor. A lot of them have chosen to be left behind for perfectly sound reasons – none of which constituted a rejection of *you!* – just a choice of another way of life. Some of them you’ve *had* to leave behind, like Sarah Jane. And maybe you haven’t gone back for them because you didn’t want to expose them to further risk – again, like Sarah Jane, perhaps... But it’s the ones that’ve died that bother you the most, isn’t it?”

He looked at her bleakly for a few moments, and then down at the floor, and remained silent.

“About *them*, Doctor,” she persisted. “Have you ever asked yourself – objectively, mind! – whether they’d *really* have wanted to give up the experience of knowing you, and sharing your, shall we say, somewhat less than ‘safe as houses’ way of life – even if they’d known how it was going to end?”

She cocked an eyebrow at him.

“That’s how River felt, after all, and she *did* know. She was willing to die rather than risk losing those experiences, those memories of being with you. I think that’s rather telling – and I can’t believe she’s the only one who’d feel like that.”

She sighed. “Don’t forget – a long, safe life in which nothing ever happens doesn’t guarantee happiness. Far from it. Quality of life *with* you can still be more important than quantity *without* you, to some of us...”

*

“When you met the Trickster...” she said tentatively, aware she was treading on dangerous ground. “He said ‘The Gate is waiting for you.’ Still no idea what he meant, I suppose?”

“Nope... Some ‘he’ or other is going to ‘knock four times’. Maybe this Gate, whatever it is, is what he’s going to knock on.” The Doctor’s expression became brooding.

“Reinette said that a door once opened can be stepped through in either direction. Whatever this Gate is, presumably it’ll turn out that either there’s someone who mustn’t *go* through it, or mustn’t *come* through it. But, Doctor, whatever it means, whatever’s going to happen, there’s one thing I’m absolutely certain of.” She spoke with such conviction that he looked at her more closely.

“What?”

“That whatever the outcome is, whatever you do, it won’t be for yourself. It’ll be for us.” She looked at him steadily, and quoted his own words to him. “*We – ARE – DEFENDED.*”

The Doctor, for once, couldn’t find an instantly adequate response to such a profound and unequivocal declaration of confidence, save to gift her a smile that told her without words exactly how that made him feel.

But then his face changed, and he said, dourly, “And then my song ends, apparently.”

She was silent for a few moments. Then she said, “When you ended up in the parallel universe where Lumic was making the Cybermen, and Pete Tyler was still alive; when you thought the TARDIS was terminally dead. You found that one tiny energy cell glowing somewhere down under the console, and you blew on it to help it start the recharging process. I still cherish the way your face lit up even more than it did! But do you remember what you said to Mickey then?”

The Doctor thought back, screwing his face up in a most unbecoming way.

“*Said?* Oh...” Recollection dawned. “That I’d used up ten years of my life.”

“‘Worth every second’, you said at the time. Maybe now it turns out those ten years were out of *this* life, being *this* you. If that turns out to be true, you’re not the only one who’s going to resent it, let me tell you!”

She leaned toward him, earnestly.

“But think about it, Doctor – one result of the cost of those ten years was that Rose was able to come back with you, you had more time together, and eventually she, at least, found happiness, with the other Doctor, your human self. I *wish* you could have had that happiness for yourself! But even if not, don’t you *still* think it worth every second – for *her*?”

*

“D’you know, if there’s one thing that’s helping to shore up my theory about this being a fiction, it’s that I can remember everything I’m quoting to you with near perfect recall. I couldn’t do that normally! Someone’s got to be helping me remember *this* accurately...!”

*

“Look, I’ve got to ask,” she said, perched on the pilot’s seat. “Have you still got the scarf? It’s passed into the realms of legend, that scarf has!”

“Oh, well, yes, of course I have! I’m sure I have. I must have. Somewhere... Dunno where, though. But it’s bound to be somewhere in the back of the wardrobe,” he said, with a nonchalant shrug and one of those face-splitting grins of his.

“Ah, yes – had a brief glimpse of ‘the wardrobe’ back when you were choosing your current ‘look’ – which, if I may say so, I’ve always really liked, though I’ll gratuitously add that the brown suit’s my personal favourite. Though I have to say I thought the pyjamas were quite becoming, too...” she added impishly.

The Doctor gave her a wary look which made her grin inwardly, but she continued to muse as if she hadn’t noticed.

“D’you know, I think that’s the only glimpse I can remember of any room other than this one – in this version of the TARDIS, that is; you used to favour ‘white minimalist’ quite a lot, I recall. But there must be dozens of other rooms, aren’t there?”

She glanced over her left shoulder in the general direction of the wall behind the pilot’s seat, thinking to herself of the astonishment he’d probably feel at how ridiculously thrilled she was to see the other door out of the control room, the one that must lead to those other rooms.

She’d always known, given the limited possibilities imposed by the various angles of the control room she’d seen, where it had to be, but she’d never got to see it before.

For some reason, its location was never shown on-screen, though its presence had certainly been implied, not least by the fact he could go to ‘the wardrobe’, and that Mickey had led Rose in that particular direction when he’d asked her to show him around the rest of the TARDIS.

But it had always been shrouded in unaccountable mystery, that door...

“Anyway, I’m glad about the scarf,” she went on, with satisfaction. “Somebody – nobody you know” – she hastened to qualify, with a smile that seemed to indicate the identity of this person was in some way a source of secret amusement – “has observed upon the fact that no-one ever really gets over the scarf, and he’s right.”

“Who said that?” the Doctor enquired.

“Oh, somebody called McDonald. Like I said, you wouldn’t know him.”

She smiled nostalgically.

“That’s how I first remember you, you know. My first real memory of you was in some cavern or other on Voga, lying on the floor, festooned in that scarf and yelling ‘Harry Sullivan is an idiot!’ There’s a saying where I come from, that your ‘first’ Doctor is always ‘your’ Doctor – like your first love, I suppose. And I was very fond of you in that regeneration. But you’ll no doubt be gratified to hear that *you’re* my Doctor, now.”

He grinned again, wagging his head as if he was swaggering.

“Well, flattery’ll get you everywhere!” he said, accepting the tribute with an elaborate flourish. “It never hurts to have another boost for the old ego!”

“I didn’t think *your* ego *could* be boosted any higher than it already is,” she remarked, dryly, and chuckled at his immediately indignant “Oi!”

*

“Doctor – did you *really* play the tuba at the first Proms?”

*

“I can’t help thinking about Rose, sometimes, and wondering what she feels about what happened to Jack,” she mused.

“The last she’d known was that he died on the Game Station, and then suddenly there he was, not only still alive, but springing back to life after a Dalek blast – *again*. She’s got to have wanted an explanation, once the dust had settled, so to speak.”

“Yeah,” he agreed glumly. “I’ve thought about that sometimes, too. I suppose my other self’s told her by now. I don’t like to think of her feeling responsible for – well, the consequences. She never intended to do to him what she did. I don’t envy myself – him – having to break that bit of news to her.”

“Well,” – she thought she’d better lighten the mood – “that won’t have been his worst challenge. After all, he’s Earth-bound now. I bet *he* knows how Sarah Jane felt after she found herself confined to normal life again! Probably having to deal with all those things you’ve never had to – like a *mortgage!*” She widened her eyes, expressively. “And – wait for it – *money!* Isn’t he *lucky?*”

The Doctor looked distinctly queasy.

“Don’t,” he said, raising an admonitory finger. “You’re frightening me – and that’s not something I’d admit to just anyone!”

“Ha! If you find that frightening, there’s an even worse possibility, you know,” she said, flashing her eyes even wider and positively radiating mischievousness.

“What?” he demanded, looking almost alarmed.

“Well, I presume, now that he’s human, if events are taking their natural course... Not to put too fine a point on it, Doctor, Rose and he could be producing a whole flock of little Doctors in that universe! Think of that – founding a dynasty of Doctors! Blond ones, even! Oh, I bet you look cute as a blond! And some of them female, maybe...!”

She grinned gleefully at his startled reaction. Clearly this possibility had never occurred to him.

“Just imagine that! An assortment of little you’s on the loose, running around the world! And what a bunch of teenagers *that’ll* be, eh? Oh, look out, World! In fact, look out, Universe! What would the collective noun be for a group of you, I wonder? A ‘genius of Doctors’, maybe? But I reckon it’s a definite possibility that you could well be – well, a sort of uncle, at any rate!”

He dragged his hands down over his face until the clawlike fingers parted to reveal staring, alarmed eyes. She wondered how much of that was in earnest!

“You – are – *frightening*,” he accused her. “*Genuinely* frightening!”

“Oh, *c’mon*, Doctor!” she said, jabbing a conspiratorial elbow against his arm. “Just think of the potential of the collective intelligence of a swarm of *you*. Talk about ‘gifted and talented’! Pity the poor old alien invaders! They’re not going to stand a chance!”

*

“Look,” she said sheepishly, displaying a fair degree of embarrassment. “This is going to sound really juvenile, but – can I do the ‘fan’ thing...? Can I have a look at the sonic screwdriver?”

He grinned mischievously.

“Course you can!” He pulled it out of his inside breast pocket and waved it about in front of her. “See? No request too large or too small! Here!” And he shoved it into her hand.

She examined it with a degree of awe, holding it rather as if it was a firecracker that might go off at any second, then narrowed her eyes and shook her head at him.

“Oh, you are *impossible!*” she declared, and thrust it back at him. “Look, take it back before I do something with it I shouldn’t!”

He flipped it nonchalantly in front of her face and restored it to his pocket, chuckling.

She watched him do it, then said, with a slightly anxious frown, “By the way, Doctor – you do *know* what beautiful hands you’ve got, don’t you? I mean, somebody *has* told you that, haven’t they?”

And then she grinned. “Especially the fightin’ hand, of course!”



Chapter 5

The Man Who’s Always All Right

It was a completely unexpected and astonishing development when he suddenly fell asleep.

They’d been gradually migrating around the control room in the course of their conversation, sitting on the floor, the pilot’s chair, leaning on the pillars, against the walls; anywhere convenient at the time.

At that precise moment they’d ended up sitting on the floor, side by side, their backs propped against the railing. All of a sudden he lapsed into silence, leaned his head over onto her shoulder, and abruptly relaxed into oblivion.

For a moment she was alarmed – after all, in this universe, in the TARDIS, anything might suddenly start happening! – but then she realized he had simply gone to sleep.

When the law of gravity kicked in and he inevitably began to slide downwards, she guided him down until his head was on her lap and he was sprawled out on the floor, all arms and legs, sleeping so deeply that her movements never caused him even to flicker an eyelid.

She’d seen him rendered unconscious on a number of occasions, but never naturally asleep, like this. She knew Time Lords slept very little, and only for very short periods; she wondered if, like humans in times of deep emotional stress or depression, they fell asleep when their minds had been stressed so far that they needed to take temporary mental refuge from the realities around them.

If so, she fervently hoped this sleep was going to give him real respite, enough chance to regroup the emotional resources he was evidently going to need in order to face whatever was coming toward him from the future.

But he looked, for once, so completely at rest, at peace; that was a distinct novelty, but also a great gift.

She sat there in quiet content, watching his face as he slept, his head heavy on her lap, and waiting for him.

Eventually – she never knew how much later – he suddenly woke (he had the habit of doing rather a lot of things *suddenly*, she reflected), obviously realized instantly what had happened, and almost as instantly jerked himself back into a sitting position, as if startled by finding himself in such an intimate attitude.

“Gosh! Sorry! Didn’t mean to do that!” he apologized.

“When cats fall asleep on you, it’s supposed to indicate a profound degree of trust, so I’ll take it as a compliment,” she remarked, grinning as he rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms. “I wish Astrid could see you now! You told her she should see you first thing in the morning – this, presumably, is what she’d have been treated to!”

The Doctor looked extremely sheepish – and then they both erupted into laughter.

But hers abruptly broke off, as, both suddenly and at last, there came the sensation she’d been fearing.

She scrambled to her feet and put a hand against her midriff. The Doctor looked at her sharply and likewise surged erect.

“What’s the matter?” he demanded, although clearly he already suspected the answer.

Her mouth twisted in a wry smile.

“The last time you saw Sarah Jane, you made one of your more superfluous requests. ‘Don’t forget me’. As if *anyone’s* ever going to forget you!” She looked at him sadly. “But, Doctor, even with all the things that go on in your life – I hope you won’t forget *me*.”

“You’re not going?” he protested, suddenly apprehensive.

“When I came here, it felt as if I was being pulled by something I couldn’t see. But that time it was very sudden. I’ve just begun to feel the same thing – but gradually, like a warning. Looks as if someone’s calling time on my being here.” She attempted to make a joke of it. “Visiting hours must be over.”

The Doctor looked rebellious. “I don’t want you to go!” he expostulated, like a petulant child.

She shook her head. There was the sensation again – stronger this time, and growing.

“I don’t want to go! I wish I didn’t *have* to go. Of course, if wishes were horses, maybe you’d find more of them trotting around spaceships... But it doesn’t look as if I get any say in the matter.” She looked at him in sudden entreaty. “Doctor, I’ve got to ask – have I done you any good, being here?”

He stepped forward and grabbed both her hands in his.

“More than you can possibly imagine,” he said, in a tone that put the matter beyond all doubt. “And I won’t forget you. Ever. How could I? After what you’ve done for me? And for *wanting* to do it?”

She looked at him closely.

“And you’ll be all right? Oh, but of course” – she went on, forestalling his reply – “I forgot – you’re the man who’s *always* ‘all right’.”

He smiled wryly at her, acknowledging the hit. “But so much more ‘all right’ than I would have been without you. Empathy and kindness – two of the very best human qualities!” He looked wistful. “I wish I could think of a better way to thank you.”

She smiled with genuine amusement at some private thought.

“Actually, I have a feeling you’re going to, you know – quite soon, in fact.”

The feeling of being pulled was becoming ever stronger. Convulsively she gripped his hands more tightly, as if that was going to prevent the inevitable.

“Doctor, two more things I need to say, before the chance is gone. Listen – this is important! – the Trickster was wrong! You *haven’t* lost everyone you think you have!” And before he could ask what she meant, she went on, “And whatever’s going to happen to you, *you won’t be alone!* I may not be *here*, but I *will* be with you, right to the end, I promise you! *Please* remember – *my* Doctor! – how very much you’re loved! Not just by me – by *all* of us!”

Then the sensation became overwhelming, and her last sight was of his face as she faded out of his vision and his grasp. But she took with her a feeling of great happiness – she’d been able to do for him what she’d hoped.

*

The Doctor stood, bereft, in the control room, his hands held out as if he was still holding hers. Then slowly they sank to his sides.

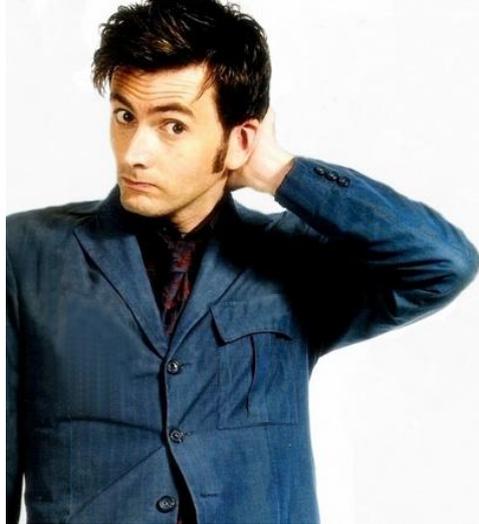
“Goodbye, Alex Allison,” he whispered. “Thank you...”

He stood motionless for quite a while, thinking about the past few hours. Then he abruptly came to life and strode back to the console to set the controls for his next destination.

“Sorry, Ood Sigma, but I don’t think I’ll answer my summons right now,” he said defiantly. “Think I’ll have a bit of fun, first.”

Then one thought in particular struck him.

“Naming a galaxy...” he mused, rubbing the back of his head absent-mindedly. “I wonder what she meant by that...?”



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).

PLEASE NOTE: "Calling Time" is, as of March 2016, no longer published on the "A Teaspoon and an Open Mind" website, where it first appeared in May 2010; it has now been replaced by "The Fourth Wall", which uses the same concept but is (unusually for me) somewhat shorter, and it's not the Tenth Doctor but the Ninth Doctor who receives an unexpected visitant (who looks like somebody who looks suspiciously like Arthur Darvill, though it isn't him... Look, just go and read it! All will become clear...). However, this version, "Calling Time" (with the inclusion of some amendments) remains available on www.deborahlatham.co.uk, though to all intents and purposes archived.

Chapter 1: Fictional Scenarios

- "The Waters of Mars" (4.16) was initially broadcast in October 2009. Alex has been watching a recording of that broadcast on her HDD DVD player.
- Donna Noble's encounter with the Racnoss occurred in "The Runaway Bride" (3.X, December 2006).
- Proper Dave and Other Dave were companions of River Song in "Silence in the Library" and "Forest of the Dead" (4.4, May 2008 and 4.5, June 2008 respectively).
- Re fictions: "A fictional universe is a cohesive imaginary world that serves as the setting or backdrop for one or (more commonly) multiple works of fiction or translatable non-fiction. It can be argued that every work of fiction generates a world of its own; Robert A. Heinlein coined the neologism **fiction** to refer to such a world. A fictional universe is then a fiction that has an existence extending beyond a single story, which becomes the basis either of other stories, or of games or other creations. It generally consists of a time and place that invoke a sense of a distinct world, one which is unique to the content and context of the tales that it is used to tell." (Source: http://72.9.148.189/library/Imaginary_universe)

Chapter 2: Working Hypothesis

- At the time of this story the Doctor's only encounter with River Song was in "Silence in the Library" and "Forest of the Dead" (4.4, May 2008 and 4.5, June 2008).
- The TARDIS collided with the starship Titanic in "Voyage of the Damned" (4.X, December 2007).
- The Doctor encountered the Beast on Krop Tor in "The Satan Pit" (2.9, June 2006).
- The Doctor was on the SS Madame de Pompadour in "The Girl in the Fireplace" (2.4, May 2006).
- The Tenth Doctor met the Fifth Doctor in "Time Crash" (CIN2, November 2007).
- The Doctor told Ood Sigma that he'd named a galaxy Alison in the first segment of "The End of Time" (4.17, December 2009).
- Jenny was created from the Doctor's DNA in "The Doctor's Daughter" (4.6, May 2008).
- The speech by Davros that Alex refers to is in "Journey's End" (4.13, July 2008).
- The events on the Game Station are chronicled in "The Parting of the Ways" (1.13, June 2005).

Chapter 3: A Man Convinced Against His Will

- The mentions of Dalek Caan and Davros here refer to "Journey's End" (4.13, July 2008).
- The poet John Donne (1572-1631) is probably most famous for the "No man is an island" passage from his Meditation 17, "Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions" (1624), quoted here.
- The Doctor, with hubris-induced superciliousness, uses the dismissive phrase "little people" about non-famous humans in "The Waters of Mars" (4.16, October 2009); Adelaide Brooke challenges him, "Who decides how important they are?! I don't care who you are, the Time Lord Victorious is WRONG!"
- Alex does not at this time know what will happen to the Doctor in "The End of Time" – but she has seen the BBC trailer that immediately followed the first broadcast of "The Waters of Mars"...

Chapter 4: Snatches of Conversation

- The references in this chapter are from the following episodes:
 - Sally Sparrow and the Weeping Angels – "Blink" (3.10, June 2007).
 - ReINETTE (Madame de Pompadour) - "The Girl in the Fireplace" (2.4, May 2006).

- *Krillitanes* – “School Reunion” (2.3, April 2006).
- *The Trickster* – “The Wedding of Sarah Jane Smith” (“The Sarah Jane Adventures”, 3.6, October 2009).
- *Lumic and Pete Tyler* – “Rise of the Cybermen” and “The Age of Steel” (2.5 and 2.6, May 2006).
- *Playing the tuba at the first Prom* – “Music of the Spheres” (Doctor Who Prom, 2008).
- *The Fourth Doctor visited Voga* in “Revenge of the Cybermen” (4D, April-May 1975).
- *The Doctor’s ‘other self’ remained with Rose in the parallel universe* – “Journey’s End” (4.13, July 2008).
- *The Doctor’s dread at the prospect of having to have a mortgage* – “The Impossible Planet” (2.8, June 2006).
- *The Doctor’s ‘fightin’ hand’* – “The Christmas Invasion” (2.X, December 2005).

Chapter 5: The Man Who’s Always All Right

- *The Doctor asked Sarah Jane not to forget him in “The Wedding of Sarah Jane Smith” (“The Sarah Jane Adventures”, 3.6, October 2009).*
- *When she said “I don’t want to go”, Alex had no idea that those would turn out to be the Tenth Doctor’s last words. (As in, when I wrote this story, I hadn’t yet seen “The End of Time”, so I didn’t know, either!)*

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