

## MISSING PERSONS

by Deborah Latham

- Chapter 1 [Water Always Wins](#)
- Chapter 2 [The Disappearance of Fionnula Thornton](#)
- Chapter 3 [Joiking Forbidden](#)
- Chapter 4 [Room for More](#)
- Chapter 5 [“Anyone About?”](#)
- Chapter 6 [“Who’s the Daddy?”](#)
- Chapter 7 [Eutychia meets Earth](#)
- Chapter 8 [The Best Khitarah Player on the Planet](#)
- Chapter 9 [The Diakonos](#)
- Chapter 10 [Chalk and Talk](#)
- Chapter 11 [A Question of Justice](#)
- Chapter 12 [Finn’s Wish](#)
- Chapter 13 [The Garden of Starlights](#)
- Chapter 14 [Elianya](#)
- Chapter 15 [“I’ve Been in a Fair Few Quarries in My Time...”](#)
- Chapter 16 [The Black Cloud](#)
- Chapter 17 [Paying the Price](#)
- Chapter 18 [The Answer to Arrem’s Question](#)
- Chapter 19 [The Brollachan Trap](#)
- Chapter 20 [Esker](#)
- Chapter 21 [The Empty Room](#)
- Chapter 22 [Mirror of the Soul](#)
- Chapter 23 [Launch of the Skyrider](#)
- Chapter 24 [The Planet That Once Was](#)
- Chapter 25 [Stasis Sphere and Inertia Shell](#)

contd...

Chapter 26	<a href="#">The Doctor's Song</a>
Chapter 27	<a href="#">Revelation of the Sunsinger</a>
Chapter 28	<a href="#">The Consequences of Prophecy</a>
Chapter 29	<a href="#">Finale...</a>
Chapter 30	<a href="#">...and Vale</a>
	<a href="#">References</a>

---

## Chapter 1

### *Water Always Wins*

The beetle ambled unhurriedly over the rocks piled at the cave entrance. The rocks themselves, weathered by thousands of years of wind and rain, looked as polished as glass, but the countless tiny hair-like strands on the beetle's feet enabled it to cling to the smooth planes like a burr to a piece of cloth.

The beetle had very limited self-awareness, and certainly wasn't intelligent. But it was sensitive to the dampness in the surrounding air, even though it had no concept of rain as such. It also registered the occasional movement in the air that signalled a reaction to the sound waves that came from the periodic peals of thunder reverberating over the landscape, though it couldn't see the spectacular lightning strikes that generated them.

Another thing it was aware of was a closer, gentler, warmer movement of air in its vicinity, and the occasional more energetic burst of vibrations. But it had no idea it was being observed by two alien creatures, that the warmer air was produced by their breath, that the vibrations were the sound waves from their speech. Its eyes might have been aware to some limited degree of the large, pale patches of their faces only inches away from its path across the rock surface, but naturally enough it had no concept of a face, or of anything to do with such inconceivable creatures as these, so ignored this phenomenon.

Blissfully unaware of the proximity of monsters, it continued to trundle serenely on its way, walking past giants too fantastic for it to comprehend.

Two sets of eyes followed its progress intently.

"Do you think he knows we're here?" mused one of the aliens, sending another gust of warm air toward the oblivious beetle.

"What makes you assume it's a 'he'?" challenged the other.

"Don't know," said the first speaker, with the vocal equivalent of a shrug. "Just being a victim of my native culture, I suppose. It's a sort of habit of speech – some things or creatures are automatically 'he', others are automatically 'she'. Until proven otherwise, of course."

"You can't even assume there are only two genders on this planet," pointed out the second speaker, somewhat severely. "Might be several. Or hundreds. Or just one, and everything reproduces by parthogenesis. Or mitosis. Or binary fission. Endless possibilities!"

"Then I'd better not make any assumptions on the basis of one passing beetle," agreed the first speaker. "Or what I take to be a beetle. I wonder if it flies?"

As if it had heard her, the beetle raised its elytra, unfolded its wings, and launched itself out into the rain. In moments it was lost to sight.

"Well, now you know!"

The Doctor rolled away from where he had been lying full-length alongside his companion on the cave floor, executing some acrobatic moves that ended up with him sitting with his back against the opposite wall, his forearms resting on his knees. Finn Thornton remained where she was for a few moments, lying on her stomach, her chin propped on her hands, still gazing at the rocks only inches from her nose as if the beetle were still there. Then she, too, shifted into a sitting position, shuffling into one that had her leaning forward, her body supported by the piled rocks, her chin now resting on her folded arms on the crest of the pile as she looked out of the cave mouth into the pouring rain.

“Good job the TARDIS doesn’t mind being wet,” she observed, looking down to the foot of the slope below them. “She’s getting quite a bath at the moment.”

The Doctor turned his head to his right to look down at the familiar blue shape sitting in a little hollow in the rocks there. When they’d landed, and discovered they were in a ravine at the foot of a mountain – well, more of a middle-sized hill than a mountain, really, but composed mostly of bare rock – he’d suggested they climb up and get their bearings from a viewpoint up above. They’d only got part-way up when the heavens above them had opened and the downpour had begun. Luckily, they’d spotted the cave only a few yards further up, and taken refuge. The TARDIS, at the foot of the hill, had no such protection.

“Oh, she’ll be all right,” he said, dismissively. “She’s been immersed in worse than this, I can tell you.”

“Somehow I don’t think I’ll ask what ‘worse’ might be,” Finn said, cocking an eyebrow at him. “Got a feeling I might not like the answer. At least this is only water! That’s harmless enough.”

She was startled by the dark frown that appeared on his face.

“No, it isn’t. Not always,” he said, grimly.

Since she couldn’t see into his mind, she didn’t understand why he looked so fierce. But his expression was enough to warn her off asking for an explanation. Feeling rather shaken, as if something she’d thought was safe had suddenly revealed itself to be inimical, she looked away again, staring with troubled eyes out of the cave mouth.

Her peripheral vision told her the Doctor was continuing to stare at her. Without speaking; there was a long silence. Then he broke it in his normal tone of voice, as if that last exchange had never happened.

“Not bored, are you? We’ve been stuck here almost an hour, you know.”

Finn, despite having her chin resting on her forearms, managed to shake her head, relieved to hear him sounding more relaxed.

“Not bored one bit,” she assured him quickly. “I *love* thunderstorms. The smell of rainwashed air. And I love just listening to rain falling.”

“You can’t hear rain falling,” the Doctor contradicted her. “The human ear’s not sensitive enough for that. What you mean is, you like to hear rain *landing*.”

“All right, pedant!” she agreed pointedly, giving him an old-fashioned look. “In the interests of accuracy – I love listening to rain *landing*! But” – she reverted to her previous expression, the one he always saw her face wear when she was enthusing about natural phenomena – “just the sound of it, pure and simple. That thudding drumbeat of impacting droplets... I just *love* it! It’s so often the sort of thing you don’t get time, or opportunity, to appreciate.”

“Got both at the moment,” commented the Doctor.

“Mmm,” she agreed, happily.

Silence fell. Finn continued to watch the rain falling, listening to the irregular percussion of its impact on the various surfaces it encountered, but still wondering why the Doctor had said what he’d said about water. Now facing more away from him, gazing out to her left, she wasn’t aware of the look on his face as he studied her.

A sombre, even grim look, a slight frown distorting the line of his eyebrows. An expression in his eyes that combined sorrow, anguish, even anger. An awareness of impending loss, along with raging resentment.

He was thinking about what had happened just prior to this impulsive trip on which he’d brought her, bursting back into her life and sweeping her into the TARDIS to accompany him.

He was thinking about what had happened to him immediately before that, on Mars. Mars, in 2059. The year Bowie Base had been – would be – destroyed, with all its personnel.

Had Finn been able to see into his mind, she would have seen the images flickering through it – the base in the Martian landscape; Maggie Cain and her two colleagues infected with the mysterious life form named the Flood; the deaths of all the base staff save the two he'd transported back to Earth, along with Adelaide Brooke, in the TARDIS; and – the death of Adelaide herself. What he'd said to her. What she'd said to him. Why she'd done what she'd done.

*“Water always wins”* – that was what he'd said himself. To Adelaide. All those consequences, because of the water of the Flood. Not just for them. For him, too...

Water always wins, and he'd lost. Lost so much – would lose so much more...

*No, Finn, you are so, so wrong – water isn't always harmless.*

And he was thinking about what he had subsequently learned, back on Earth, in the year 2020.

About himself.

And about Finn.

He remembered the thoughts that had raced through his mind, the turbulence of emotions roiling within him as he shut the TARDIS door, the echoes of the shot with which Adelaide Brooke had killed herself still reverberating in his mind.

He remembered standing by the console, staring into space, shutting out the summoning song of the Ood by a deliberate act of will.

“NO,” he'd said, flatly denying the bidding of that call. And had set the TARDIS into flight, away from the knowledge of the imminent ending of his song. Away to other things, other places, other times. The Queen Elizabeth affair – that might, just conceivably, have been a bit of a mistake, he conceded to himself. Although perhaps not his finest hour... No wonder he'd become her “sworn enemy”! Though for some reason the surrounding events seemed to have become a bit fuzzy, and he couldn't remember why... Funny, that...

Now, that Phosphorous Carousel – that was more like it! That'd been a right old merry-go-round! Of a sort... And the Red Carnivorous Maw – oh, he'd been brilliant that time! And countless light years away was the galaxy that would always now be known as Alison – though no-one outside of it, other than himself, was ever going to know why... Places and times, none of which had been the place and time he was avoiding.

And the last of those places and times had been Earth, 2020 AD.

New Zealand, as it happened. One of those countries that, despite all his visits to Earth across the centuries, he'd somehow not managed to take a look at lately. Had the New Zealand bid for the 78th World Science Fiction Convention for 2020 got off the ground? He remembered the bid being proposed, but, annoyingly, couldn't remember if it had got anywhere. So he decided to see. And then, about to plunge back into the Time Vortex, he paused.

Since he was back on Earth anyway, why not quickly pop over to England and see Finn? See how she was doing at this point in her life. Wouldn't hurt – back in 2009, she'd never know she still had that particular visit to look forward to. He'd rather liked the idea of surprising her like that.

So he'd set the controls for the usual place – Finn's living room – expecting a smooth journey of mere moments. Instead of which...

The Doctor closed his eyes, shutting out the cave, the storm, the girl in front of him, and set his memory to 'replay' mode...

## Chapter 2

### *The Disappearance of Fionnula Thornton*

Unexpectedly, the TARDIS shuddered and lurched. The Doctor grabbed at the console and looked up at the Time Rotor in some alarm, but then everything seemed to return to normal.

“What was that all about?” he demanded.

The TARDIS didn't say.

He shrugged, and went down the ramp, pulling the door open.

“Oh,” he said.

It was obvious something had gone awry.

Instead of being in the usual place inside Finn's living room, the TARDIS was standing on a small earth trackway at the end of the terrace that included her house. Clearly something had prevented a landing in the customary spot. Which didn't bode entirely well, because the Doctor knew Finn specifically kept that area clear for him.

This warranted immediate investigation.

He approached her front door and rang the bell, but there was no reply. Casting a quick, precautionary look up and down the street, he unpocketed the sonic screwdriver. Seconds later, he was inside.

Immediately, he knew something was wrong. Well, maybe not wrong, but certainly changed. The hallway looked completely different. She must have redecorated. He turned the handle of the living room door and went inside.

He looked around the room and instantly reverted to the theory that something was wrong.

It was not that this room, too, had been redecorated. It was that there was more furniture, and it was distributed in such a way that there was no possibility that the TARDIS could fit in there – hence the protest when asked to try, and the relocation to outside the house. Children's toys scattered in various places on the carpet. And the photographs on the mantelpiece – all various groupings of a man, a woman, and three children; two boys and a girl. Obviously a family of at least four or five years' standing. Which, after eleven years, wouldn't exactly be surprising, he supposed.

Except that the woman in the photographs wasn't Finn.

So where was she?

The Doctor made a hasty search of the rest of the house for clues. One bedroom obviously belonged to the boys, another one to the girl, the third and largest to the parents. None of the documents he could find referred to 'Miss F Thornton' – only to various members of the Carlisle family – parents Andy and Katie, children Dan, Lucy and Peter. Nowhere did he see any sign of anything belonging to Finn.

The implication was obvious.

Finn didn't live here any more.

In which case, where had she gone? And when?

The Doctor went back down to the living room, where he'd spotted a tablet computer on the table. He fired it up with the sonic screwdriver, and summoned the latest search engine on the internet.

“Come on, Son of Google,” he muttered to himself. “Help me out here...”

With dancing fingers, he entered his search parameters and waited for the results.

A few seconds later he was staring at the screen, reading a newspaper report that was seven years old, his face a mix of incredulity and dismay.

*'Local Woman Still Missing: Police Abandon Enquiry'*, said the headline. A rather blurred photograph of Finn's face gazed back at him. The article – brief, but to the point – announced that, due to the absence of any further leads, and with other calls on their resources, the police were being forced to abandon active pursuit of the unresolved enquiry into the disappearance of Fionnula Thornton which had occurred two years previously, though the case would, of course, remain open, and if any new leads emerged they would be examined...

The Doctor stared at the display in horror.

So that was why the house was so different. Someone else was living here now. A family. Strangers. Because nine years ago, at some point in the year 2011, Finn Thornton had become a missing person. And, apparently, stayed that way.

\*

The Doctor let himself out of the house and stood still on the pavement, thinking hard. He was hardly aware of the elderly man coming along the street, shopping bag in hand, and who turned in through the tiny front garden area to the next door, key in hand.

The man glanced at him with mild curiosity, then looked more closely.

“You all right, mate?” he enquired, with a marked Cockney accent.

“What?” responded the Doctor, awakening fully to his presence. “Oh, yes, fine. Right. No problem. But – ” he looked with full attention at the amiable, kindly eyes watching him “- you couldn’t tell me what happened to the young woman who used to live here, could you?”

“Wot, Finn?” the old man said immediately. “Why? Did yer know ’er?”

“Yes,” said the Doctor. “She’s” – obeying an unexpectedly overwhelming instinct, he immediately corrected himself – “well, she *was* a good friend of mine.”

“Mine, too,” agreed the old man. “Ere – my name’s George. George Clifford.” He held out his hand, and the Doctor shook it. “You must not’ve been in touch with ’er for quite a while, then.” He looked at the Doctor searchingly for a moment or two, then apparently made up his mind. “Fancy a cup o’ tea? There’s summink yer need to know...”

A few minutes later the Doctor, seated at George’s kitchen table, accepted a cup of tea from the old man and watched him as he seated himself opposite, with his own cup in front of him.

“Well, no point beatin’ abaht the bush,” George said. “So – sorry to ’ave to break it to yer like this, mate, but – she disappeared. Long time ago. Abaht ten years, almost. Just vanished. Not a dicky bird by way of explanation. One day she was there, like normal – next, she just *wasn’t*. Very upsettin’, that was. Lovely girl, weren’t she?” he said wistfully. “She used to look aht for me and Kath – that was me wife – after we moved ’ere. Came from ’Ackney when I retired, see? You don’t always strike lucky with new neighbours, but we did with Finn. Did the shopping when we weren’t well, looked after the cat when we was away, that sort o’ thing. One o’ the best friends I ever ’ad. Ever so kind, she was.”

“Yes, she was,” said the Doctor pensively. George’s evocative word portrait of Finn had set him thinking about how much kindness she’d shown *him... One of the best friends I ever had. Ever so kind*. He could, he realized, have used those exact same words to encapsulate the relationship between himself and her.

“Don’t always get that from young people these days, do yer? Then, when Kath died...” George paused for a moment, his eyes old and sad. Then he looked at the Doctor again with his former amiable expression. “Finn really ’elped me through that. For all she was so young, she knew all abaht wot it’s like, losin’ someone. I expect yer know abaht that, don’t yer? ’Er family, I mean? That was a real terrible thing wot happened. An’ ’er so young at the time. So she knew wot I was goin’ through. Don’t ’alf make a difference when it’s someone wot really *knows*, not just makin’ the right noises.”

“Yeah, it does,” the Doctor agreed. Again, the old man was expressing about Finn exactly what he felt himself. He looked at George keenly. “So what do you think happened to her?”

“Dunno, mate. Wish I did,” said George with heartfelt sincerity. “She weren’t the type to just do a runner. ’Specially not for no reason. An’ if she’d just ’ad an accident, stands to reason she’d’ve been found. But nobody ever found a thing. So someone must’ve made away with ’er some’ow. Daresay she’ll turn up buried in some ’edgerow somewhere one day, like a lot of ’em do. ’Ope I don’t live to see it. Rather remember ’er the way she was.”

He suddenly looked at the Doctor more attentively.

“Ere, you never said who you was,” he realized. “Who are yer?”

“Me?” exclaimed the Doctor, as if taken by surprise. “Oh – I’m the Doctor.”

George’s eyes widened.

“You’re the Doctor? Blimey! She used to go on abaht you! You sounded like quite a bloke, from what she used to say! I thought, from what she said, you was ’er best friend.” He looked genuinely puzzled. “But, if you was, then ’ow come yer didn’t know abaht wot ’appened?”

The Doctor cast about for a plausible explanation.

“Er... well, we drifted out of touch,” he said lamely. “I – travel a lot. Don’t always keep in touch as much as I should...” His voice trailed off.

George looked at him sternly.

“Well, if you was as good a friend as she made out, I’m surprised at yer, I really am,” he opined gruffly. Then he saw the Doctor’s forlorn expression and evident distress, and relented. “Still, I know wot yer mean. Yer mean to write or phone or summink, and then you find months’n’ even years’ve gone by all of a sudden, and you never realized. Mind you,” he added, as if he’d just remembered something and was slightly puzzled by it, “summink she said once... Can’t remember exactly, but – it was almost like she seemed ter know you was goin’ to be away fer a long time. Still” – he looked at the Doctor with renewed sympathy – “sorry, mate. That you ’ad to find out like this. She was a wonderful girl, an’ I miss ’er still. Oh, well – that’s life for yer.” He sipped at his tea. “Nothin’ we can do abaht it now. She’s gorn, and that’s all there is to it.”

The Doctor took a sip from his own cup, returning George’s wistful smile.

But George was wrong, of course. There *was* something he, the Doctor, could do. And as soon as he’d finished his tea, he’d go and do it.

He gulped down the rest of his drink, put down the empty cup and stood up.

“I’m so sorry, George – thanks and all that – but I really ought to go now,” he said, offering his hand to George. The old man took it and smiled at him over the handshake.

“Don’t mention it, mate,” he assured him. “Anythin’ for a friend o’ Finn’s...”

He followed the Doctor to the front door. The Doctor stepped outside and turned back for one last goodbye, but George forestalled him.

“Course, there was that other friend of ’ers I met once,” he remarked casually. “E seemed like a good sort. Bit flashy, mind. An’ you don’t see too many of them coats about these days, neither.”

The Doctor had been glancing along the street, but at the word ‘coat’ his head shot round like a dog suddenly fastening onto a scent.

“What coat?” he demanded.

“One o’ them long RAF ones,” said George, slightly surprised. “Used to see ’em all the time when I was a kid. Still a lot of pilots around, even after the end o’ the war. But like I say, you don’t see ’em no more. And not being worn by no Americans!”

The Doctor’s mouth fell open.

“Jack?” he exclaimed, dumbfounded.

“Jack – yeah, Jack,” agreed George. “That was ’is name. Jack – Barker, was it? Summink like that, any’ow.”

“Harkness,” the Doctor corrected him absently, thinking furiously. So Jack had come back to visit Finn, had he?

“Do you remember anything else?” he prompted.

George screwed up his face, trying to recall.

“Long time ago now,” he apologized. “I only saw ’im the once. They was off on some trip together. Didn’t say where – leastways, if they did, don’t remember it. An’ she was back only a couple o’ days later. Never saw that Jack bloke again, mind... But I thought yer might like to know she did ’ave a friend keepin’ in touch with ’er. Back then, anyway.” George peered at the Doctor’s preoccupied expression. “Friend o’ yours, too, was ’e?”

“What? Oh – yes,” the Doctor agreed, wrenching his attention back to the old man. “Yes, he was. Is! I think... But I haven’t seen him for a while, either.”

“You wanna keep better track o’ yer friends, mate,” George advised him. “You never know what’s goin’ a’ppen, do yer?”

“You, George, are a very wise man,” the Doctor told him, emphatically.

George felt considerable concern as he watched the tall figure walk away, hands shoved deep into the pockets of the blue pinstripe suit, pushing the skirts of the brown trench coat back and behind him. It had obviously been quite a blow to that young man, hearing what had happened to Finn. The very set of those drooping shoulders spoke eloquently of how much she must have meant to him. George felt very, very sorry for the Doctor, as he retreated into his home and shut the door behind him.

\*

The young man on the reception desk in the police station looked up from behind the protective glass plate at the tall, slim man in the long brown coat who’d just planted himself in front of the desk.

“Met CID,” this apparition announced, holding up a small leather wallet to the glass. The desk officer peered at it; he saw the expected ID card and details. *Detective Inspector Peter Carlisle*, he read, and wondered what had brought a Metropolitan Police officer to this part of the country.

“Yes, sir,” he acknowledged. “What can I do for you?”

“I want to see the file on Fionnula Thornton. Missing person, 2011. May have a bearing on a case I’m working on at the moment,” said the Doctor authoritatively, returning the psychic paper to his pocket. “And any papers, photographs, other physical evidence you’ve got.”

“Righto, sir,” the young officer agreed. “I’ll get the relevant colleague here to help you...”

Some time later found the Doctor seated in front of a computer, which had not helped at all; he’d found nothing in the electronic records that threw any further light on what he already knew. Now he turned his attention to the three large storage boxes on the table beside him.

“There you are, sir,” the officer had said when he’d placed them there earlier; an older man, perhaps in his fifties. “All the papers found in the house.”

He’d made to leave, but only got as far as the door before he’d hesitated and turned back. He clearly wanted to say something; the Doctor’s raised eyebrows tacitly invited him to do so.

“I remember this case, sir,” he’d said tentatively. “It was the will I always wondered about.”

“The will?” the Doctor had prompted.

“It was handwritten on some scrap of paper, though it was properly witnessed and everything, so apparently it was valid enough. But it was the wording that puzzled me.”

“Why? What about it?”

The officer’s eyes had worn a slightly unfocused look as he’d analyzed his memories for absolute accuracy.

“Well, it used that phrase about ‘in the event of my death’, but then it said something else as well.” There had been an unalloyed sense of unease in his eyes; what he remembered clearly continued to disturb him. “It went on and said – what were the exact words? – oh, yes – ‘or in the event that I should be declared legally dead’.” He’d looked at the Doctor almost challengingly. “I mean – that’s not normal phrasing for a will, is it? It always made me wonder if – well, if somehow she *knew* she might go missing. Doesn’t it sound like that to you, sir?”

The Doctor had stared back at him.

“It’s certainly a valid line of enquiry,” he’d agreed. “Who was the beneficiary?”

“Beneficiaries, sir,” the office had corrected. “You’ll find a copy in one of those boxes, if you want to take a look. Some woman and her son and a couple of other kids. Up London way. Ealing, if I remember rightly.” He shrugged. “We looked into that, of course, but it didn’t come to anything. They checked out all right.”

The Doctor had nodded, slowly. They would have done, of course...

“But it was funny, all the same,” the officer had persisted. “I was just never able to shrug off this feeling she knew about – whatever it was that happened – before it happened.” He’d looked at the Doctor with a kind of

pleading in his eyes. “It’s always bothered me, that. If you do come across anything, sir – I’d appreciate knowing...”

The Doctor had regarded him expressionlessly.

“You realize we might never know?” he’d said non-committally.

The man had nodded, reluctantly.

“But – if you ever do...” he’d repeated. Then he’d squared his shoulders. “Anyway – sorry to take up so much of your time, sir. I hope you find what you’re looking for...” And he’d finally gone.

The Doctor had sat for a long time, thinking about what he’d said. Now he opened the first box and began to lift out the contents.

“Blimey, Finn,” he muttered. “You could give the National Archive a run for its money, couldn’t you!”

He looked at the pile, took a deep breath, and began to go through it.

A long while later, surrounded by a welter of papers and photographs, he was beginning to lose hope that he would find anything helpful at all. He’d come across the will, of course – it had been photographed, not photocopied, so it was clear to see that the handwriting was definitely Finn’s own, on a single piece of notepaper. As he’d suspected, she’d left everything to be sold and the proceeds divided equally between Sarah Jane, Luke, Clyde and Rani. He’d scrutinized the signatures of the witnesses, but the names were unknown to him. Amy and Rory Williams. He wondered who they were; he’d never heard of them...

But it’s a definite corollary of Murphy’s law – *whatever can go wrong, will go wrong* – that whatever you’re looking for will be the last thing in the sequence that you look at. The Doctor found himself proving it empirically when he came to the very last piece of paper at the bottom of the third box.

It was a rather small and shabby sheet from what looked to be a writing pad of some kind. The content was handwritten. At some point it had been folded into four, but now was spread out flat. It read:

*“You’re reading this in 2020, aren’t you? Well, listen carefully. A unique date in Swedish history. May be the month this year, and the rest adds up. But I don’t need to tell you not to tell me yet! Trust me? Then don’t go there. Not until you see the right double-tap.”*

It was written in Finn’s own handwriting.

The Doctor stared at it. It was clearly a message. To him.

Somehow, she’d known he was going to do this – come here, find this piece of paper, read it. Therefore...

And there was something else about that piece of paper.

The Doctor pulled the photograph of the will back out of the pile and compared it to the paper in his hand. The two sheets were clearly identical. From the same source. The same notepad. And written with the same pen. So they’d been written at the same time.

Quickly he re-folded the note and stowed it in the breast pocket of his suit. Then he got up to leave.

Some unlucky minion was going to find themselves tasked with having to repack the storage boxes with all those papers and photographs he’d left strewn over the table. And he hoped the desk officer wouldn’t catch it too badly from his superiors when it was discovered there was no Detective Inspector Peter Carlisle with the Metropolitan CID.

But right now, he had something more important to worry about. He needed to get back to the TARDIS.

Where he could decipher Finn’s message in private.

\*

Slumped in the pilot’s seat back in the TARDIS control room, the Doctor stared at Finn’s message.

The cryptic clue she’d given him was easy enough – the ‘*unique date in Swedish history*’ was obviously 30 February 1712. That had happened as part of the gradual change from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar that had taken place across Europe from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries; Sweden’s rather convoluted approach to the transition had resulted in the unique date of 30 February in the year 1712 in their attempts to align the two calendars.

So to convert that to its component numbers of 30021712, take out the digits for 2011 (obviously the 'this year' reference, because that had to be when Finn had written the note), add the remaining 3+0+2+7 to total 12, and put that into May, was an almost instant deduction for him. She'd even included a pun: '*May be the month*' was clearly a play on the way some natives of Somerset would structure the sentence that someone in another part of the country would say as '*the month is May*'.

Finn was telling him that the date of her disappearance was going to be 12 May 2011. And she'd known when he'd discover the note.

So she already knew it was going to happen! Or, rather, while at some future point she evidently would, she didn't, not yet – hence the warning not to tell her '*yet*'.

But what did she mean by '*the right double-tap*'? That was the gesture she used whenever she was referring to his mind being in hers – double-tapping her forehead with her middle finger.

And why was the handwriting, although unmistakably hers, obviously written with a rather shaky hand?

He stood up, thrusting the paper into his pocket, and started to set the controls with every intention of ignoring her warning not to go to that date.

He might as well have listened to her.

Because the TARDIS refused to move. An abortive movement of the Time Rotor and some loud complaining noises were the only response he got.

"What?" he demanded in frustration. "What's stopping you?"

Then, scanning the readings, he realized.

"Oi! Who's applied a temporal interdict?" he demanded indignantly. A temporal interdict meant that the TARDIS has been programmed so that it could not go to the temporal and spatial coordinates selected.

Which made him realize something else.

"Hang on! *I'm* the only one who can do that...!"

At which point he caught sight of the monitor.

It was displaying a message.

To him.

Written in Circular Gallifreyan, it read:

*"Message from me to me,"* it began. *"Tut, tut! Didn't she tell you not to go there yet? Patience is a virtue! So listen to her! And wait for the right moment. You really ought to trust her."*

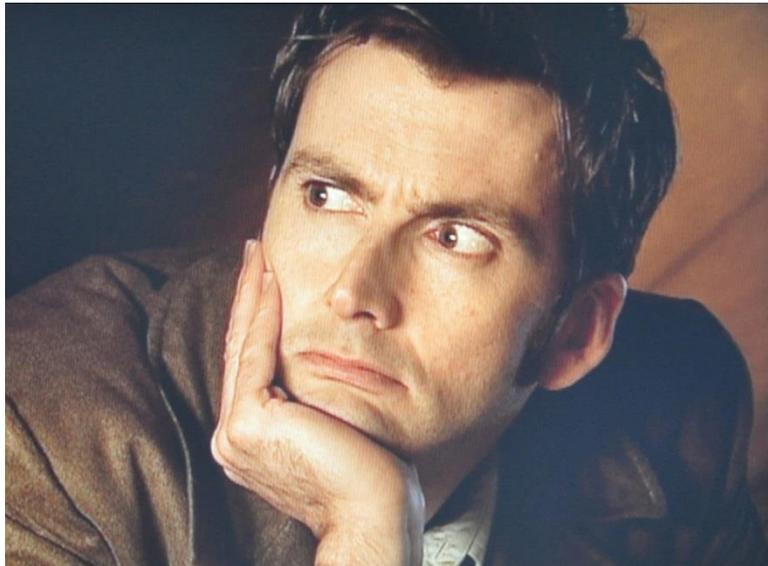
The Doctor's frown of indignation deepened for a few moments. Obviously his future self was aware he'd try this. And he didn't much care for being either thwarted or scolded, even by himself. Despite there being a good reason for it, as there obviously was. Clearly, at some point in the future, whenever he'd applied the temporal interdict, he'd arranged for this message to be triggered if any attempt was made by his current self to ignore it.

But he was right, that future self. He ought to trust Finn.

Not only 'ought to', but 'did'.

So, for the moment, he had to let it lie. Go back and see her at a time when he knew she was still there.

And not let slip, by one single word or look, that he knew that something as yet unexplained was going to happen to her.



### Chapter 3 *Joiking Forbidden*

When he thrust open the TARDIS door and burst out into Finn's living room, he saw her standing in front of the sofa from which she had evidently just risen, staring at him in delighted surprise. She had clearly not been expecting anyone, let alone him, if the silk dressing gown she was wearing was anything to go by. But her pleasure on seeing him was unmistakable. She smiled, and was about to utter a greeting, but he cut across her.

"Where's your favourite place in all the world?" he demanded.

Finn blinked at him.

"My what?"

"Your favourite place in all the world," the Doctor repeated, insistently. "Your 'quiet' place. The place you go in your head when you're trying to escape from your problems. *That* favourite place."

"Oh!" she said, her face clearing. "Well, in that case – it's Dartmeet. Devon. England. In the interests of accuracy, a place about a mile or so down the east bank of the river from Dartmeet itself. Why?"

"Well, come on, then!" the Doctor snapped impatiently, as if she ought to have known his intention. "Let's go."

"What – to Dartmeet? *Now*?" She sounded taken aback.

"Of course *now*," he scolded her. "*Carpe diem*, and all that! No time like the present! Chop, chop!"

She was puzzled by his manner, but not for the world would she have denied him.

"All right. Just give me a couple of minutes to get changed," she said, glancing down at what she was wearing. "Your friend Arthur might have had to go swanning round the universe in his dressing gown, but it's not *my* outfit of choice for space travel! Hold your breath!" she advised him briskly, and vanished.

One thing about Finn; when she said 'a couple of minutes', that was exactly what she meant. Even so, she was startled by the urgency with which the Doctor bundled her into the TARDIS as soon as she reappeared.

"What on earth's all the hurry for?" she enquired, as he slammed the door and raced up the ramp, leaving her to follow at her own pace. "Is this some sort of emergency?"

"Of course it is! It's vitally important I take you to your favourite place in all the world," he said firmly, bustling round the console, diligently avoiding meeting her eyes. "Right now. So I know where it is. For future reference."

"Oh," she said, slowly, not entirely comprehending. "*That* sort of emergency..."

The Time Rotor had hardly begun to move before it subsided again, and the Doctor was racing back down the ramp; Finn had to step aside smartly to avoid being bowled over. Whatever was the hurry all about? The Doctor threw the door open, and stepped out.

“Here we are,” he said briskly.

Finn followed him, wondering where he’d parked the TARDIS; Dartmeet was a popular tourist spot, and such a glaring anachronism as an old police box on a moorland path would hardly pass unremarked. Although, it having been December 2009 when they’d left, she was half expecting to see grey skies and leafless trees, and so maybe not that many tourists, after all.

Yet when she stepped out into the sunlight, tinted green as it fell through the leaves of the trees all around them, she realized he’d brought her here on a summer’s day. Wondering what year it was, she saw that they were partway up the slope of the hill above the river, partly masked by trees and piled, moss-covered boulders, only a few hundred yards away from the place she’d specified. And despite the beauty of the day – warm, sunlit, windless – there was nobody in sight, nobody to be heard. Just the sound of tumbling, hurrying water below, the calls of birds, and the occasional faint rustle of leaves.

“Which way?” the Doctor demanded.

Finn pointed down the slope, where the path left the edge of the riverbank as it sank down into the curve of a small gorge and instead made its way through the trees to rejoin the course of the water further downstream, out of sight to their left.

“Right! *Allons-y*, then,” he said briskly, leading the way.

Finn smiled, and followed him. She still had no idea what was going on, but he was evidently in one of his ‘force of nature’ moods, so she simply surrendered to the flow and went with him.

“This is it,” she said, a couple of minutes later.

The Doctor looked around. They had emerged from the tree-lined path out onto an area of flattish rocks, some the standard Dartmoor granite grey, but some tinged pale pink. To the right, to the north, the level of the river lay above them, from where it came tumbling down over a series of small cascades to where they stood. To the left, the south, the water, stained to golden-brown by the moorland soil, streamed downward past a small sandy beach and away toward the coast, shouldering its way round boulders or else flowing over them regardless, creating countless white crests of bubbling energy across the surface of the river. Behind them and before them, the banks on each side climbed to become a steep-sided valley, covered with trees in full summer leafage.

The Doctor assessed the scene, and nodded in approbation.

“Nice,” he said. “Very nice.”

Finn looked around, happily, and shrugged at him lightly.

“I like it,” she said cheerfully. “In fact, I love it! So thank you for the whim.”

“What whim?”

“The one that made you want to bring me here. And talking of whims –!” Her eyes lit up, and she abruptly sat down and started to take her track shoes off.

The Doctor looked at her with some mystification, as socks followed shoes.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“You’re the genius,” she said, busy rolling her trouser legs up to her knees. “You work it out...!”

A couple of seconds later she was sitting on the edge of the rock shelf, her feet in the water, kicking gently at the growth of green riverweed waving in the water there, and squinting up at him, shading her eyes from the sun.

“Well, come on, then!” she urged.

The Doctor rolled his eyes, then followed her example, shedding his trench coat in addition to his footwear. Soon his long, slender feet were being stroked by the green weed and the cool water, too. Finn grinned at him joyfully, taking pleasure in his evident enjoyment of the sensation, and of the entire ambience.

They sat in silence for some minutes, just drinking in the experience. Then the Doctor nodded again, decisively.

“Yes,” he said. “I can see why this would be your ‘quiet place’. It’s beautiful. Calm. Peaceful.”

“I bet you’ve been to lots of more beautiful places than this,” Finn commented, a little sadly, aware of how many and varying vistas he must have seen across the universe and the millennia, and how limited her experience

even of her own planet was. “Felindre, for a start! This is just one tiny little place on one tiny little planet among billions. I don’t suppose it measures up much with some of the places you’ve been.”

The Doctor looked at her sharply. Then he gave a long, sweeping consideration to their surroundings again. When he’d finished, he shook his head firmly.

“No,” he disagreed. “You’re wrong about that. This is one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been. And it’s special.”

“Why?” Finn asked. “I mean – I’m glad you think so, because that’s how I feel about it, but – why do *you* think it’s such a special place?”

“Because it’s *your* special place,” said the Doctor, looking away as he said it, and moving his feet back and forth through the streaming weed again.

Finn was silent. She didn’t know how to describe the odd mix of emotions he’d roused up with that one simple sentence. And he’d known he was going to, or he wouldn’t be looking the other way so assiduously.

Then, with the suddenness he so often employed, he leapt to his feet and scooped his footwear up from the rocks.

“Come on, then,” he said briskly. “Time we were on our way.”

“Way where?” Finn asked, withdrawing her own feet from the water to follow his lead.

The Doctor shrugged.

“I don’t know! Anywhere! Somewhere else. *Somewhen* else. Shut our eyes and stick a pin in the Time Vortex and see where we end up.”

“Oh,” said Finn slowly, pleasure tinged with confusion, realizing she was being invited for another trip in the TARDIS.

And that, with minor variations in the detail, was just what they’d done.

\*

“Storm’s passing,” said Finn, breaking in on his thoughts.

He opened his eyes and found her looking at him, her head cocked to one side as if she wasn’t entirely sure everything was as it should be. So he gave her an ear-to-ear smile, and bounded to his feet.

“Good! Brilliant!” he exclaimed enthusiastically. “Maybe now we’ll be able to see where we are.”

She smiled back, reassured, and stood up, staring out into the remnants of the now rapidly diminishing rain. One last, particularly spectacular flash of lightning came streaking down as she did so. She looked at him, her face lit up with a mixture of pleasure and anticipation, and she held an imperative forefinger up to instruct him to stay as still as she was, waiting for the inevitable crash of thunder. When it came, a few seconds later, with a deep-throated roll of sound, she looked at him with sheer delight, the huge smile widening on her face an open invitation to him to share her enjoyment of the phenomenon. He couldn’t help but smile back at her.

A few minutes later the storm had indeed passed over, and the landscape in front of them was bathed in a sharp, clear light from the sun, now clear of its veil of clouds. A much larger star than Earth’s sun, the Doctor estimated, briefly peering up through partially closed eyes at it, but emitting much the same spectrum of light.

The view now on display could plausibly have been on Earth, too, from the colour of the vegetation; the trees and bushes were strange in terms of species, but all bore variations on familiar shades of green and brown, some evidently bearing blossoms of various kinds, and if what covered the surface of the ground wasn’t grass, it would certainly do until the real thing turned up. Had they been in England, back on Earth, a scene like that would have suggested the season was late spring.

They were overlooking an enormous plain, which stretched into the distance in all directions. What looked like mere clumps of trees dotting the landscape were probably quite large areas of wood when you were close up to them. The silver threads of rivers and streams, newly charged by the rain, wandered across the plain. A few miles away a large, bowl-shaped depression in the ground held a lake in its hollow. In the distance, the Doctor could see at least three other similar, regularly shaped depressions; more were implied, but, if there, were masked

by the amount of moisture still hanging in the air. And stretched across the sky above all of this was the most intensely coloured, magnificent double rainbow Finn had ever seen.

“Look at *that!*” she exclaimed superfluously. “Those colours are *incredible!* That must span *miles!*”

The Doctor watched the play of emotion across her face with vicarious enjoyment.

“Pretty good,” he agreed, squinting at the phenomenon.

“Rainbows are rather sad in a way, though, aren’t they?” she went on.

“*Sad?* Why?” The Doctor was surprised; he found the concept that a rainbow might be viewed that way an unexpected thing for her to suggest.

“Because you can never reach them. They’re beautiful, but unattainable, no matter how much you want to get close to them. Everybody wants to, but nobody ever can. You never reach your rainbow.” She smiled at him wryly. “Physically or metaphorically, I suppose.” She shrugged cheerfully. “So I’d better appreciate this one while it’s still here!”

She glanced back at him, and a look of concern crossed her face.

“What’s the matter? You’re frowning,” she said, slightly anxiously.

“Am I? Just chasing a rainbow of my own. Nothing to worry about,” he said lightly, and changed the subject. “Does that look to you like a village of some sort over there? Buildings, sticking out from behind that wood?” He pointed to a clump of trees not far from the edge of the huge hollow with the lake in it.

“Might be,” she agreed, staring hard. “Can’t really see it that clearly.”

The Doctor suddenly rummaged energetically in his coat pockets, and triumphantly produced something that he handed over to her. A small but immensely powerful monocular, she realized, once she had it in her hand.

“Where do you keep all this stuff?” she demanded, regarding him quizzically. “Are your pockets bigger on the inside, too?”

He grinned at her rather smugly.

“Ah,” she acknowledged calmly, and lifted the monocular to her eye. “Yes,” she concurred after a few moments. “That does look like a village. You want to go visiting, I presume?”

“We-e-ell ...” shrugged the Doctor, accepting the monocular back from her. “Be rather churlish not to, since we’re here, wouldn’t it? Bit of a walk, mind.”

“That’s all right,” Finn assured him. “Not in a hurry, are we? We’ve got plenty of time.”

His expression changed, though she couldn’t quite identify in what way. The lines of his face seemed to have become unexpectedly drawn and noticeable. But his voice remained casual as he said, “Even so. Let’s not waste any of it,” and led the way out of the cave at a decisive pace.

Finn awarded a puzzled frown to his back as she followed him down the hillside. In some undefinable way, he wasn’t his usual self. She couldn’t quite put her finger on why she was getting that impression, but she had a definite feeling something was on his mind, something he wasn’t telling her about. Oh, well – either he would at some point, or he wouldn’t. It was his call. She wasn’t going to hassle him about it.

But, for some reason, one brief exchange they’d had in the TARDIS on the way here rose again in her memory, haunting her with its demand for attention...

She’d been leaning against the railing in the console room; as she’d watched the Doctor running around pushing levers, pressing buttons, manipulating dials, she’d been quietly humming to herself.

“What’s that noise?” the Doctor had asked, rather rudely. “Are you *singing?*”

“Yeah, ’course I am,” she’d riposted. “Actually, I’m composing a joik for the TARDIS. Can’t you tell?”

“Can’t you try a haiku instead?” he’d complained. “It’d be quieter.”

“Because I’d rather joik, you Philistine. Watch out, or I might do the same to you! Transfer *your* essence into a song. Then where would you be?”

The Doctor had suddenly looked bleak.

“Don’t!” he’d said sharply. “Not a song. Not for me.”

She’d been surprised by the intensity of his tone, the sudden anger in it. In point of fact, she hadn’t been making up a joik at all – it had simply been the first rather facetious thing that came into her head to say. She’d

only meant to tease, but instead she'd upset him. Which had upset *her*. Even worse, she hadn't known what she'd done, though – come to think of it – it wasn't the first time this had happened. Comments she'd made innocently, the content of which she couldn't now remember, that had induced abrupt mood changes like this. But for some reason he seemed particularly sensitive at the moment. Something was definitely going on with him, something that he hadn't told her about. But should she ask? Or would she just be needlessly probing some wound, only to cause him further distress? Something she'd give anything to avoid doing.

“Okay,” she'd said, striving to keep her feelings out of her voice. “Just for the TARDIS, then. Don't you think she deserves it?”

The Doctor had looked up at the Time Rotor, and his face had relaxed back to normality, the effort involved only slightly detectable.

“Yeah,” he'd agreed softly. “Yeah, she does.” Then he'd looked at her sharply. “How do you come to know about joiks, anyway?” he'd demanded.

“The opening ceremony for the Lillehammer Winter Olympics. Back in 1994. A Sami singer performed a joik there. First time I'd ever heard of any such thing. I was only eight years old, but I was fascinated by the sound. Never forgot it. And they're such a lovely concept. *I think, anyway. Encapsulating a person or a place in a song.*”

And then the conversation had veered away onto something else. But now, prompted by the Doctor's manner, she remembered the feeling of unease the whole exchange had given her. But this wasn't the time to follow it up, she could tell. *Think of something else to say, Finn...*

“By the way, Doctor,” she said casually. “Something I wanted to ask you. Something I came across in the TARDIS.”

“What?” asked the Doctor, without turning his head.

“Well, I can't help wondering – why do you keep a tuba in the downstairs loo?”

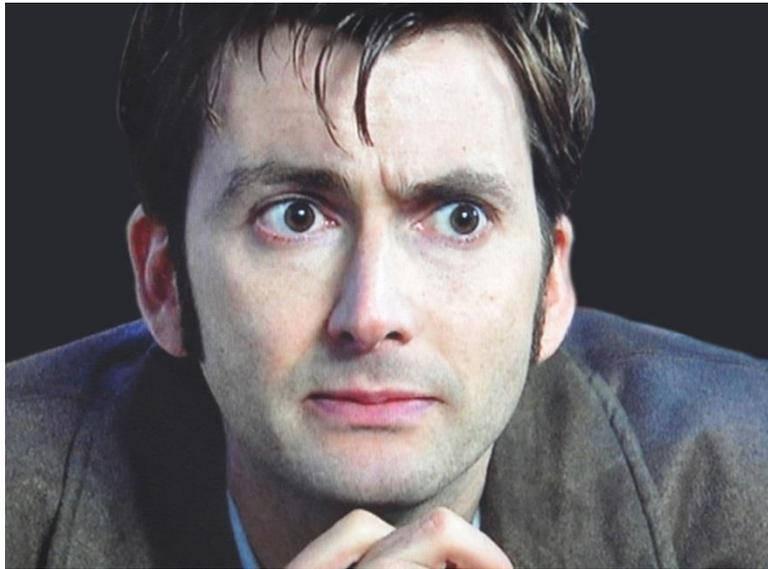
“Oi! That's *my* tuba you're talking about!”

“Gosh, you're a dark horse, aren't you? When have you been playing a tuba?”

“Well, you remember the first Prom? 1895?”

“Not personally, no,” Finn said dryly. “But given the occurrence of subsequent Proms, I'm willing to concede the existence of a first one. Why...?”

Gradually their voices faded as they drew further away down the hillside, until pristine silence was restored. The beetle flew back to the cave, and landed on the piled rocks again. No alien creatures there now. Just air, and stillness, and quiet. The beetle placidly resumed its exploration of the rocks, completely oblivious to the two distant figures now making their way out across the plain below.



#### Chapter 4

##### *Room for More*

Finn tried to keep up a flow of inconsequential conversation as they made their way through the shin-high grass toward what she was mentally classifying as ‘the village’, now about two miles distant, in her estimation. Not because she particularly wanted to, but because she wanted to try to distract the Doctor from whatever it was that was troubling him. Pointless chatter didn’t come particularly naturally to her, but she felt motivated to employ it now. Whether he realized it or not, every time the Doctor was left to his own thoughts a slight frown settled on his face. Finn wished with all her heart he’d come out with it, and tell her what the problem was.

From the moment he’d burst out of the TARDIS and virtually dragged her inside to accompany him on this trip without a word of explanation, there’d been something slightly odd in his manner, as if, underneath the normal self he was projecting, he was distracted by something. Something not very pleasant, she suspected. But if he chose not to tell her what it was, she didn’t intend to invade his privacy without a better reason than this slight uneasiness she felt on his behalf. Maybe he’d come to it, in time, if she was patient...

Eventually she came to a point where, for the moment, she had run out of things to say, and a short silence ensued. When the Doctor broke it, he couldn’t have surprised her more.

“So,” he said, sauntering along with his hands in his trouser pockets, “heard from Jack lately?”

She almost stumbled because of the unexpectedness of the question, and awarded him an astonished stare.

“*Jack?*” she repeated, incredulously. “*Jack Harkness?* Of course not! Why would I be hearing from *Jack?* He’s not even on Earth! Goodness knows where he’s got to since you unloaded him on – wherever it was you unloaded him on after Kvitverden!”

“Oh, you never know with Jack,” said the Doctor casually. “Hates being predictable. And he certainly gets around... Hasn’t been in touch, then?”

“Absolutely not. Why would he?” She was still puzzled.

The Doctor shrugged.

“Dunno. You did tell him he could look you up. Just wondered if he had.”

“Well, he hasn’t, I promise you.” Finn looked at him, wondering what was behind the questions. “It’s definitely the kind of thing I’d’ve noticed. He’s a noticeable sort of man, wouldn’t you say? Anyway, why are you asking about Jack?”

“He told me to look after you,” the Doctor said offhandedly. “Wouldn’t dare get on his wrong side over that!”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure you can hold your own against Jack,” Finn assured him.

“Yeah, but – it was a fair point,” said the Doctor, with a shrug. “And I just want you to know...” He hesitated, then looked away. *You’re going to become a missing person on 12 May 2011, Fionnula Thornton. And I don’t*

*know how, or why. Because of me? Will I put you in danger, the way I have so many others? Is there anything I can do to protect you...?*

"I'm still looking after you," he said. "I want you to remember that. Even if – for any reason – I'm not here at any time. I'm still looking after you."

Finn regarded him through narrowed eyes. Something was *definitely* going on, and he still wasn't telling her what it was. He was trying to behave for all the world as if this conversation didn't really matter. But the strategy wasn't working. Because she knew that somehow, for some reason, it did matter.

She might have followed it up, except that at that moment she saw something that put it right out of her mind. A dark lump of something lying in the grass a few yards ahead. She wasn't sure what it was, to start with. A second look, however, had her face wrinkling in an expression of distaste.

"Yeuch!" she said, with feeling. The Doctor looked at her quickly, then followed her line of sight.

"Hello!" he said. "What's that, then?"

"Fairly obvious *what* it is," Finn told him. "Rather less obvious how it got that way..."

The Doctor covered the intervening distance with a few long strides and knelt by the object of their attention. Finn, coming up behind him, preferred to remain standing, as she strove to overcome her initial reaction and look at it objectively. Because there was something very strange about it.

What it was – or had once been – was an animal of some sort. Judging by the furred hindquarters – still bearing a stiff little tail stump with a clump of long strands of hair growing from the end – no bigger than the size of a domestic tomcat, she estimated, when it was whole.

But it wasn't whole any more.

The hindquarters were intact, but halfway along the body, the rest of the animal vanished. Or at least changed – if that was the right word. Because it was as if the rest of it had been melted. The flesh suddenly sagged into a small but rather repellent shining blob that brought to her mind the image of a dead jellyfish – except that no jellyfish she'd ever seen had been such a repulsive reddish-grey colour. Which would be the colour everything would go, she supposed, if something had made all the bones and flesh and blood deliquesce into this shapeless, shrunken mess of matter, still horribly attached to the remainder of the body.

The Doctor bent closer to peer at it with detached interest.

"Now what could have done that?" he murmured.

"Try asking Harry Cunningham, not me," Finn muttered facetiously.

"Sorry – who?" The Doctor looked up at her, momentarily puzzled.

"Never seen *Silent Witness*? You Philistine!" she said, censoriously. "Okay, any other TV pathologist you happen to know, then."

The Doctor gave her a look of disapproval. "They're not *real* people, you know," he remarked, dismissively. "Not like you and me."

Finn pretended dismay.

"*Doctor!* Do you mean to tell me that the people I see on television aren't *real*?" she demanded. "What a time to burst my balloon on that one!" Her tone was horrified, but her eyes were twinkling.

The Doctor sniffed, and returned to his contemplation of the phenomenon.

"Either there're some very unusual predators on this planet, or it walked into an energy field of some kind," he mused. "Except that if that was the cause, we'd be in the same state by now. So it's not that. Unless it only activates periodically, of course. Or isn't fixed in one place..."

"That is *not* a comforting thought," Finn told him, definitely.

"But why would there be an energy field around here? Protecting something? The village?" The Doctor ignored her comment and went on thinking aloud. "Not very likely. On the other hand, better safe than sorry..." He reached into his inner breast pocket and brought out the sonic screwdriver, brandishing it toward the corpse.

"Which setting are you using?" Finn asked.

"This one." The Doctor showed her. "Why?"

“I’m still learning how to use mine, remember?” She tapped one of the pockets in the light cotton gilet she was wearing.

“Well, get it out and have a go, then,” the Doctor invited her. “On-the-job training!”

She swallowed a little nervously, but obeyed, kneeling next to him and scanning the body.

“Right – what are you getting?” The Doctor peered over at her sonic, then held his up next to it for purposes of comparison. “Same, see?”

“But what does it mean?” Scanning wasn’t really the problem, she thought to herself. Having the background knowledge to interpret the results was going to be more the issue...

“Means it *was* an energy field of some kind. Not a type I recognize, though. And it didn’t happen very long ago, either. Hours? Not more than a day or so, at the outside. Hmm...” He tapped his sonic against his chin thoughtfully, then sprang to his feet and began to scan the ground around the remains of the dead animal.

“Now what are you getting?” he asked. Finn hurriedly copied him.

“Oh! A reading of the same thing, in that direction,” she said, lifting the sonic to find that it was pointing toward the village.

“Snap!” The Doctor put his sonic away and grinned at her. “Come on! Let’s find out what’s going on!”

He abruptly headed toward the distant buildings; Finn had to run to catch up with him.

“Do you *ever* go somewhere new without some mystery or other cropping up?” she asked conversationally, dropping into a pace that matched his. “Or is it always like this?”

“Not *always*,” the Doctor demurred, his hands back in his pockets. He glanced at her with twinkling eyes. “Just *mostly*. Enough to keep things interesting. No danger of being bored. Makes life better, don’t you think?”

“You’ve made life better for me in any case,” Finn told him cheerfully. “Been meaning to tell you that.”

The Doctor looked at her with a slight frown.

“How d’you mean?”

“Because I *notice* things,” she said. “Even when you’re not there. But I notice them *because* of you. Being with you. All sorts of things. Just little, some of them. But because of you, I realize how wonderful they all are. I find myself looking at all sorts of things that other people see as ordinary, and thinking ‘*Oh, that’s wonderful – he’d love that!*’. So the abridged version of the thought process goes something like ‘*Look! – Doctor! – Wonderful!*’” She smiled at him, happily. “And it happens all the time. So even when you’re not here, you’re still with me. Everywhere, all the time. The best friend I’ll ever have. And that’s brilliant.”

The Doctor stopped abruptly and stared at her. She stopped, too, wondering what the matter was. Then, suddenly, he covered his face with his hands.

Alarmed, Finn took a pace toward him.

“Doctor, what is it? What’s wrong?”

He looked up, his hands held in the same position in front of him as if still cupped over his face, the fingers stiff as claws, and she saw with astonishment that his eyes were wild and overbright, as though he was on the verge of tears.

“What did I do?” he demanded. “What did I *do*, to deserve you?”

His uncharacteristic display of emotion disconcerted her, and she took refuge in resorting to the very English quality of self-deprecation.

“Ooh, something very bad, I should think!” She tried to make a joke of it. “I seem to be worse to get rid of than flypaper – ”

He cut her off, shaking his head vehemently.

“No! No-no-no-no-no! *Good!* It must have been something *good*. So very, very good I can’t even *imagine* how good it must’ve been! When did I do something *that* good?” His eyes were huge and wild.

“Oh, answers on a postcard, everyone...!” she instinctively riposted, then allowed her extreme bewilderment to show on her face. “Doctor, what *are* you talking about?” Something was going on here that she really didn’t understand.

The Doctor was silent for a while, just staring at her.

“Please, Doctor! What is it? What’s the matter?” she asked, now very much concerned. Those dark eyes, usually so expressive, were so hard to read this time, but there was obviously something vitally important going on behind them.

He still didn’t speak, but continued to look at her with that unsettling expression. Then he visibly arrived at a decision.

“Got something else I want to give you,” he announced, sounding quite normal and calm now.

“What d’you mean?” she asked, uneasily; there was something strange about his manner that she wasn’t quite comfortable with.

“Come here,” he said, crooking a finger.

Puzzled but game, Finn stepped forward until she was right in front of him. He brought up his hands and placed them on either side of her head. Now she was even more puzzled, but, realizing what was happening – if not why – she relaxed slightly. However, she continued to watch his face as he scanned her mind, his eyes closed, his brows drawn together in a frown of concentration.

After a few moments, he opened his eyes, and nodded in satisfaction.

“Yes,” he said. “You’ve got room for a bit more and you can still be safe...”

“A bit more what?” she asked, mystified, but beginning to realize what he was suggesting.

“A bit more of me. To add to what you’ve already got. I want to give you another piece of my mind.” A ghost of a grin appeared momentarily on his face. “You up for that?”

She didn’t understand why he was doing what he apparently was doing, but she had no intention of saying anything other than ‘Yes’.

“Of course! If it’s what *you* want,” she said, eyes and voice expressing without equivocation her absolute trust in him.

Just for a moment, his brow creased into an expression that she could only define as anguished. But it was gone the next instant, and he closed his eyes again, the pressure of his fingers against her temples increasing.

“Okay,” he said softly. “Here are some things I want you to know.”

And he began the transfer. Adding more of his mind to hers.



## Chapter 5

### “Anyone About?”

Finn wore an understandably distracted look for a while after that, as the new instalment of the Doctor’s mind integrated into her brain. They walked along in silence, the Doctor casting the occasional look at her to

check she was all right; the first time it had happened, back on Mynydd y Seren, the uncontrolled nature of the transfer had rendered her completely unconscious. This time, though, it seemed to have just made her slightly dizzy for a couple of minutes before she was able to function normally. Well, almost normally. It was still quite an adjustment to have to make, judging by the look on her face.

The path they were taking skirted the rim of the huge, almost mathematically circular crater, while all the time aiming towards the settlement behind the wood.

Which was becoming harder to see. The sun was beating down on the recently soaked ground and vegetation, and a fog of condensing water was beginning to rise, obscuring the view in gradually increasing degrees.

The Doctor peered down at the lake in the centre, then surveyed the crater itself – as much of it as could still be seen in the increasing haze.

“Wonder how long that’s been there,” he muttered eventually.

“How long what’s been where?” Finn enquired, emerging from her abstraction.

“The crater...”

“What made it? Is it an impact crater?”

“Looks like it. There’re quite a few of these craters on this plain. Looks as if something gave it quite a pasting sometime in the past.”

“How long ago, do you think?”

“A few hundred years, at the outside,” the Doctor opined. “Not more than that; they’ve kept their shape too well. Much longer and they’d have been more eroded. Weathered.”

Finn looked more carefully at the interior of the crater, but the fog was fairly thoroughly obscuring it by now.

“Ah, well – that’s a nice little mystery you can be working on in the meantime,” she observed. “To stop you getting bored. Maybe someone in the village’ll know how old they are.”

Another few minutes of walking and they’d skirted the wood, the trees looming like ghostly sentinels in the mist, and were approaching the edge of the village itself.

“It’s awfully quiet,” said Finn, a touch uneasily. “I know fog blankets sound, and all that, but – it’s too quiet, don’t you think?”

The Doctor looked at her with profound disapproval.

“Oh, you had to say it, didn’t you?” he complained. “Haven’t you ever seen those Westerns where the cavalry column is riding along, and the sergeant says to the captain, ‘I don’t like it, sir – it’s too quiet’, and the next thing you know – *Whhht! Donk!* – he’s falling off his horse with an arrow in his chest?”

“If simply saying something *really* caused it to happen, I’d have that ten million pounds I’ve been wishing for by now,” Finn told him dryly. “Still – point taken. But, even so – *don’t* you think it’s awfully quiet?”

“Well – yes, I do,” the Doctor admitted. He peered through the fog at the blurred outlines of the buildings still some hundred yards or so away. “So – proceeding with caution...” He began to walk forward more slowly, Finn close on his shoulder. She got out her sonic again, and scanned their way forward.

“That energy field reading,” she said. “It’s even stronger here.”

The Doctor nodded, as if he’d been expecting that.

When they reached the first building, it proved to be a small hut, or perhaps barn, built of rounded, pale brown stones bonded by a black mortar, roofed with thatch. The Doctor led the way along the side of the building, but when he put his hand against the stones and put his weight on it, with a view to peering round the corner, he suddenly snatched it away again. The stones he’d touched crumbled into a pale dust that tumbled down the wall.

“That’s not right,” he muttered, staring at the wounded wall intently.

“What’s not right?”

“These stones. Nobody in their right minds’d build a wall out of something that friable!” He pressed against another place, with the same result, and frowned. “Might as well’ve used dry sand.” He regarded the wall with disfavour.

“Well – are they all like that?” Finn asked. “This one might be just a very old building, and it’s disintegrating naturally.”

The Doctor sniffed dismissively, and marched over to the wall of the next building. He applied pressure to it; once again, the stones cracked and crumbled into particles like grains of flour.

“Exactly the same,” he muttered.

“An effect of the energy field, then?” Finn suggested.

The Doctor nodded, rubbing and slapping his hands together several times to get the dust off them.

“Must be,” he agreed. He swivelled his head to and fro, trying to see through the swirling fog.

“Where is everybody?” he demanded.

“Perhaps you should try asking someone who knows,” Finn suggested with acid humour.

“Good idea,” he nodded. Abruptly he cupped his hands around his mouth, and yelled at the top of his voice.

“HELLO!”

A pause; no response. He tried again.

“HELLO! ANYONE ABOUT?”

Still silence.

“Apparently not,” said the Doctor, more to himself than to Finn.

“Let’s try over there,” she suggested, pointing. “I think I can see a house, or something. The fog’s starting to clear a bit, do you think?”

The Doctor looked around, and nodded. He held up a finger.

“Bit of a breeze starting up,” he said. “That’ll soon shift it. Come on.”

He let her precede him in the direction she indicated, toward a dimly-seen dark rectangle that did indeed resolve itself into a house as they neared it. Others were becoming visible beyond it; as the fog began to twist and writhe under the pressure of the rising breeze, it became evident they were in the middle of a village.

It was because he was so close on her heels that he couldn’t avoid running into the back of her when she unexpectedly halted right in front of him.

“What’s the matter?” he enquired indignantly. “What –?” Then he followed the direction of her eyes down toward the ground, and saw what she was looking at.

“Oh,” he said slowly.

At her feet lay two roughly circular objects, each about two feet in diameter. Flattish domes of reddish-grey jelly. Like the partial animal they’d seen earlier. Except that here, the conversion from living creature to dead jelly had not been partial, but complete.

Finn stared at them, dawning comprehension swiftly supplemented by horror. She raised appalled eyes to the Doctor’s face.

“Is that –? Were they –?” She couldn’t complete the awful question.

The Doctor silently got out his sonic screwdriver, dropped to his haunches, and scanned the objects. Then he met her eyes.

“Yes,” he confirmed harshly.

“No...!” Finn instinctively stepped backward a pace, as if that way she could avoid the knowledge that these two misshapen masses of matter had once been people.

“What did it do to them?” she whispered hoarsely.

The Doctor studied his screwdriver for a few more moments, but didn’t answer. Then he stood up and looked round. They were standing in what seemed to be the main road through the village; single-storey houses similar to the one they were in front of lined the roadway in both directions. Fog still obscured the ends of the street, but their immediate surroundings were now clear to view. The Doctor scanned up and down the length of the road as far as it was visible; his expression grew even more bleak.

“What it did to everyone,” he said.

Finn looked at him quickly, then looked around. Everywhere, now, it seemed, she could see more of the horrible jellies. Some in the doorways, some in front of the houses, some out on the road. Some larger than

others, some quite small. The implication was clear. Adults – and children. No discrimination. All had been converted by the energy field into these ghastly remnants.

“Everyone...” she repeated, blankly.

“Or – maybe not,” said the Doctor. He’d suddenly pulled himself up to his full height, and his head had snapped round alertly.

“What –?” Finn began, but didn’t get the chance to finish. The Doctor had already taken to his heels up the street. After about twenty-five yards or so, he suddenly swerved off to the left, down an alley between two houses, back out toward the edge of the village.

As she followed him, Finn began to perceive what his keener hearing had already detected. A thin, miserable wailing, coming from somewhere still masked by the thinning fog.

A child. A baby...

The Doctor was approaching a house set well back beyond the other buildings, but as he bounded up to the partially-open door, ignoring the two mounds of jelly just outside it, the wall around the door started to crack and crumble. The intensity of the wailing scaled upwards in response. He retreated hurriedly.

“Maybe there’s a back door?” Finn suggested, as she caught up with him.

The Doctor nodded, and bolted round to the side. Finn followed him round to the back. There was no back door, but there was a window there. However, drawn curtains masked the interior. The Doctor leaned on the sill and pressed his nose against the glass, hoping to be able to see through some crack to the distressed child within, but to no avail. Then, sharply, he drew his head back in a gesture of realization, and scanned the wall around the window.

“What is it?” Finn asked quickly.

He didn’t answer; he was too busy retracing their path around the house, running his hands over the surface of the stones as he went. She watched him, puzzled. Suddenly he exclaimed. “Ah!”

“*What?*” Finn repeated impatiently.

“Look!” said the Doctor. “Here” – he pushed again at the wall where he was standing, near the front of the house; the stones crumbled, as they had before – “and now here!” He took a couple of long strides toward where Finn was standing at the back of the house, and pushed again. This time the stones stayed firm and intact. He pointed at the wall; the source of the wailing was easy to pinpoint, behind the undamaged wall.

“That’s where the baby is,” he announced.

Finn stared at him.

“Then... Then whatever it was, the edge of it passed through this house, and affected the front, but left the back untouched?” she deduced. Then, with a burst of realization, “Is that what happened to that animal we found, too?”

The Doctor moved his head in a quick sideways motion of approval, accompanied by a funny ‘cluck’ of his tongue against the roof of his mouth, which she took to collectively amount to a ‘Yes’. Then she followed him as he ran back to the front of the house.

“Keep back,” the Doctor instructed her. Then, carefully avoiding the two mounds of jelly, he cautiously approached the door, which stood slightly ajar. He wrapped his long fingers around the handle, and pushed.

The stones crumbled even more threateningly than before, but the lintels of the door held, despite creaking alarmingly. The Doctor pointed at Finn sternly.

“Stay there!” he ordered, in a tone that brooked no argument.

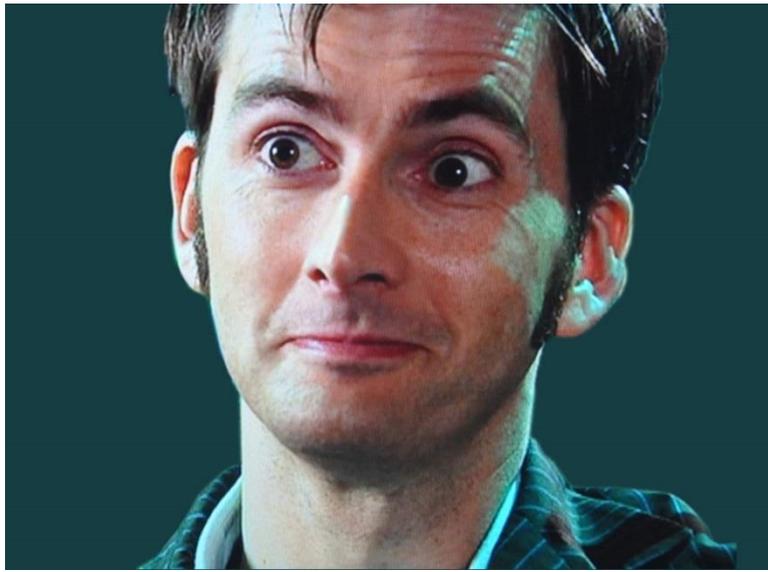
Finn frowned anxiously.

“Be...” she began, but he’d already vanished into the dark maw of the doorway – “...careful...” Her shoulders drooped as she realized she was, to all intents and purposes, talking to herself.

Time has such a curious ability to telescope in such situations; the Doctor couldn’t have been gone for more than a few seconds, but already he seemed to have been in there for an unrelieved eternity of anxiety. And – inevitably – just when she thought she heard him coming back, the straining fabric of the building began to give way.

One of the doorposts suddenly splintered, and gave. The pressure on the lintel from the sagging roof above, no longer supported by the stonework of the wall as it had once been, became too much. The whole front wall began to disintegrate. The window frames distorted; the glass within them shattered outwards in sprays of crystalline shards. The roof tiles began to detach and slide downwards, first singly, then in groups, crashing and smashing on the ground.

“*Doctor!*” Finn shrieked, but she could hardly even hear herself above the rising crescendo of the building destroying itself in front of her. There came another, more distant sound of glass shattering, but it was almost impossible to distinguish from the general din of the collapse. The roof suddenly gave way entirely, caving down and into the shell of the house, dust and fragments erupting in a cloud that enveloped the whole building.



## Chapter 6

### “*Who’s the Daddy?*”

Finn clapped one hand to her mouth, the other over her heart, her eyes wide and horrified.

“*Doctor...!*” She’d thought to scream it, but it came out as no more than a hoarse whisper.

Her eyes were about to fill with tears of shock and dismay, when they were drawn to a movement on the left side of the house, where the sound section of wall still stood.

Out of the swirling dust, a familiar figure was emerging, carrying a small covered cot. Dusty, coughing, and with hair more wild than she had ever seen it – but intact.

Finn drew in a shaky breath; relief this profound was positively painful. She realized now what that additional sound of breaking glass had been – the Doctor smashing the window of the room where the baby had been and making his escape that way.

“Here – hold that,” said the Doctor, marching up to her and thrusting the cot at her imperatively. She took it automatically, so transfixed by relief that she didn’t so much as glance at the occupant; she was watching the Doctor take his trench coat off and give it a thorough shake.

“Wonder if they’ve got a decent dry cleaners around here?” he asked, shrugging back into it, and then ruffling his fingers energetically through his hair, shedding more dust in the process.

“I have no idea – I’m new here,” Finn pointed out. Even though the tightness of her vocal cords betrayed the fact that she hadn’t quite recovered, he apparently failed to notice it.

“Let’s ask someone else, then,” he said, reached into the cot, and hoisted the occupant out of it. “What about you? Do *you* know if there’s a dry cleaners here? No? Oh, well – hello, anyway! Who are you?”

Finn found it impossible to determine whether the baby was a boy or a girl; it had dark, spiky hair and huge brown eyes. Looking at the Doctor cradling the tiny infant in his arms, with such similar colouring to his, the cue was too good to resist.

“So who’s the daddy?” she enquired.

“Me, of course!” said the Doctor indignantly. “Aren’t I always?”

“Granted,” Finn agreed, fighting to maintain her expression, “but I was actually asking, who’s the *baby’s* daddy? Or are you claiming paternity? Been here before, have you?” She raised one eyebrow at him, managing to keep a straight face as she did so.

“Ah! Oh! Ah! No!” said the Doctor hastily, realizing what she meant. “Not *his* daddy! Or hers, as the case may be... *The* Daddy! I meant, I’m *the* Daddy!”

Finn openly grinned as he held the child just that little bit further away from him.

“So is it a him, or a her?” she asked, putting the cot down on the ground.

“You can find out, if you like.” The Doctor offered the baby in her direction.

Finn shook her head vigorously, and held her hands up in a gesture of rejection.

“Er – no, thanks! Trying to give ‘em up,” she said, hastily.

“Oh,” said the Doctor, realizing the buck he had tried to pass had just bounced back to him. He drew the baby back and looked it in the eye.

“Are you *sure* you don’t know if there’s a decent dry cleaners around here?” he asked, more searchingly.

The baby gurgled, and the Doctor sighed.

“Oh, well – just have to wait till we get back to the TARDIS. I – ” Whatever else he’d been about to say got cut off as his head shot up and he stared intently over Finn’s head, back toward the centre of the village. Then he looked at the baby again.

“I heard something,” he told it, quickly and definitely. “Did you hear something?”

The baby simply regarded him solemnly.

“Well, *I* heard it,” the Doctor told it severely. He looked at Finn. “Did you?”

“Hear what?” Finn shook her head, helplessly.

“That!” said the Doctor firmly.

And now she could. A vehicle of some kind. Voices. Still distant, but audible.

Someone else had arrived in the village.

“Back you go,” said the Doctor, re-inserting the baby into the cot, then plumping the whole thing into Finn’s arms. “We’re going to find out who it is.”

Silently, Finn followed him back out into the main street, and they turned to the left, the direction from where the sounds were coming.

The fog was thinning to a silver, sunlit mist, and out of it were emerging shapes. A large, rectangular vehicle, not unlike a lorry, a man sitting in a cab on the front, operating its controls. Fanned out in front of the vehicle, five human figures, walking slowly and cautiously, obviously on the alert. Each of the five was wearing a uniform of some kind, a royal blue high-collared tunic with sleeves that puffed out slightly over the forearms before being drawn back into a two-inch cuff and trousers that also flared out slightly before being gathered into the tops of knee-high brown boots; the overall effect reminded Finn of Russian men’s national costume. All of them except the vehicle’s driver carried a foot-long silver tube in their hands. Four of the five – three men, two women – had white armbands on their upper left sleeves; the other man had a pale blue armband. It was he who raised his hand to halt the others and the vehicle behind them. The driver killed the engine and leaned cautiously out of the cab, gazing at them over the heads of his colleagues.

For a moment, no-one spoke. The six newcomers stared at the Doctor and Finn; they stared back. Then Finn decided she had the perfect icebreaker.

“Do any of you know anything about babies?” she asked, with a slight frown furrowing her forehead.

“*Babies?*” blurted the man with the armband.

“Yes.” Finn took a step forward, and tilted the cot so everyone could see the child inside. “The Doctor’s just rescued him – or maybe her – from a house over there” – she jerked her head in the relevant direction – “but now we don’t know what to do with him. Or her... Do any of you?”

One of the two women, who looked to be in her mid-thirties, with long-lashed hazel eyes and brown hair, looked at the man.

“Kedron? I could...” she began, suggestively.

He glanced at her, back at Finn’s hopeful face, then nodded.

The woman slid the tube she was holding into a thin holster depending from her belt, and stepped forward. Finn came part-way toward her.

“I’m sorry,” she said apologetically, “but I just don’t have any experience of babies.”

The woman smiled.

“I’ve had two, so I do,” she said, reaching into the cot to extract the child. She examined it, then looked back at Finn. “It’s a girl,” she said, repressing another smile. Then she grew more serious. “You said ‘rescued’. Rescued from what?”

“The house nearly fell down on top of her,” said the Doctor. “We only just got her out in time. Otherwise, there might have been no survivors at all.”

“What do you mean – ‘no survivors at all?’” asked the man called Kedron, stepping forward quickly. “Do you live here?”

“No. We’re visitors. We only got here about half an hour ago. I mean everyone who lived here,” said the Doctor flatly. He looked Kedron and his team over. “You look like some sort of rescue team. Am I right?”

Kedron nodded. He was perhaps as much as forty years old, with blue eyes and neatly trimmed brownish-fair hair; Finn thought him rather good-looking. He had an air of competence but not arrogance, for all that he was evidently the team leader. “We lost all contact with Vevarorna early this morning. So we came to find out why.”

“Vevarorna – that’s this village?”

“Yes.”

The Doctor looked at him narrowly.

“Only a few hours ago. Bit soon to panic, wasn’t it? Unless...” He eyed Kedron. “Unless this isn’t the first time this has happened.”

Kedron met his look levelly.

“It isn’t,” he said heavily. “You said, ‘everyone who lived here’. *Lived.* Not *lives*. That wasn’t a slip of the tongue, was it?”

The Doctor’s shoulders drooped slightly.

“No. You already know what you’re going to find, don’t you?” he said.

“What?” asked the woman holding the baby. She spoke sharply, as if she already knew what he was going to say, but wanted to deny it.

“What we found, when we got here,” said the Doctor simply.

Kedron looked round at the rest of his team; the fourth man had by now got out of the vehicle and come to join them. Their faces were still and serious.

“And what was that, exactly?” the other woman, younger than her colleague, demanded. She was a pretty girl, with long dark hair gathered back in a ponytail that reached down almost to her waist.

“All the buildings weakened and crumbling. And everyone who lived here...” The Doctor turned round and gestured toward the nearest house. Everyone’s eyes followed his pointing finger, trained on a group of three of the repulsive reddish-grey jellies.

The younger woman couldn’t restrain her gasp of horror. Kedron’s eyes closed as if in pain for a few moments. The other woman, cradling the cot, averted her eyes and focused on the baby instead. The other men didn’t react outwardly, but their eyes spoke for them.

“Listen – I’m the Doctor, and this is my friend, Finn,” said the Doctor quickly. “Do you know what caused this?”

Kedron shook his head despondently.

“Nobody’s ever survived to tell us,” he said.

“Well, we’ve got something to show you,” the Doctor told him. “This way!” He swept his arm through the air with an imperious gesture, and strode off back down the side lane to the partially collapsed house. Finn was amused to see the way everyone automatically obeyed and followed, as if caught up in a current they couldn’t resist.

“What happened here?” asked one of the men, as they all came to a halt in front of the house and surveyed the ruin before them.

“The front wall collapsed,” Finn said. “I was afraid the Doctor’d been caught inside, but he got out all right. With our new little friend there.” She nodded at the baby.

“You went in and rescued her?” Kedron asked, with an overtone of respect. “From that?”

The Doctor shrugged it off.

“This is what you need to look at!” He got Kedron to compare the crumbling texture of the stones toward the front of the building, and then the solid stones at the back. “See?”

Kedron repeated the experiment, and looked at the Doctor with dawning excitement.

“So whatever it was, it affected some of the house, but not all of it,” he said. “No-one’s noticed that before. But what was it?”

The Doctor whipped out his sonic screwdriver and scanned along the wall.

“What’s that?” Kedron demanded.

“Sonic screwdriver,” said the Doctor off-handedly. Kedron’s forehead wrinkled at the description.

“What does it do?” he asked

“Oh, lots of things,” said the Doctor proudly. “And one of the things it does is tell me that an energy field of an unknown type passed through this area not long ago.”

“A *screwdriver* can tell you that?” Kedron was understandably incredulous.

“It’s a lot more versatile than the name suggests, trust me,” Finn assured him. He glanced at her, and clearly decided to do just that – trust her. People tended to do that with Finn, the Doctor had noticed.

“And you think that was the cause of – this?” Kedron made a gesture that encompassed the whole village and its erstwhile inhabitants.

“Perhaps there’s something else you should see,” said Finn. “Something we saw on the way here.”

Kedron looked at them both curiously. “Which, if you don’t mind my saying, raises the question – where did you come from? And how?”

“Oh, over that way,” said the Doctor, gesturing vaguely. “We walked up to the crater, then into the village.”

“There was a thick mist everywhere after the storm,” Finn chipped in. “It didn’t start to lift until we were in the village, so we couldn’t see anything until we got here. But on the way – we found the animal.”

“Ah! Yes! The animal,” agreed the Doctor. He looked at Kedron. “You’ll definitely want to see that! Big clue there.”

“What animal?” Kedron demanded.

“We’ll show you,” Finn offered eagerly.

“Wait a moment,” said Kedron. He turned to the others. “Voros, send for a flyer. When it arrives, I’ll take our new friends back to the Diakonos – he’ll want to know what we’ve found. Oh, and tell them to send some specimen containers. We’ll take samples of the – evidence” – his voice faltered slightly as he remembered the nature of some of that evidence – “back with us for analysis. Shealla – you’ll come, too, with the baby, but for the moment stay with the vehicle. Ledramai, you come with me. With us. The rest of you, make sure no survivors have been missed. Okay?” The orders were issued in a brisk tone, but from everyone’s manner, and from that concluding question, Finn could see that Kedron led the team by consensus, not by weight of authority. A leader, not a dictator. She found that reassuring.

“So where’s this animal you want to show us?” Kedron said, turning back to the Doctor.

“This way,” said the Doctor. “Bit of a walk, mind,” he warned.

“In the circumstances, I think I can cope with that,” said Kedron dryly. Finn grinned; he saw it, and smiled slightly in response.

“Come on, then,” said the Doctor briskly. “Ledramai, was it? This way!” And he led off, Kedron at his shoulder, Finn and Ledramai in their wake.

## Chapter 7

### *Eutychia meets Earth*

“Your friend...” said Ledramai, after she and Finn had walked in silence for a few minutes.

“The Doctor,” Finn nodded.

“He’s – quite a character, isn’t he?” Ledramai suggested diffidently.

Finn rolled her eyes.

“You have *no* idea,” she assured her companion.

“Actually, if you don’t mind my saying so,” said Ledramai hesitantly, as if afraid she might give offence, “you both are. Your clothes – they’re strange. I’ve never seen anything like them before. Where do you come from?”

“A long way away,” said Finn. “A *very* long way away. The Doctor travels all over the place, and sometimes he invites me to come along with him. You wouldn’t believe some of the things I’ve seen, being with him!” She wasn’t sure how much to reveal, and found it rather fun, treading the line between enough truth and too much. “And if there’s anything strange going on – like there is here – you can absolutely count on him to get mixed up in it!” She looked at Ledramai. “What about you? Kedron said you were some kind of rescue team? Rescue from what?”

“What’s happened here,” said Ledramai unhappily. “This isn’t the first time. Vevarorna’s the sixth village that’s been wiped out. Hundreds of people – turned into those horrible – ” She couldn’t complete the sentence. “So the Diakonos put this team together. To try to find out what’s happening. We’re all volunteers. But I’ve only just joined it. This is the first time I’ve seen it for myself.” She swallowed hurriedly, then looked at the two men ahead of them, deep in conversation. “Do you think you’re going to be able to help us? You, and your Doctor?”

“I don’t know about me,” Finn disclaimed hurriedly. “But the Doctor – he always helps, wherever he goes. He’s saved my planet more times than I – ” She suddenly realized what she’d said, and looked at Ledramai with a degree of panic. What if these people didn’t have space travel? What damage might she have done, with that thoughtless slip of her tongue?

To her relieved astonishment, Ledramai’s face was lit only by surprise and excitement, not shock.

“So you’re not from Eutychia at all?” she said quickly. “*That’s* why your clothes are so different, then! That explains it! You’re from another planet! Which one?” She sounded intrigued and curious.

“Er – we call it Earth,” said Finn nervously. Ledramai thought for a second or two, then shook her head.

“I’m afraid I haven’t heard of it,” she said apologetically. “The Diakonos has been to many other planets, but I don’t remember him mentioning that one. Kedron!” She raised her voice, and he stopped and looked back at them with mild enquiry. Finn sought the Doctor’s eyes anxiously; he noted it, and was immediately on the alert.

“Finn and the Doctor are from another planet,” Ledramai said, sharing her new knowledge with evident pleasure. “Somewhere called Earth.”

The Doctor’s eyes flashed wide, but Kedron merely nodded and looked at him with renewed interest.

“I wondered about that,” he said calmly. “You don’t look – forgive me, but – you don’t look like natives of Eutychia. So how do you come to be here? Are you here for a particular purpose, or just visiting? Have you met the Diakonos in your travels, perhaps?”

The Doctor’s mouth opened and shut a couple of times, like a suffocating fish, as he adjusted to the fact that neither Kedron nor Ledramai were at all fazed by the concept of aliens on their planet. Which, apparently, was

called Eutychia. The sparsely populated plains, the style and materials of the buildings in the village, the brief glimpse of the standard of technology he'd had in the one house he'd been inside – nothing had led him to suspect that these people would take the news that he and Finn were visitors from another world so completely in their stride.

“No – no, I haven't. It's just – somewhere I haven't been before,” he said, a little lamely. Kedron smiled understandingly, and then more sadly.

“Well, I'm sure the Diakonos will want to meet you, now you're here. But I'm sorry you've found us in a time of crisis,” he said. “Though perhaps, with your experience of another world, you'll be able to bring that to bear on our problem?”

“Er – yes... Yes! Delighted!” the Doctor agreed, glancing at Finn with a *'well-I-wasn't-expecting-that!'* arch of his eyebrows. Then he turned his attention back to Kedron and Ledramai. “So – how many other planets have *you* been to?” he asked curiously.

“Oh, none,” said Kedron, casually. “Only the Diakonos visits other worlds. But he tells us about some of them, when he thinks there are things we can learn about them. And sometimes he even brings visitors from them. I've met quite a few.”

“You're my first non-Eutychians,” Ledramai volunteered a little shyly. “So I'm quite excited about this, really.”

“Right,” said the Doctor slowly, more successfully hiding his surprise than before. Then his face lit up in a big grin. “Well – pleased to meet you!”

“Thank you,” she said, a little embarrassed. Then, hastily, to divert attention away from herself, “So – are we close to where this animal is, that you want to show us?”

“Oh! Ah! Yes! Just another few yards – that way,” said the Doctor, demonstrating his phenomenal sense of direction by leading them briskly straight to the spot, during which he and Finn exchanged a look that involved some very raised eyebrows, but said nothing aloud.

Ledramai wrinkled her nose in distaste at the sight of the partially destroyed carcase, but Kedron knelt down to examine it more closely.

“What do you think happened to it?” he asked the Doctor.

“The same thing that happened to the house,” said the Doctor. “It was just on the edge of the energy field – half in, half out. The half that was outside – not affected. The half that was inside...” He shrugged.

“This field – it must have been moving,” Kedron decided. “Or we wouldn't be here now. I wonder how far away it is now? And how fast it moves?” An idea struck him. “That device of yours – could you use it to track the movement of the field, perhaps?”

“Doctor...” Finn interposed, before the Doctor could answer. She had her own sonic screwdriver out again, and was staring at it in perplexity. “I've got this on the same setting as before, but the reading's faded almost to nothing. Am I doing something wrong?”

The Doctor took a pace to stand alongside her, peering over her shoulder at the sonic. He frowned, fished his own back out of his breast pocket, and scanned the carcase, as he had done earlier. But the result was the same.

“No-o-o,” he said slowly. “The field residue's dissipating.” He looked at Kedron apologetically. “Looks like we can't track it. Not unless we're very close to where it's just been. You lost contact early this morning? How many hours ago is that?”

“About five,” said Kedron.

“So – ” The Doctor broke off as a thought occurred to him. “Hang on – going to check something. Wait there!”

He took to his heels and ran back toward the village, the hand with the sonic screwdriver held out in front of him. Every few yards he stopped to look at it, then ran on.

“What's he doing?” Ledramai asked Finn, who shrugged.

“No idea,” she said, resignedly.

The Doctor had come to a final halt about five hundred yards away, and was once again scanning the area with his sonic screwdriver. He held it up to his face, stared intently at it for a few seconds, then flipped it dexterously into the air and caught it again before restoring it to his breast pocket. Then he came trotting back to join them.

“Interesting,” he commented.

“What is?” Kedron enquired.

“No field residue at all after about a hundred yards from here. And yet there was in the village. It’s like someone’s switching it on and off every now and again. If it gets turned on, and something gets caught in it, or partially caught in it – like our little pal there” – he indicated the dead animal – “*finito*.”

Kedron and Ledramai might not have understood the word, but they clearly intuited the concept.

“Then you think this is some sort of artificial energy? Being deliberately activated? By someone hostile?” Kedron demanded.

The Doctor chewed the inside of his lower lip.

“Could be,” he admitted. “But, on the other hand, maybe not...”

“Well, at least we can take this back with us for analysis,” Kedron commented, looking at the disfigured carcass. “And here comes our transport ...”

The drone of an engine was becoming audible from the direction of the village. The Doctor and Finn looked upward. The vehicle flying toward them put Finn in mind of a long, thin helicopter with three sets of rotors spaced equidistantly along the fuselage; much of the latter was constructed of some clear material similar to a hardened plastic. It had clearly already visited the village, because as it drew closer they could see Shealla on board, the baby’s cot strapped onto the seat beside her.

While Kedron organized the transfer of the animal’s remains into a specimen container, Ledramai and the vehicle crew assisting, the Doctor and Finn stood back a way and watched.

“Do you often find people like this?” Finn asked, after a while.

“Like what?” The Doctor glanced at her.

“So” – she sought the right words – “so open? So trusting?”

“Not as often as I’d like,” the Doctor said, a little sadly. “But – they are, aren’t they?” he went on, more cheerfully.

“I was just thinking what sort of a reaction someone’d get on Earth if they announced out of the blue they were from another planet. People’d think they were mucking about, or mad, or – well, almost anything except telling the truth. But those two never batted an eyelid. Just believed us. Just like that. Took us at face value, without a second thought.”

“Makes a refreshing change to some of the welcomes I’ve had,” said the Doctor wryly. “I’m looking forward to meeting this Diakonos of theirs, though. Wonder what worlds he’s been to, exactly? And why? And who he is?”

“Don’t know, but he’s obviously someone they respect a lot,” said Finn. “The way Kedron talked about him, anyway...”

“Doctor, we’re ready,” Kedron called, interrupting her.

“Right,” returned the Doctor, raising a hand in acknowledgement.

As they boarded the flyer, Ledramai deliberately took a few paces back.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” Finn asked, surprised.

“I’m going back to the village now to help Voros and Tengan finish up,” Ledramai explained. She smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll see you tomorrow, probably. Unless we finish early. In which case I’ll see you later, perhaps.” She suddenly looked anxious. “You will still be here tomorrow?”

“Shouldn’t be a bit surprised,” Finn told her.

“That’s all right, then. It’s just that the Diakonos is very keen to meet you as soon as possible.”

“Well, that’s mutual,” the Doctor assured her. She smiled at him, and waved a farewell as the flyer lifted and headed away, back over the village and on across the plain.



## Chapter 8

### *The Best Khitarah Player on the Planet*

The end of the journey, some considerable time later, proved to be what Finn could only describe as a castle, built on an outcrop of rock rising from among the roofs of the small town clustered around its base.

“Edinburgh Castle, but on Eutychia,” she observed to the Doctor, who admitted the likeness with a nod.

She continued to look at it as the pilot circled the flyer around it, preparatory to landing. There was something about its architecture that she couldn’t quite put her finger on, but it gave her the feeling that this castle had never been built for the purpose of control or oppression, unlike those the English had built throughout Wales in the thirteenth century, for instance. Instead, it gave her more the feeling of the visible expression of a centre of things, a place for people to come when they had a need of any kind, and that its scale of grandeur was intended to instil confidence, not inflict subjection. Another evidence of an open and trusting society? She certainly hoped so.

It wasn’t long before they found themselves being guided through the stone corridors of the castle by Kedron to what he described as ‘the meeting hall’. Entering through impressively-sized and ornately carved wooden doors, they found themselves in a hall, indeed – a huge room, with a large dais at the far end. The walls were hung with arras, old but colourful. The Doctor scanned them quickly; they were all scenes of people building, gardening, farming, playing musical instruments, dancing, playing with children. Peaceful pursuits; not a hint of battles or conflicts of any sort.

He found himself desperately hoping that, for once, everything would be what it seemed. He hated to use that word ‘seemed’, but he’d come across too many apparent utopias in his time, only to be disillusioned later. He sighed. Quietly, but Finn heard it.

“What’s the matter?” she whispered anxiously, so that Kedron wouldn’t hear.

“Nothing,” the Doctor shrugged. He looked at Kedron, who’d stopped a few paces ahead of them. “Where’s this Diakonos of yours, then?” he asked.

Before Kedron could answer, another man – in his middle thirties, with dark hair and vivacious dark eyes – appeared through a small door in the corner at the far end of the hall, and hurried toward them.

“Sorry to keep you all waiting,” he said a little breathlessly as he came. “The Diakonos’ll be with you shortly, but he’s asked me to apologize for not being here to meet you himself. He’s with Shealla – he wanted to check on the baby’s wellbeing. Are these our new friends?” He came to a halt in front of them with a beaming smile.

“Doctor – Finn – this is Mahhrk,” Kedron said.

“Hello, Mahhrk,” said Finn; it was impossible not to respond to the broadness of his smile with one of her own. The Doctor gave a cheerful nod by way of greeting, and continued to scan the tapestries hung around the room.

“How old are those?” he asked.

Mahhrk followed his glance, and shrugged. “Oh, three or four centuries, at least.”

“That isn’t, though,” said the Doctor, pointing at what looked like a plaque attached to the wall on the left. He strode over and peered at it. “What’s this, then?”

“That’s a map of our science centres on this continent,” Mahhrk said. “They’re quite spread out. We don’t like to group too many buildings together in one place. So each branch of study has a different headquarters. We’re here” – his forefinger reached out to touch one of the spots – “at the centre. H1 – that’s us. But all the science centres are networked. We do a lot of collaborative working.”

The Doctor peered more closely at the map, and at the key in one corner. “Biological sciences, chemistry, astrophysics, propulsion...” he muttered to himself. “Propulsion? As in rockets?”

“Satellites, really,” Mahhrk corrected. “Though we use rockets to launch them, of course. Arrem oversees that field. He’s got a son here, working under Esker. She’s our chief scientist. Riada’s specialism is biology, but Arrem’s our most brilliant rocket scientist.”

“And which base does he work at, then?” the Doctor enquired.

Mahhrk tapped the map in a different place.

“This is the one,” he said. “H2.”

“Oh,” said the Doctor instantly, with a completely straight face. Finn giggled.

“Oh, *water* joke,” she riposted. “*Very* adroit!”

“I thank you,” said the Doctor, with a cocky little wiggle of his head. “*I* thought so!”

“What are you two talking about?” Kedron asked, mystified.

“Oldies but goldies, Kedron – oldies but goldies,” Finn grinned. She saw the expression on his face, and hastened to reassure him. “Don’t worry about it – it’s a very old Earth joke, that’s all.”

Kedron shrugged, and turned away, losing interest in the map. He clearly wasn’t in much of a mood for laughing. Thinking of Vevarorna, Finn couldn’t blame him.

The Doctor stepped back from the map, too, and turned to survey the tapestries again.

“From what I’ve seen so far, looks as if a lot of things in life haven’t changed much since those were made?” he suggested.

“Not much,” Mahhrk agreed cheerfully. “Those are still our most popular occupations. Though of course we’ve developed our science and technology a great deal since those times.” A note of pride crept into his voice.

“Really?” said the Doctor, arching his eyebrows in an expression of interest. “What sort of thing?”

“Er...” Mahhrk screwed up his face as he strove to think of suitable examples. “Our planet-wide communications systems, I suppose. Our network of weather monitoring satellites. And we’ve had a great deal of success in preventative medicine, wouldn’t you say, Kedron? Not over-prolonging life, but enjoying the best quality of it for as long as possible.”

“What Mahhrk’s too modest to tell you is how involved he’s been in the most recent developments of our communications systems,” Kedron put in. “He’s extremely skilled at all forms of communication. And not just technologically.” He gestured up at one of the arrases, where a man was portrayed playing a stringed instrument closely resembling a guitar. “He said those are still our favourite occupations, and he should know – he’s the best khitarah player and composer on the planet.”

Mahhrk flushed – both from embarrassment and pleasure, Finn suspected. The Doctor saw it, too, and grinned.

“Good for you, Mahhrk! Nothing like music for lifting the spirits!” Finn gave him a sharp look, remembering how negatively he’d reacted to the concept of a song in their earlier conversation, but he either didn’t notice, or chose not to. “Now, this – problem of yours,” he said briskly, changing the subject. “What’s your science telling you about that?”

Mahrk and Kedron exchanged grim looks.

“Not very much, yet,” Mahrk admitted, suddenly more subdued. “Esker’s leading the investigations, but so far she hasn’t been able to make much sense of what’s happening.”

“Well, look – I can help,” the Doctor urged. “I’m good at that – helping with problems. Sorting things out.”

“Is that right?” Mahrk returned, raising one eyebrow; it was hard to tell whether he was being politely sceptical, or mischievously facetious.

“Yes, that *is* right,” confirmed a quiet voice from the far end of the hall.

Kedron and Mahrk both swung round to face the speaker, their expressions changing to evident pleasure tinged with an underlying respect.

“Diakonos,” said Kedron, inclining his head deferentially.

The Doctor and Finn looked at the man advancing along the hall toward them with an unhurried, measured pace.

“This is the Doctor,” the newcomer said, “and his friend Fionnula Thornton. And he’s quite correct. He *is* good at helping with problems.”

The Doctor was about to ask how this stranger knew Finn’s full name – neither of them had told that to anyone they’d met so far – but was distracted by her suddenly grabbing at his sleeve.

“Doctor!” she hissed, her face a picture of astonishment. “It’s *him!*”

“Him who? Who’s him?” demanded the Doctor, with a fine disregard for grammar.

“*Him!*” Finn repeated, pointing urgently at the man coming towards them. “Ledramai wasn’t kidding when she said the Diakonos had been to other planets. *That’s the man I saw on Felindre!*”

\*

Out on the plain, dusk was beginning to fall. The clouds left in the wake of the earlier storms were sprayed with colour by the setting sun until it vanished; then they dimmed to grey, and the sky dulled toward the black of nightfall.

And in the gloaming, something was moving.

Leaving death behind it wherever it travelled.

## **Chapter 9** ***The Diakonos***

The Diakonos was a man of medium height, apparently in late middle-age, with curling brown hair and a placid expression. He came forward and took one of Finn’s hands between both of his, and smiled at her.

“Fionnula,” he said. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Er... Thank you,” said Finn, bemused. Her emotions were complex, and mixed: confusion, bewilderment, surprise – and, astonishingly, profound pleasure, as if re-encountering a trusted friend she had not seen for some time. The Diakonos smiled again, pressed her hand comfortingly, and released it. His eyes were tinged with amusement as he turned to the Doctor and found himself being stared at with an intent frown.

“Doctor,” he said, inclining his head in a dignified gesture of acknowledgement. “It’s a great pleasure to meet you at last.”

“At last?” the Doctor prompted swiftly.

“I have, as you doubtless know, already encountered Fionnula,” the Diakonos went on. “In a manner of speaking... And I’ve known of you for a great many years, anticipating that one day our paths would coincide. But if you’ll recall, you were in mid-emergency at the time Fionnula first saw me, and the moment was not appropriate for our meeting. Now, however, you’re here, and that omission has been rectified. Although we are, as you’ve already realized, having an emergency of our own. May I invite you to confer with me about it?”

“Yes, of course,” agreed the Doctor warily.

“Thank you,” said the Diakonos warmly. “Then perhaps you wouldn’t mind accompanying me? This hall is imposing, to be sure, but perhaps not the best possible place for a discussion of this nature... Oh, and” – he had begun to turn toward the doorway, but turned back, struck by a thought – “you’ve been separated from your craft. Your TARDIS... I imagine it’s somewhere in the vicinity of Vevarorna? Would you like me to arrange for it to be collected and brought here for you?”

The Doctor blinked, then nodded.

“Well, er – yes – thanks,” he said, somewhat taken aback by the offer, and also furiously speculating in the privacy of his own mind on how the Diakonos knew the name of the TARDIS. Definitely something to follow up later...

“I’ll see to that, Diakonos,” Kedron offered. “Where is your craft, Doctor? And how big is it?”

“It’s – sort of a big blue box,” said the Doctor, sounding a little bemused. “There’s a kind of hill – rock – about a couple of miles north of the village. It’s there.”

“I know the place,” Kedron nodded. “I’ll supervise its transport myself.”

“Thank you, Kedron,” said the Diakonos warmly. “And, Mahhrk – perhaps you could prevail on your beautiful wife to exercise her skills so as to organize some refreshments for our visitors? We’ll be in my chamber of office.”

“Of course,” Mahhrk acknowledged brightly. “It’ll only take her a few minutes. I’ll go and find her now.” He smiled, and he and Kedron both saluted the Diakonos. Then they left.

“And now, please...?” The Diakonos indicated the door through which he had entered the hall with a graceful sweep of his hand, and led the way, Finn and the Doctor mute in his wake.

They followed him a short distance along the stone corridor and through a heavy wooden door into a large room. It was plainly furnished, with bare stone walls, a couple of wooden tables – one large, one small – with matching chairs, some cabinets – also of made of wood – and, in one corner, what could only be described as a couple of sofas, placed at right angles to each other, piled with beautifully woven drapes of all colours and hues. All the wooden furniture had clearly been made not only to be functional but also attractive, decoratively carved by highly skilled craftsmen, gleaming dark surfaces evidently polished with care and attention. The whole room gave an impression of a place where business was conducted efficiently while valuing tranquillity, skill and beauty, too. In spite of all the questions fighting for expression inside her, Finn found herself relaxing in response to the atmosphere.

The Doctor was evidently focused on other things. He strode in, then swung round to confront the Diakonos, hands stuck deep into his trouser pockets, face intent.

“Diakonos,” he said, as if testing the word. “*The* Diakonos. Someone who’s to be found on more than one planet. This one, obviously. But Felindre, for another. Both just at the moments when Finn and I are on them. How does that work, then?”

The Diakonos smiled; more to himself than at the Doctor, Finn fancied.

“Like you, Doctor, I’m interested in many worlds,” he said calmly. “And, like you, I visit them from time to time.”

“Time?” prompted the Doctor, lowering his chin and arching his eyebrows significantly.

“Oh, yes,” the Diakonos agreed, taking a seat on one of the sofas, and indicating with a graceful gesture of one hand that they were invited to do the same. Finn accepted the implicit invitation, but the Doctor remained standing, staring searchingly at the Diakonos, who smiled at him again.

“Yes, I sometimes make use of the Time Vortex,” he went on comfortably. “But there are other ways, too, if one has the knowledge, and the ability to make use of them.”

The Doctor chewed the inside of his lip for a moment, considering his next question.

“You said you’ve known about me for a long time. How long?”

A corner of the Diakonos’s mouth twitched.

“Since you defied the Time Lords and left Gallifrey in your – *borrowed*” – he gave the word a gently ironic emphasis – “TARDIS. Your activities since that time have made you – of interest. Noteworthy.”

The Doctor was about to pose another question, but Finn forestalled him. She had questions of her own. She leaned forward, and the Diakonos turned his head to look at her. Once again, as she had on Felindre, she sensed a quality of approval, sanction, in his regard of her.

“Why were you on Felindre?” she asked. “To meet us? You seem to know us. Or about us. Why didn’t you speak to us then?”

“I knew the time was near when we would finally meet, Fionnula.” It struck her that he consistently used her full name; not once had he called her by its diminutive. “I wanted to prepare you for this moment, so we would not encounter each other here as total strangers.”

“*How* did you know?” the Doctor challenged quickly.

“Perhaps the same way you know of certain events before they happen at their appointed time?” the Diakonos suggested. The Doctor’s mouth twisted, as if he was chewing on protests, but he didn’t reply.

“I know you have many questions, both of you,” the Diakonos went on. “And much will become clear to you soon. But for the moment, may I beg your indulgence to concentrate on our current predicament?”

The Doctor regarded him for long moments. Then he gave a decisive nod, as if prepared to shelve whatever reservations he was harbouring about the enigma presented by the Diakonos, and dropped down onto the sofa beside Finn with a complete change of manner.

“Right,” he said briskly. “What exactly is it that’s going on, then?”

“On Eutychia, we have no cities,” the Diakonos began. “The population is not a large one. Many hundreds of years ago the planet was struck by a shower of meteors. Not large meteors, as these things go, but sufficient in size and number to cause a perhaps inordinate amount of damage at the time. There were numerous environmental side effects, and a large percentage of the population died at the time, though now both we and the planet have almost completely recovered. You will have seen some of the physical evidence in the vicinity of Vevarorna, I think?”

The Doctor nodded. So the circular craters had been meteorite impact sites. As the Diakonos said, they couldn’t have been particularly large ones – even the kinetic energy of only a relatively small chunk of rock would be sufficient to make craters of the size they had seen – but in sufficient numbers, yes, the damage would have been extensive, and the effects on the atmosphere not dissimilar to those that the eruption of Tambora in 1815 had had back on Earth; it had led to ‘the Year Without a Summer’; cold, famine – and, consequently, many, many deaths.

“Our centres of habitation – towns, villages – are widely dispersed, connected by a simple but highly effective road network,” the Diakonos continued. “Even such centres of industrialization and scientific development as we have are relatively small in size. What we do have is an extremely high standard of communications systems by which we monitor the welfare of all our settlements. Every day, the appointed official for each reports to us here – to let us know if there are any problems that we can help with, whether immediate or longer term, or else merely to confirm that all is well.”

He leaned forward, his expression serious.

“It was perhaps a month ago that we began to realize something was happening. Perea was the first. A small village, on the edge of this continent, many hundreds of miles from here. We failed to receive the usual contact. We checked the communication network, of course – but there was nothing wrong with it. It was unusual not to receive a report, but not entirely unheard of. So initially we were not unduly disturbed. But no contact the next day, either. Or the next. At that point we despatched a team to investigate. You know what they found.”

The Doctor nodded grimly.

“At first, nobody realized what had happened. Why everyone had vanished. What the strange residues scattered throughout the village were. But then, a few days later, it happened again. We lost contact with another settlement. Investigation revealed the same conditions. Then a third. And by this time we had realized, to our

horror, what was happening. But not how.” He looked at the Doctor with an intimation of entreaty in his eyes. “Have you learned anything that can help us, Doctor?”

“So far, not that much,” the Doctor admitted, grudgingly. “There’s some kind of energy field at work, but not one I’m familiar with. Anything outside its boundary seems to remain untouched, but anything inside is – changed.” He offered the euphemism carefully. “Not just living beings. In Vevarorna it had passed through part of a house; the untouched part was still sound, but the affected part was weakened. As if something had been taken out of it by the field.” He looked at the Diakonos with more animation. “That’d be a starting place...”

“Any insight you may have will be appreciated,” the Diakonos assured him. “Perhaps – ” He broke off at the sound of a knock at the door. “Come!” he said, loud enough to be heard out in the corridor.

The door swung open; it was being pushed by Mahhrk, so as to permit entry by the young woman accompanying him, carrying a tray of food and drink. They both came across to the sofas, where the woman, with a shy smile, set the tray down on a small table.

“Doctor – Fionnula – this is Aihleah. My wife,” said Mahhrk, with evident pride. As well he might, Finn thought. Aihleah had a quiet, dignified, graceful beauty – not just of body, but evidently also of spirit, on the strength of those eyes and that smile.

“Aihleah, you’ve excelled yourself yet again,” said the Diakonos warmly. “Our sincerest thanks.”

Aihleah responded with another of her shy smiles.

“I know you’ll have a lot to talk about,” she said diffidently, “but Mahhrk and I were wondering – if you’d like to look round Vusunus a little later, we’d be happy to be your guides?”

“Vusunus?” the Doctor queried.

“Here,” said the Diakonos, by way of explanation. “This is Vusunus. This castle, and the town. Vusunus is the nearest Eutychia has to an administrative centre for the planet,” he added. “Though we try not to stand on formality, if it’s avoidable.”

“Ah! Right,” said the Doctor. He gave Aihleah one of his most charming smiles. “Love to, Aihleah – thank you! But a bit later, if that’s all right? Got some stuff to sort out before that.”

Aihleah smiled, gratified.

“Of course! We’ll be happy to come for you at any time,” she said. Finn smiled back, but the Doctor was already intent on the Diakonos again, and didn’t even look up as Mahhrk closed the door behind his wife and came back to join them.

“Mahhrk mentioned somebody called Esker?” he prompted.

“Ah, yes,” the Diakonos agreed. “She’s heading the team investigating the incidents.” A nice euphemism for such horrendous events, Finn thought. “Kedron and his colleagues have been gathering data and samples for her from every site and bringing it back for her to analyze. I feel sure you’d like to see her results thus far?”

“Oh, yes!” the Doctor agreed.

“Then I’ll take you to her,” said the Diakonos, rising. “Mahhrk, will you excuse us? In any case, you mustn’t be late for this evening, must you?”

“I’ll try not to be,” said Mahhrk, with a smile.

“What are you doing this evening?” Finn asked, unable to suppress her curiosity.

“I hope that, later, I will be able to show you,” the Diakonos said with slightly amused evasiveness, Mahhrk nodding in enthusiastic confirmation. “But for now... Doctor – Fionnula – this way, please?”

Finn directed a *What’s all that about?* look at Mahhrk as they left, but he just grinned and mouthed “*See you later*” at her.

## Chapter 10

### *Chalk and Talk*

The Diakonos led them out of his office and along more corridors to the room which housed Esker and her team.

Esker turned out to be a woman in her fifties, with curling black hair and lively, sparkling blue eyes which looked as if they might denote the presence of an equally lively and sparkling sense of humour. The Diakonos presented the Doctor and Finn; when he introduced the former as an off-world scientist who he thought might be able to bring a fresh viewpoint to the investigation, Esker's eyes gleamed with intrigued interest.

"I'm sure you have many subjects you'd like to discuss with the Doctor," the Diakonos proceeded smoothly, deftly heading her off from some of the questions she was almost visibly considering, "but perhaps for now you could give us an overview of the data you've compiled so far?"

Esker nodded.

"Yes, of course," she agreed, conceding the priority. She led them across the room, weaving around the tables where the various members of her team were working, to where a large map was displayed on a board. The site of each incident was marked with a white circle, with figures written on a label alongside.

"The date of each attack," said Esker. For now, her eyes were anything but sparkling. "If that's what they are."

"Ledramai mentioned six villages, but that's ten markers," the Doctor said, scanning the map intently. "What are the other four places?"

"Ah! Now, that's very interesting," Esker agreed, her eyes kindling momentarily. Then the light died. "Or would be, if I understood the significance," she went on, with an air of resignation. "All four locations are quarries."

"Really?" said the Doctor, raising his eyebrows. "What do you get out of them?"

"Stone for house-building out of two of them. Chalk. And marble."

"And – fatalities in all four?" the Doctor probed delicately.

"Everyone there," Esker agreed. "Some must have been buried in the cave-ins. We never found their" – she broke off, remembering that 'bodies' was not an accurate description of what had been left – "we never found them."

"Cave-ins? At all four quarries?" the Doctor enquired alertly.

"Yes. Something must have weakened the tunnels in some way. But we haven't discovered what, or how." Esker exchanged a brief, sombre look with the Diakonos, standing behind them. It struck Finn, looking at him, how subtly he had managed to withdraw himself from proceedings, even though still in the room; he had chosen to become an observer, not a participant, yet was listening to every word. He was both there, and yet not there. It was quite a trick.

He saw her looking at him, and smiled slightly; she had the feeling he knew exactly what she was thinking. In someone else, she might have found that a disturbing concept, but with him, it was somehow reassuring. She returned the smile, then concentrated on the conversation again.

"What's so strange is that it's not just people who seem to be affected," Esker was saying with growing animation, sounding more like what Finn suspected was her normal self. "Animals, too, of course – like the one you found. That was a useful find, by the way," she said, gratefully. "We've not come across a partial" – she carefully sought the right description – "conversion – such as that – before. I've got a team of biologists studying it right now. But" – she returned to her theme – "inanimate things, too. In a minority of cases certain types of vegetation seem to be affected. And in the villages, objects, or sometimes just constituent parts of objects."

"What sort of objects?" the Doctor enquired, intrigued.

"Items of clothing, most often – like belts. The leather is affected, the metal buckles aren't. Or shirts made of a mix of natural and synthetic fibres. The natural fibres are affected, the synthetic aren't. Woollen blankets.

There's an ornament from one of the houses in Yiyala" – she pointed at one of the circles on the map – "made of seashells set into metal. The metal is untouched, but the shells..." She shrugged expressively.

"So things that are living, or were once living, are susceptible to whatever it is," mused the Doctor. "But things made of non-living material aren't touched."

"But why would stone be affected?" Esker challenged. "That's not living matter!"

"Chalk would be," Finn offered. "Or used to be, sort of. It's made of the compressed shells of tiny sea creatures, isn't it?"

Esker's blue eyes widened and round and her mouth dropped open as she realized she'd overlooked something very obvious, while the Doctor beamed at Finn.

"Of course it is!" he agreed. "What about the stone from the quarries?" he asked Esker. "What sort of stone is that?"

"That's just limestone," said Esker, mystified. "There's nothing remarkable about it."

"Except that that's composed of the compressed shells of crustaceans, just like chalk," the Doctor pointed out. "Something out there seems to like seafood..."

Finn walked forward and looked up at the map.

"You said it was used for house-building. All the houses in Vevarorna were built out of just one kind of stone – was it the same one? That same limestone, I mean?"

Esker nodded, slowly, and the Doctor's eyes gleamed eagerly.

"Were *all* the affected villages built of it?" he asked quickly. Esker blinked, then nodded.

"Probably," she agreed. "It's the most common building material on the planet, so it's widely used. I'll have to check, of course, but – very likely, yes."

Finn was still looking at the map.

"So all these places are places where there's either a concentration of people, or of these types of rock, or both – is that right?" she said. "Living, or once-living, animals – humans or sea creatures."

"And the marble quarry... Marble's metamorphosed limestone, so the same thing, one stage further on. And then" – the Doctor remembered something, and turned to Esker – "vegetation, too, you said?"

"A very few kinds only, but – yes," she agreed. She was now beginning to smile with renewed enthusiasm, as she realized she had a new and definite line of enquiry to follow.

"Right, I need to see the chemical analyses of everything that's been affected," the Doctor declared. "It's all got to have something in common, and we need to find out what it is."

"We've got printouts of all our preliminary investigations. They're over here," Esker offered with alacrity, and she led the Doctor over to another table, piled high with papers covered with charts and data of various kinds. Together they bent over the table, heads almost touching, instantly oblivious to everything else.

Finn smiled wryly, and walked over to the Diakonos.

"That's that, then," she observed, with tolerant resignation. "He won't surface now until he's found the missing bit of the puzzle."

"It looks as if it may take some time," he observed. "Would you like to stay here, or can I persuade you to accompany me? There's a particular garden in Vusunus that I'd very much like to show you."

Finn glanced over at the top of the dark head, and shrugged lightly.

"I can't be of any help to him with this sort of thing. So I might as well come with you." She suddenly realized how that sounded, and put a hand to her mouth, horrified. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean –"

The Diakonos laughed.

"No need to apologize," he assured her. "I know exactly what you meant! So, please, allow me the honour of being your escort." And he offered his arm in a courtly, old-fashioned gesture. Smiling, she took it.

"Riada," the Diakonos said, addressing the nearest of Esker's colleagues, "when a convenient moment presents itself, perhaps you'd tell Esker and the Doctor that we'll be in the Garden of Starlights?"

The young man nodded obligingly. "Of course, Diakonos," he agreed.

"My thanks," said the Diakonos, and he led Finn from the room.

She glanced back as they went through the door, but the Doctor hadn't looked up once. He probably wasn't even aware she was gone. She shook her head with a rueful smile, and went with the Diakonos.

\*

"Calcium!" the Doctor suddenly ejaculated loudly.

At the next table Esker looked up, startled. Riada, with whom she was consulting at that moment, did likewise.

"That's what the common denominator is!" the Doctor explained quickly. "Look!" He brandished the sheets of paper he'd been studying at them. Riada took them and stared at the data, Esker reading over his shoulder.

"But there's no calcium in any of the analyses –" Riada began to protest, and then he realized the significance of what he was saying.

"Exactly," said the Doctor triumphantly. "No calcium! None! And there should have been! Human body – only one point four percent calcium, but it's in the blood, in the bones, in the teeth – and it permeates all human tissue. Limestone – eighty percent calcium carbonate! Marble – almost one hundred percent! And those plants you listed – all with above average percentages of calcium. And all the other items – the clothes, the ornaments, all that stuff. But" – he indicated the papers in Riada's hand with a jerk of his head – "no calcium in the analyses."

"How did I miss something that obvious?" Esker wailed, clutching at her black curls with both hands in a gesture of frustration.

"That's why there were cave-ins at all the quarries," the Doctor went on, barely noticing the interruption, and continuing to pursue his own line of thought. "Something took the calcium out of the rocks, so of *course* they collapsed!"

"But it's not just rocks, is it? So why would simply extracting the calcium from the bodies jellify them in that way?" Riada queried, striving for scientific detachment, though all the while his eyes betrayed his real feelings.

"The process is probably more complicated than simple extraction," said the Doctor. "Like when humans eat. What happens to the food is more complex than mere absorption of nutrients." And what was left at the end of the process, what the body couldn't absorb and was eventually ejected from it, was in a very different state from the source material when it was put into the mouth – but he decided it would be prudent not to enlarge on that part of the analogy. Although, when he caught Esker's eye, he could see she'd followed his reasoning through to the same conclusion, though she didn't say anything out loud.

"But what could do that? And why?" Riada demanded.

"Don't know – yet," the Doctor admitted. He strode back to the map and stood looking at it intently, hands in his pockets. "But clearly something is."

"So – is there an intelligence at work here, Doctor?" Esker enquired. "A calcium-eating alien from outer space, perhaps?" Clearly she was one of those people who coped with matters that were serious by talking about them as if they weren't.

The Doctor glanced at her with a brief moment of fellow-feeling, then returned to studying the map.

"Don't know," he said. "But whatever it is, we need to work out where it's going next. Somehow it knows where these big concentrations of calcium are, and it's travelling from one to the next. Look" – his long forefinger traced the route of white circles – "every time it goes for the next nearest source." He looked at Riada and Esker grimly. "So where's the next biggest source of calcium from Vevarorna?"



## Chapter 11

### *A Question of Justice*

“This,” Finn pronounced with decision, “is a very beautiful garden.” She looked around the glade in which she and the Diakonos stood. All the trees and shrubs and flowers were unfamiliar to her, but they were colourful and abundant, growing in profusion everywhere. One type of tree in particular had taken her eye; they had passed one every few paces as they’d walked, and there were several around the edges of this glade. It was a fragile-looking thing, with slender trunk and delicate branches spreading out like filigree, and it had very few leaves. What leaves there were were silver in colour and clustered around the base of the single flower that blossomed at the end of every twig; a small, pure white flower with a shiny surface on its pointed petals. It was rather like what a celandine flower would look like if it were white instead of yellow, she thought.

“What’s the name of that tree?” she asked, pointing at it. “They’re everywhere!”

“I thought you might notice them,” said the Diakonos. “That’s a starlight – the tree after which this garden is named.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Finn.

The Diakonos smiled. “Even in daylight, yes,” he agreed. “But they’re at their most beautiful at night.”

Finn looked at him with a slightly puzzled air, as if sensing there was some relevant piece of information he was withholding from her.

“Why’s that?”

He shook his head, still smiling. “It’s not long until sunset,” he said. “Then the moons will rise – and you’ll see.” He indicated a seat on the edge of the clearing, formed out of a fallen log. “In the meantime, will you sit with me? I have some important things to say to you.”

Finn looked at him searchingly, then nodded, and took her seat beside him.

“I have much to explain to you,” the Diakonos began, speaking as if he were choosing his words with extreme care. “I’ll have to ask you to take some of what I say on trust, for the moment, though all will become clear to you in the future. But it was vitally important that we have this conversation. That was why I made myself known to you – in a manner of speaking – on Felindre. To pave the way for this meeting.”

Finn looked at him steadily, waiting.

“Your – association with the Doctor is of much significance,” the Diakonos went on. “Even though its duration has been quite brief thus far. You have formed a bond with each other that runs deep, I think.”

Finn shrugged ruefully.

“On my side, anyway,” she agreed. “I wouldn’t venture to answer for him! But” – she hesitated, then plunged on – “why does it matter? To you, I mean?”

“I can’t explain that to you at this time,” the Diakonos apologized. “But I need to be clear about certain things. I need you to be honest with me, Fionnula. Will you do that?”

She looked at him, slightly surprised.

“Of course,” she said, as if there was no other possible way in which she might react. A corner of the Diakonos’s mouth twitched.

“Yes, I should have known you’d say that,” he said, as if chiding himself.

“Why, though?” Finn asked, perplexed. “Why would you know anything about me? Is it the Doctor? Because I travel with him? Is that why you’re interested in me?”

“In a manner of speaking,” the Diakonos conceded. “Though you are of great importance in your own right, of course – as is every individual. But your – interaction” – another carefully chosen word – “your – *relationship* – with the Doctor – matters greatly in decisions that have to be made.”

“Decisions made by whom? By you?” Finn probed.

“In this instance – yes,” the Diakonos agreed.

Finn met his eyes, and contemplated what she read as she searched them. Then she nodded. “What do you want to know?”

The Diakonos smiled at her encouragingly.

“You’ve found the Doctor a little – shall we say, *prickly*, of late, perhaps? And he hasn’t accounted for it to you. Have you wondered about that?”

Finn fought down the impulse to ask how he knew, deciding to concentrate on answering, instead. She thought carefully. How *did* she feel about the unexpected bouts of irritability that the Doctor had evinced on this latest trip?

“It’s difficult, sometimes,” she admitted. “But I think that’s probably my fault. I mean, it’s natural for me to anthropomorphize – I can’t help it. To put non-human things into a human context, I mean. And especially when the non-humans in question *look* human. So it’s difficult not to think of the Doctor in human terms. Because he looks and sounds so human. But of course he isn’t. So nearly – but he’s *not*. But it’s easy to make misjudgements because of it. I certainly seem to have been getting it wrong quite a lot lately,” she said, a little forlornly.

The Diakonos regarded her with a sympathetic half-smile, but didn’t comment.

Suddenly she looked at him alertly, almost as if something had startled her, and she studied him with narrowed eyes, searching his face intently. Slowly she seemed to come to a conclusion, and she looked astonished by her own thoughts. With a hesitancy that betrayed a sense of surprise at her own temerity in suggesting what she was about to suggest, she spoke again, slowly.

“Not human... The same’s true of you, isn’t it? You look human, but somehow – I don’t think you are. I think you’re something much more. For all I know, I’m only seeing you as you *want* me to see you. You might actually have forty-two multicoloured tentacles or something, and I’d never know!” She ended with a gasp of nervous laughter, instinctively attempting to moderate the potential effect of her accusation with humour.

The Diakonos laughed aloud – an eruption of genuine mirth – and, though taken by surprise, she was drawn into joining him by the infectiousness of his amusement.

“I promise you I do not have tentacles, of any number or colour,” he assured her. “But you are most perceptive, Fionnula. This is not my true appearance. However, it is the appearance I use when interacting with humanoid races. This does not alarm you?” he probed, delicately.

Finn shook her head, firmly.

“No,” she said. “Because you are who you are. I don’t know what that is, but I do know it’s good. I just” – she searched for the right words to convey her conviction – “I just *feel* it. I know that’s not a lot to go on, but even so – I trust you.”

The Diakonos inclined his head in a gesture of appreciation for her words. Then he leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his hands clasped together.

“There is so much that I can’t tell you yet,” he said, with a tinge of regret. “But everything I’m asking you about – everything I can tell you – touches on an issue of... justice.”

Finn experienced a frisson of unease at the word.

“Justice for who?” she asked, swiftly.

“Who indeed?” The Diakonos smiled momentarily, though whether because of the unconscious flaw in her grammar or because of the wording of his reply could not be determined. “Over the course of Time,” he went on – somehow Finn could hear the capitalization – “many events and outcomes have been affected by chance – coincidence – but also by other agencies.”

“You’re talking about the Doctor,” she said flatly.

The Diakonos inclined his head again, acknowledging the accuracy of her deduction.

“What’s justice got to do with – whatever it is that you’re telling me?” she challenged, a little more harshly.

“Actions inevitably lead to consequences, both for the one who acts and for the ones for whom – or against whom – they act,” said the Diakonos. “Therefore the decision to act inescapably invests that one with certain responsibilities. The question needs to be asked, by what right do they so act? Who gives it to them? If they arrogate to themselves the right to make decisions that will affect others, without the consent of the ones who will experience the outcomes of those decisions, then what? On whom will the consequences fall – on them, or on others only? In physics, each action is recognized to have an equal and opposite reaction. What reaction should there be, then, to a source cumulatively responsible for so many alterations over the course of Time?”

Finn listened with growing unease, though nothing in his tone implied that he was being judgemental in any way. He was, as far as she could detect, impersonally listing points that were, she was forced to concede, perfectly valid in relation to the circumstances he was describing.

Yet her emotional instincts were screaming at her to rebut, somehow. In some way she couldn’t articulate, she knew something was going on that could have serious consequences for the Doctor – but what was behind it? Who? Had some kind of attack been launched against him? If so, how could she defend him?

She had no answers, but she did have another question.

“What’s this got to do with me? How am I involved? Why does what I think matter?”

The Diakonos smiled at her with unmistakable affection.

“Ah, Fionnula,” he chided her, “you shouldn’t underestimate your own significance. No other human – perhaps no other being, at any time – has ever had the insight into the Doctor’s mind that you have. It gives your reactions, your opinions and judgements, an importance that you cannot evaluate at this time. But I assure you, they, and you, play a vital part in the outworking of this” – another carefully chosen word – “situation.”

“But – but why? I’m no-one special. It’s a complete accident that I’ve got his mind in mine at all!” she protested, perplexed. “It wasn’t planned, he didn’t set out for it to happen; it just – happened! By accident,” she repeated.

The Diakonos didn’t reply in words, merely looked at her steadily, but she understood him nonetheless.

“When I first met the Doctor,” she said slowly, groping for comprehension, “I said something to him about the chances of meeting him when he could have been anywhere in Space and Time...”

The ghost of a memory echoed through her mind. “*I never expected to actually meet you... What were the odds against that? After all, you’ve got the whole of space and time to be in... And yet here we are...*”

She looked at the Diakonos sharply. “Are you telling me that it *wasn’t* chance, after all?”

“What is chance?” he asked rhetorically. “Another word for coincidence. And what is coincidence? Multiple events that occur at the same time, without planning or prearrangement. *Apparently.*”

And after emphasizing that last word, he fell silent.

Finn stared at him.

“So” – her words came out slowly – “some kind of decision is being made... About the Doctor. And I’m – some kind of *character witness*? Is that what you’re telling me? The Doctor – is he in danger?” Her voice sharpened with apprehension. “Some kind of attack by someone? Is he being accused of something?”

“True justice must be even-handed,” said the Diakonos evenly. “There must be a penalty for sins of commission or omission. For those who knowingly do what they should not, or knowingly fail to do what they should. Else all becomes chaos. With knowledge comes responsibility.”

“But for it to be truly even-handed, there’d have to be reward for good done, too,” Finn declared urgently, the overtones of anxiety in her voice clearly audible. “Wouldn’t there?” She met the Diakonos’s eyes with a look almost of pleading in her own.

He smiled at her.

“Of course,” he concurred. “So anyone whose role it is to dispense justice, if they were a person of integrity, would make sure that was done also. For everyone concerned.” There was a faint but definite emphasis on the word ‘everyone’.

Finn stared at him, her mind a confusion of emotions and reactions. The implications of what he had been saying to her were – what? They seemed so overwhelming she didn’t feel capable of articulating them. She felt pulled in two directions – between her feelings about, and for, this man – or whatever he was – and the Doctor. One of whom she knew not at all, one of whom she knew better than anyone else. Yet both of whom she would instinctively trust with her life. She didn’t know what to think, how to feel.

“Don’t worry, Fionnula,” said the Diakonos, as if he was reading her very thoughts. “All will be for the best, I promise you.”

Looking into his eyes, hearing his tone, she slowly relaxed, with an almost soundless sigh in which satisfaction and trust were somehow mingled.

Not that she was entirely reassured, or even truly understood what he was so obliquely hinting at. But, based on whatever indefinable instinct motivated her in this matter, she kept coming back to the fact that, at some very profound level, she trusted him – whoever, or whatever, he was. A being of integrity; she was quite sure he was that. So whatever was going on, she was content to abide by his judgement.

For now.

“You do understand,” she said with quiet determination, making her position plain, “that I’ll defend him with everything I have? I’ll stand up for him against anyone. *Anyone.*” *Even you*, her eyes were saying.

The Diakonos smiled, and there was no mistaking his approval.

“I never doubted it,” he said, almost proudly.

## **Chapter 12**

### ***Finn’s Wish***

The Doctor, on his way to find the Diakonos, was accosted by Kedron in one of the corridors.

“Doctor! We’ve brought your ‘blue box’ back,” he said, with a smile at his own use of the description.

“What? Oh, brilliant!” said the Doctor happily. “Where is it?”

“It’s down in the entrance courtyard. I’ll show you,” Kedron offered, and turned to lead the way.

The Doctor’s heart lifted at sight of the TARDIS; it was good to have her back. He strode over and gave the door a brief touch, as if reassuring himself she was really there. Then he turned back to Kedron, who was watching him with interest.

“Right, thanks for that,” said the Doctor briskly. “Now, I need to find the Diakonos, and I’m told he’s in the Garden of Starlights, whatever that is. How do I get there?”

“Easy,” said Kedron, and led him outside the castle gates. The slope on this side of the hill between the castle and the town was wooded, with a number of paths visible through the trees and shrubs even in the falling dusk. Kedron gestured at the expanse of greenery.

“That’s the Garden of Starlights,” he said. “I know the Diakonos has a favourite spot – a clearing over there.” He pointed down and to the left. The Doctor marked the target area in his mind and nodded.

“Thanks,” he said, clapping a hand on Kedron’s shoulder before striding off.

His unerring sense of direction didn't fail him as he navigated through the trees; it wasn't long before he heard voices, and after another few paces identified them as those of Finn and the Diakonos. The mass of shrubs and trees in this particular part of the garden were thicker than elsewhere, so he couldn't yet see them, even though he was getting quite close. Close enough to hear clearly what they were talking about.

Him.

Curious, he halted to listen, masked by a stand of dark green bushes, though he realized that when he looked through the leaves, he had a partial view of both the Diakonos and Finn, though somewhat dim in the fading daylight. They, however, had apparently not heard his approach, and went on talking.

"...After we left Felindre, he took me right outside the galaxy, far enough to see the whole thing all at once," Finn was saying enthusiastically. "It was so beautiful! I just can't get over how *lucky* I've been, that he's taken me places and shown me things like that! Sometimes I really do pinch myself, just to be sure – but it really *has* been happening. I've got so much to be grateful to him for. I just wish –" She broke off.

"Ah, wishes," said the Diakonos cryptically. His face wore an expression of pleasant interest, but there was a subtle gleam in his eye. "Tell me something, Fionnula: if you could have one wish granted – any wish at all – what would you wish for?" he enquired lightly.

Finn's answer was immediate, unpremeditated, and unequivocal.

"For the Doctor's happiness," she said instantly.

There was a pause. The Diakonos put his head slightly to one side as he studied Finn's face. Behind the curtain of leaves, the Doctor swallowed. Where had that lump in his throat suddenly come from?

"Why *his* happiness?" asked the Diakonos. "Why not your own?"

"He's my friend," said Finn succinctly. "My *best* friend. My 'I'm-having-a-crisis-at-three-in-the-morning-who's-the-first-person-I-call' friend." She looked at the Diakonos. "Do you know what I mean by that?"

"Oh, yes," the Diakonos assured her. "We may know many people, have many friends. But when it comes down to it, there are only a very few – perhaps only one or two – people in our lives who are our true friends at that level. I call them 'friends of the heart'."

Finn considered the description, and nodded.

"Well, that's what he is to me," she said. "The friend of my heart. The only one that matters that much to me." She met the Diakonos's eye levelly. "And before you ask, I doubt very much if the feeling is reciprocal. I'll go so far as to say he's probably fond of me. But he's known so many people – I'm just the latest in the line. Why would I be in top spot just because of that? And no two people ever feel exactly the same level of intensity about each other – or I shouldn't imagine so, anyway. Very rare, if they do. Don't know how you'd measure it, in any case! So I don't expect him to feel about me the way I do about him. Wouldn't be reasonable, would it? But in the interests of fairness, I should point out I'm not being purely altruistic," she added, with an air of pointing out the obvious. "Actually, I'm being very selfish."

The Diakonos raised his eyebrows at her, playing along with her.

"In what way?" he prompted her gently.

"Because if *he* was happy, that'd make *me* happy," said Finn. "And I like feeling happy. So it's really just self, self, you see." She grinned at him, and he smiled back, in complete mutual comprehension.

"You care about him very deeply," he observed, studying her. "Tell me something... Would you give your life for him?"

The Doctor was startled to the core, both by the question and by the response, which was even swifter than before, and just as emphatic.

"Yes, I would," Finn said flatly. Nobody hearing that tone of voice could doubt that she meant absolutely what she said. But then she looked at the Diakonos with a wry smile. "I would," she repeated. "But I'd rather not have to, of course."

"Just the same, you *would* do it?" he persisted, gently. "Just as he would for you?"

She shook her head slightly.

“You’re trying to make out I’m like him,” she said. “And I’m not sure that I am. Yes, of course he’d do it for me. But then, *he’d* do it for *anyone*. I’m not sure I’m that altruistic. I’d like to be, but...” She paused, her expression touched with regret. Then the corner of her mouth quirked in a half-smile. “Maybe I’ll learn to be, one day. But for now – for *him* – yes, I would give my life. But the worst thing is that I know it wouldn’t do what I’d want it to. Because it would just mean he’d’ve lost someone else. And he’s already lost too many. So I know how it’d make him feel. But even so” – her expression was determined – “I would do it. Because the Universe needs him a lot more than it needs me.”

“Are you sure he’d agree with that?” the Diakonos probed delicately.

Finn chuckled derisively.

“Of course he wouldn’t,” she agreed. “But it’s true, all the same. Whether he likes to admit it or not.”

“To do what you have done – and what you so manifestly would do – for him takes courage, Fionnula. You do realize that?”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” she said dismissively. “I only know it’s what I’d have to do. I owe him too much. And I want so much *for* him. Not that I can tell him that.” Another wry smile. “If nothing is said, nothing has to be answered. That’s the way it works.”

“I have no doubt he knows what he needs to know,” the Diakonos said, but as he said it, he turned his head toward the bushes behind which the Doctor stood, and their eyes met through the gap in the leaves. It was as if he’d known all along that the Doctor was there. “I think you can be sure of that.”

“I hope so. Provided it doesn’t scare him too much!” Finn, unaware that anything had happened, gave a shaky little laugh. “It might, you know!”

“Oh, I think he’s too wise not to recognize the value of your companionship,” said the Diakonos, breaking eye contact with the Doctor and turning back to her.

“Well, I hope you’re right,” said Finn. “As long as I can be useful to him, help him, I hope he’ll go on letting me hang on to his coat-tails.”

Something seemed to catch her attention; she suddenly sat very erect and looked over the trees, somewhere over to the Doctor’s right.

“What’s that light?” she asked curiously. The Doctor turned and looked, too, and saw an orange glow emanating above the trees.

“Ah – that’ll be the Meeting Fire,” said the Diakonos easily. “Further down in the garden there’s a large clearing, where the people of Vusunus often come for social gatherings, and when they do a celebratory fire is always lit. Tonight everyone will be coming to hear Mahrk perform. His musical skills have won him an enduring place in the hearts of many of us. Would you like to hear him play?”

“So *that’s* what that rather cryptic exchange was about, earlier! Yes, I would!” she said enthusiastically, and stood up, so that the Doctor could no longer see her face. The Diakonos did likewise.

“Just follow this path downwards, and take the next left fork,” he said. “That’ll take you to the Glade of the Meeting Fire.”

“Aren’t you coming?” She sounded surprised.

“I have something to attend to first, but I will rejoin you, as soon as I can,” he promised. “And – thank you, Fionnula. For your forbearance, when there must be so much more that you want to ask. And for your honesty, which I much appreciate.”

“I meant what I said earlier, you know,” she said. The Doctor didn’t know what she was referring to, but she sounded uncharacteristically serious, even severe.

“I know, and I would expect nothing less of you,” the Diakonos acknowledged gently. “Don’t worry. Everything you’ve said will be taken into account. I will not abuse your trust.”

There was a pause. Then she said, softly, “I know.”

There was a further pause, as if she was simply looking at the Diakonos. The Doctor wondered what expression her face was showing, what that silence meant. Then light footsteps sounded as, without further word, she left the Diakonos and headed down the hill, passing the Doctor without ever realizing he was there.

He waited until she was out of earshot, then, taking a deep breath, pushed out of the bushes and into the clearing. The Diakonos rose to meet him.

“Doctor,” he said. “You have news, I think?”

And that was all. *If nothing is said, nothing has to be answered.*

“Yes,” said the Doctor after the briefest of pauses, and delivered a brief summary of what he, Esker and Riada had discovered. “The next nearest concentration of calcium seems to be another quarry. A place called Elianya.”

“Yes, I know it,” said the Diakonos. “It’s a very old mine, one of our oldest, but still one of the most productive. You think it will be the next target?”

“As far as we can tell. And if whatever it is that’s doing this maintains the same rate of travel, it’ll get there about midday tomorrow.”

“So – what course of action do you propose?”

“Eutychia seems to be a very hospitable planet,” said the Doctor evenly. “I think it would be very ungracious of us not to provide a welcoming party, don’t you?”

“Despite the dangers implicit in your proposal, I fear we have no choice,” said the Diakonos, somewhat heavily. “Or we’ll learn nothing more than we already know. I suspect Kedron would like this assignment, and he’ll want to brief his team as soon as possible. Let’s go and find him. And then” – his expression lightened slightly, as he glanced down the hill in the direction of the Meeting Fire – “I have an appointment to keep. I hope you’ll accompany me?”

It was clearly the nearest he was going to come to what had passed between Finn and himself in the Doctor’s hearing, but there was no mistaking that he expected the Doctor to comply with his suggestion.

The Doctor hesitated for a moment, frowning slightly, then shrugged.

“Why not?” he said lightly. “Come on – let’s find Kedron.”

\*

Lathrin sighed. He’d spent the day out on a solitary hike, visiting some of his favourite haunts in the hills that now lay far behind him, as he made his way back to his home village. It wasn’t the sort of expedition on which to bring the children – they were still too young to walk such distances – so Moreka had stayed at home with them, instead of accompanying him, as she had done when they were first married.

But somehow he’d misjudged the time, and quite badly; darkness had just about finished falling, and he was still some considerable way from home. He tried to pick up his pace, but the knee-high grass through which he was walking made it difficult, and he was too tired after such a long day to maintain the effort.

One of Eutychia’s two moons had risen some time ago, and was already casting its silver light over the plain; when he glanced back at the line of hills he could see the incipient glow behind the shoulder of one of them that told him the other moon was on the point of rising also. At least he could see reasonably well as he walked. If he hadn’t been so anxious about the time – Moreka would surely be wondering where he’d got to – he would have revelled in the sight of the moonlight-tipped grass fronds stretching out before him, the dark silhouettes of the hills curving away from behind him to his left, the countless stars sparkling down from the blue-black expanse of sky above.

But he was too conscious of his lateness to take the pleasure in it that he would otherwise have done, and strode determinedly onwards.

Until something, glimpsed in his peripheral vision, brought him up short to stand staring across the plain into the darkness there. The moonlight made the immediate area quite clear to view, but out there, beyond his specific vicinity, it was darker.

And in that darkness, something was moving.

Lathrin stared. What was it? He couldn’t make out any particular shape, but there was something there, beyond question. And it was moving closer, toward him. He just couldn’t make out what it was... But at the speed it was travelling, it would soon be in his range of clear vision.

And then it did, suddenly moving faster, and he could see it.

By the time he could do that, it was too late to run, too late to do anything other than instinctively raise his arms over his face in a gesture of defence.

Too late to do anything other than scream, as it overwhelmed him.

### **Chapter 13** ***The Garden of Starlights***

As the Diakonos and the Doctor approached the Glade of the Meeting Fire, they could hear the sound of Mahhrk's khitarah, gradually growing in volume as they neared. It wasn't until they had made their way under the dark canopy of the trees toward the light of the fire that the Doctor realized just how many people were present, clustered around the edges of the glade and back into the trees; there must have been something between four and five hundred altogether. But it would have been hard to tell that until you were among them; the silence and attention with which they listened to the man in the centre of the glade was intense.

The two men silently took their places on the edge of the crowd, in the shadows of the trees, and the Doctor scanned the scene in front of him.

The fire was positioned at one end of the clearing, and from either side of it the audience spread round in a circle, seated on tree trunks that had been levelled off on top to be benches, or on the ground itself; some of the younger folk were even sitting up in the lowest branches of the trees, from where they could get a better view.

Mahhrk was seated on a stool in the centre, with a group of supporting musicians in a loose half-circle about him. His flying fingers dexterously plucked at the strings of the khitarah he was holding to himself like a lover, producing incredibly beautiful and complex melodies and subharmonies. It seemed almost impossible that so many sounds could be produced by just one man on just one instrument. The Doctor began to appreciate why Mahhrk was held in such high regard as an artist.

The music rose to a crescendo of excitement, and with a sweep of his hand Mahhrk struck the final chord. The audience erupted into wild applause, and it was only then that the Doctor realized that Finn was almost directly in front of him, only a few feet away, seated with Aihleah and Ledramai; the latter had evidently returned from Vevarorna after all, and in time to come to the performance. All three were applauding enthusiastically; Finn leaned over and said something into Aihleah's ear, and got a smile of pleasure in return. Then Aihleah checked what she had in her hand; it looked like some kind of recording device. Evidently she kept an archive of her husband's performances.

Mahhrk, carrying his khitarah, came over to them. The concert was evidently over; the other musicians, and some of the crowd, were dispersing, though others stayed where they were, talking animatedly. Those around where Finn was sitting had thinned out, and he could hear her and Ledramai enthusing to Mahhrk over his performance. He smiled, and thanked them, then sat down beside Aihleah.

The Doctor was about to step forward to join them, but the Diakonos stayed him with a hand on his arm.

"Let's wait a few moments," he suggested quietly. "I'd like to hear this..."

The Doctor looked at him, frowning slightly. How did the Diakonos know that there was about to be something he'd like to hear? The mystery of the man beside him was growing. And at some point he meant to get some straight answers. But, for now, he acquiesced with a slight shrug.

"...Finn's home planet is called Earth," Ledramai was saying.

Mahhrk and Aihleah both looked at Finn, willing to be impressed.

"What's it like?" Mahhrk asked eagerly. "What kind of planet is it? What do you do there?"

Finn considered. The Doctor awaited her reply, intrigued. Just how *would* she sum up her own planet?

"Well, uh... I suppose – if you'll allow some sweeping generalizations – well, we make things. Technology, science, that sort of thing. And we grow things; agriculture and all that," she started, slowly; then went on, "But more than anything else, I think – I think I'd call us a planet of storytellers. We tell them all the time, one way or

another. Some of the stories are true, and some of them aren't. Some of them are interesting, and some of them aren't. We tell them with words, and with music, and with pictures, both still and moving. We read them, we write them, we sing them, we paint them, we photograph them, we look at them and listen to them. But throughout our history, an awful lot of what we spend our time and energy on is, in one way or another, making up, or discovering, and then telling – and listening to – stories..." she concluded, simply.

The other three smiled.

"It sounds lovely," said Ledramai, slightly wistfully.

One corner of Finn's mouth quirked.

"I'm afraid it isn't as lovely as all that, sometimes. Sometimes we need those stories that aren't true because they're a respite from some of our realities."

Aihleah smiled sympathetically. "Are you one of the storytellers?" she asked.

"And you say you *sing* stories?" Mahhrk added quickly, his professional interest aroused.

"Oh, not *me*," Finn disclaimed hastily. "Other people. Though I did make up a set of lyrics to somebody else's music, once," she admitted. "Long ago, when I was about fifteen. That's probably the closest I came."

"A song?" Mahhrk asked, alertly. "You wrote a song? Sing it for us!" It was more a demand than a request.

Finn looked taken aback.

"Oh, you won't want to hear *me*," she said quickly, flustered. "I'm just a bathroom singer – you're a *real* musician! One of the best I've ever heard! Anyway, it's just a song, and not an especially good one."

"Don't be silly," Mahhrk reproved her. "*Any* song is worth hearing! And I really would like to hear yours. Think of it from my point of view – this is going to be a song from another *world*! You can't *not* sing it for me!"

Finn frowned, disconcerted but forced to concede his point, while Aihleah and Ledramai added their voices to his in a clamour of persuasion.

"All right, you asked for it!" she told them, reluctantly. "But remember, it's not my music! Just my words."

"Doesn't matter," Mahhrk told her firmly. "I still want to hear it." Unseen by Finn, he made a gesture at the recording device in his wife's hand; she nodded, and made a stealthy movement of her fingers over one of the controls.

"Well," said Finn, colouring slightly, "it goes like this..."

"Come on – stand up!" Mahhrk interrupted. "Do it properly! It'll help your breathing!" He grinned at her encouragingly. She pulled a face at him, but obeyed. This put her facing the Diakonos and the Doctor, though she didn't realize it; she hadn't seen them standing there in the shadows. She took a deep breath, and began to sing, in a low, unexpectedly good contralto.

*Somewhere out there, where I cannot see,  
In the future do you wait for me?  
Starlight, so bright, shining in my eyes,  
Will you let me see love?*

*How long, how strong must the feelings be?  
Will it always be someone else, not me?  
How can I learn to show  
What you need to know  
That you need me so?*

*Somewhere out there, where I cannot see,  
Do you wait for me, love?*

There were still quite a few people in the clearing; not all had yet dispersed to their homes. Some of those nearby heard her voice, and gradually fell silent, turning to listen to her, until she had quite an audience.

*Some day, some way, will we meet at last?  
Rise above the past, if we just hold fast?  
Oh, how I long for you  
To be strong for you  
To belong to you*

*Somewhere out there, where I cannot see,  
In the future do you wait for me?  
We'll know, we'll show when at last we touch  
In our hands we have love...*

As the last note died away, Mahhrk stood up and began to applaud; Aihleah and Ledramai did likewise, and so did the other listeners. Finn coloured, and tried not to meet anyone's eye.

"That was beautiful!" Mahhrk told her, fervently. Finn blushed even deeper as Aihleah and Ledramai nodded vehemently in support of his sentiments. "A beautiful song! And from another world!"

Finn looked extremely embarrassed, and shook her head.

"It's not as good as all that, Mahhrk! It's not worth all this fuss, honestly."

"I'm the musician round here – I'll be the judge of that," he told her firmly, his eyes twinkling.

It was at that moment that the Diakonos took a pace or two forward; Finn caught sight of him, and her eyes widened as she realized the Doctor was with him. The others saw the expression on her face, and turned to see who she was looking at.

"Fionnula, my dear," said the Diakonos, coming forward and taking her by both hands. "Mahhrk is quite right – that was beautiful. I so much enjoyed it."

The Doctor suddenly remembered what the Diakonos had said earlier. "*I think you may be interested to hear this...*" The implication was clear – somehow, he'd known that Finn was going to sing that song. And not only had he wanted to hear it himself, he'd wanted the Doctor to hear it, too. But *how*? *How* did he know what he knew?

"But I'm afraid" – the Diakonos was continuing, looking round at the others – "I really must break up the party. Ledramai, your team will be undertaking an important mission tomorrow. The Doctor and I have already spoken to Kedron about it – if you wouldn't mind checking in with him before you retire, he'll brief you. And Finn and the Doctor will be coming with us, so I think, Mahhrk and Aihleah, perhaps you should allow them to return to the castle for now?"

"What about the baby, Diakonos?" Ledramai asked quickly. "Is she all right?"

"Perfectly all right," the Diakonos assured her. "She and Shealla have taken to each other with immense enthusiasm on both sides, so I'm sure all will be well there."

"Oh, good," said Ledramai, satisfied. "So – see you tomorrow, then, Finn... Good night!"

"Night," said Finn.

She left the Diakonos having another word with Mahhrk and Aihleah, and walked over to where the Doctor still stood in the shadows. He quirked an eyebrow at her.

"The theme music to *Trancers...*?" he queried, sounding as if he'd contemplated adding '*of all things...!*' to the end of the question. He had a quizzical expression on his face, as if undecided whether to query or endorse her taste in entertainment.

Finn looked at him and shook her head in slow astonishment.

"Your knowledge of the more obscure reaches of Earth culture is positively *beyond* encyclopaedic, at times," she told him. "Yes. *Trancers*. Which just goes to show we're *both* students of the classics, doesn't it?" She grinned at him.

"*Classic*? Well – of its kind, I suppose..." he admitted.

“Oh, come on! *Trancers?* Of course it is!” she said emphatically.

The Doctor sniffed. “They used a pretty clunky way to time travel, if you ask me.”

Finn grinned. “Is that the considered opinion of the expert who told me the people I see on television aren’t real?” she enquired.

The Doctor frowned at her *lèse majesté*.

“Goodness, don’t you look put out?” she teased him.

“Discombobulated,” said the Doctor, unexpectedly.

“I beg your pardon?” Finn countered, surprised.

“Discombobulated,” the Doctor repeated, with a gleam in his eye. “Brilliant word, isn’t it? Like ‘sesquipedalian’. Which of course *is* sesquipedalian... And so is ‘discombobulated.’” He rolled the word round in his mouth with evident relish. “Just the right description for *you*, a few minutes ago!”

Finn gave him an old-fashioned look.

“Well, I’ve never been asked to stand up and sing in front of a lot of strangers before, have I?” she pointed out. “Pity you didn’t have your tuba with you, come to that! You could’ve given them a rousing rendition of something by Wagner or Holst, I dare say!”

“Yeah, could’ve, actually,” the Doctor agreed complacently. “Oh, well – they’ll never know what they’re missing...”

The Diakonos rejoined them, with a wave to the now departing Mahhrk and Aihleah before turning to Finn.

“Our moons have risen,” he said, gesturing upwards. The Doctor and Finn followed his pointing finger and saw what they had not noticed until now – two silver globes, similar in colour to the Earth’s moon, but both larger in size.

“I think,” said the Diakonos to Finn, “it’s time for you to see why this is called the Garden of Starlights.” He made a shepherding gesture with his arm without actually touching her, and she obediently preceded him as they began to retrace their earlier steps up the hillside toward the castle, the Doctor beside her.

They walked in silence, this time. Finn found herself thinking about what had just passed, the song she’d sung. Those lyrics...

Could she have more accurately described her situation before meeting the Doctor, even if she’d set out to do so? And yet she’d made those verses up so many years before she even knew he existed, let alone met him! She might never even have remembered that she’d ever done so, until Mahhrk and Aihleah had brought it back to her mind.

Frowning slightly, she cast a quick glance back at the Diakonos. What was it she’d said to him earlier, about meeting the Doctor? *Are you telling me that it wasn’t chance, after all?* And he’d responded, *What is chance?* And gone on to quite clearly imply, without openly admitting it, that it hadn’t been chance at all.

Incredible though the idea might be, was her writing of those only too apposite lyrics all those years ago another straw in the wind of this unbelievable suggestion that she’d been deliberately destined to meet the Doctor one day?

But *why?* Why her, out of all the people the Doctor had ever known? What forces were at work here? Why *her...*?

Wrestling with this concept as she walked, she gradually became aware that something else was trying to intrude into her concentration, tugging at her consciousness for attention. Something was happening that she ought to be noticing, to be looking at...

She forced herself to emerge from her brown study, and as she scanned the surrounding trees, and the undergrowth clustered so thickly beneath them, she became aware of little points of light scattered throughout the deepening darkness. The dually-sourced moonlight made the path they were following plainly visible, and she could see the Diakonos and the Doctor perfectly clearly when she looked at them, but – what were those tiny lights? Insects, perhaps – like fireflies? But they seemed too stationary to be living creatures.

She caught the Doctor’s eye, and indicated the lights with a lift of her eyebrows. He nodded; he’d seen them, too. They both looked round at the Diakonos, and Finn opened her mouth to pose the question, but he smiled

and made a gesture that obviously meant *'wait'*. So they walked on in silence until they came back to the clearing where she and the Diakonos had had their conversation earlier in the evening. The one ringed by starlight trees.

Finn brought up short and stared, entranced.

"It's full of stars!" she exclaimed. The Diakonos, unobtrusive behind them, noted how immediate her instinct was to turn to the Doctor, to share the marvel with him. The latter grinned, and Finn realized why – she'd unconsciously quoted David Bowman's famous exclamation. She made a face at him. "Well, it is, isn't it?" she demanded, and gestured around the clearing.

He had to agree; it *was* full of stars. Or, at any rate, myriads of points of what looked like light, scattered over all the trees. It was like standing in the middle of a galaxy, surrounded by thousands of constellations.

"What are they?" Finn asked the Diakonos. "They're *beautiful!*"

He smiled at her astonishment, and her pleasure.

"It's the petals of the flowers," he explained. "In purely scientific terms, they contain a chemical that reacts to moonlight. Specifically, the light of the larger moon, Leoht – a particular wavelength in its spectrum interacts with the chemical and the flowers become luminous."

Finn shook her head in wonder, and looked around her at the network of white sparks enclosing the clearing. A breeze was beginning to rise, and they were beginning to move in response to it as the twigs and branches began to dance to its uneven rhythm.

Then the breeze suddenly gusted through the Garden of Starlights with a burst of extra strength, enough to loosen many of the gleaming petals, which flew through the air. They swirled everywhere, circling around them like a luminescent blizzard.

"Look, Doctor!" Finn exclaimed, smiling at him, spreading her arms wide as if to collect the falling flakes of white. "Snow! Sort of."

"Yeah," he said. "Sort of." He had to smile back; she never, never forgot that he loved snow.

Silent and unremarked by both of them, the Diakonos watched their shared delight.

And he also smiled, quietly and unseen, to himself. After all, how could one see two people looking at each other as they were doing, and not take pleasure in the sight?

## Chapter 14

### *Elianya*

There was little in the way of smiles the next morning, as the flyer carrying Kedron's team, the Diakonos, Esker, Riada, the Doctor and Finn lifted into the clear blue sky and headed for the quarry at Elianya.

The Doctor had looked unusually serious when they embarked, and even now, an hour into the flight, Finn could see he still wasn't looking happy. She wasn't sitting with him – she was further toward the back of the passenger area – but whenever he turned his head and she caught a glimpse of his profile, he was wearing a frown, every time. She wondered if that was because of the problem in hand, or because of whatever it was that was troubling him generally...

She sighed, and looked around at the other passengers. It was not until then that she realized there was an absentee from Kedron's team.

"No Shealla?" she asked of Ledramai, who was sitting next to her.

"Oh, she wanted to come," Ledramai assured her, with a grin. "But Kedron told her in no uncertain terms she was taking a leave of absence, because she ought to be with Selara. After all, she and her husband are going to adopt her as their own."

"Selara – that's the baby?"

"Yes. They're keeping the name her parents gave her. They looked the family up in the Central Archive, and that's what she was called. Shealla said it was such a pretty name, she didn't want to change it. But, in any case, she didn't want to take away about the only thing Selara has left from her birth parents."

Finn nodded her endorsement of the gesture. It was entirely in keeping with her experience of the Eutyrians generally. So many times, his memories told her, the Doctor had encountered a worm in the apple of what at first appeared to be utopian societies. But, this time – given that there was no such thing as real ‘perfection’ in the Universe – these people really did appear to be genuinely good and kind and caring and – well, that particular list of adjectives could just go on and on...

She looked at the Diakonos, sitting a few seats in front of her alongside the Doctor and Esker, who were deep in animated conversation, and wondered how much of that was due to his influence. Which brought another question to mind.

“How long has the Diakonos been – I suppose ‘in charge’ is the right phrase, is it? – how long has he been in charge of Eutyria?” she asked. The framing of the question had been unexpectedly difficult; he didn’t seem to ‘rule’, or ‘govern’, or ‘reign’, exactly – not in any of the ways she was familiar with back on Earth – and ‘control’ was definitely the wrong description of his approach to the administration of the planet. ‘Politely suggest’ was more his style...

Ledramai blinked, and considered her answer.

“I don’t know,” she said, thoughtfully, at last. “I’ve never heard of a time when he wasn’t.”

“So, the whole of your lifetime, then?” Finn persisted.

“Anybody’s lifetime,” Ledramai said with a shrug, as if surprised Finn didn’t know that already.

Finn frowned. “You mean –?”

“I mean, there’s never been a time in our history when there hasn’t been the Diakonos.”

“So there’s always been someone who fulfils the role of Diakonos?” Finn suggested.

Ledramai shook her head. “No. I mean *this* Diakonos. There’s only ever been the one. And he’s always been ‘in charge’, as you put it.” She smiled slightly as she repeated the phrase, as if she’d appreciated Finn’s difficulty in describing his role.

Finn was silent for a moment, trying to absorb the implications of Ledramai’s response. Then she asked, trying to sound casual, “And how far back does your recorded history go?”

“I don’t know. About seven thousand years, I think, but I’d have to look it up to give you an exact answer,” Ledramai said, with a shrug.

Finn stared at her. *Seven thousand years?* And yet Ledramai was calmly stating that the Diakonos – *this* Diakonos – had always been present on Eutyria? All that time? And yet obviously regarding this as a fact of life so obvious and normal that it hardly needed mentioning? Although, sometimes, if something had always been a particular way, people never felt the need to question it. For Ledramai, this was evidently one of those things. But to Finn, it seemed a fantastical statement. She looked at the Diakonos again, incredulous.

She found him looking back at her, as if he knew what she was thinking, even though he couldn’t possibly have overheard their conversation from where he was. Yet he was nodding at her, with a reassuring smile, as if he was telling her, *Yes, it’s true.*

And because he was who he was – though she didn’t know what that was, but she did know it was good, as she’d told him herself, only yesterday – she had to believe it. However incredible it was.

And yet, was it? The Doctor was hundreds of years old, after all, and that didn’t seem particularly strange to her. Because she knew he wasn’t human. That made it easier to accept. And the Diakonos had confirmed that he wasn’t human, either. So it was only the comparison with the relatively short lifespan she herself could expect that made the concept in any way difficult to accept. *So – adjust, and accept, Finn!*

She wondered what the Doctor would make of it, when she told him what Ledramai had said. When she got the chance, that was.

Which might not be soon. The flyer was beginning to lose height, so they were evidently approaching Elianya. Finn looked down at the landscape below.

Elianya seemed to be not a single large quarry but a series of small ones, cut into a huge promontory of rock bulging out from a long line of hills that extended far off into the distance, beyond her range of vision. One of the excavations was larger than the others, a big central bowl-shaped depression with a number of short trenches,

like roofless passageways, in the rock, radiating out like so many arms. Some came to dead ends, others vanished into openings into the rockface.

“What are the passageways that aren’t tunnels for?” Finn asked.

Ledramai glanced down.

“Don’t know,” she admitted. “Esker” – she raised her voice, and the scientist broke off her conversation with the Doctor to look back – “Finn’s wondering about the dead ends.”

Before replying Esker, too, looked out of the window briefly.

“False starts,” she explained. “From before the time we could tell where the best rock was to be found. This place has been quarried for centuries. Sometimes quite a lot of digging took place before someone realized they should be tunnelling in a different direction. So they just got abandoned. Our technology’s got better since then – we try not to be so unnecessarily destructive now.”

The Doctor was staring down at something else. On the flattish platform of a small cliff on one side of the bowl, overlooking it, was a single-storey building, evidently the working headquarters of the quarry personnel. A stone stairway had been excavated into the cliff face near to it, with metal hand rails enclosing it on both sides. At the foot of the same cliff a number of truck-like vehicles were parked, some wholly or partially filled with quarried stone, and dotted about in the bowl were a number of mobile crane-like structures that were evidently used to load the stone into them. They all seemed to emanate a sense of abandonment.

“There’s nobody down there?” he queried Kedron, who shook his head.

“We signalled the staff last night to leave. They’re safely away by now,” he confirmed.

The Doctor nodded, but continued to stare out of the window with a slight frown as the flyer continued to descend, landing – at his insistence – on the grass plain some way from the quarry itself. A safe distance, he hoped – but from what?

Nothing untoward had been visible from the air, and yet – in his bones – he knew something was coming this way. Was, maybe, already here. Something that had already killed hundreds of people. And they needed to find out what it was. Before more people died.

Everyone disembarked except for the pilot, whom Kedron instructed to stand by, in case they needed to leave in a hurry, and began to head toward the nearest edge of the bowl, obeying some sort of collective instinct to go and look over the rim. But as they spread out in a line, urgently scanning everything they could see, nothing was moving in the quarry below.

Standing together at the left-hand end of the line, the Doctor and Finn studied the bowl with equal care. Then the Doctor dug in his pocket and brought out the sonic. Starting to his left, he began to scan with it – and almost instantly stiffened.

“What?” Finn demanded.

“Traces of that field,” he said tersely. “This way.”

He started off, with her on his heels, trying to keep pace with his long strides.

But they only got a few yards, before, suddenly, the ground gave way under the weight of the Doctor’s foot. The soil and rock beneath the sole of his foot vanished into what was at first only a tiny hole. But with astounding rapidity a crack began to open up, topsoil tumbling into it at increasing speed.

The Doctor instantly turned to run back to safety, but the crack widened and spread too fast. The ground vanished from beneath him, a rush of dirt and dust billowing up into the air, and he started to slide helplessly into what was rapidly becoming a chasm.

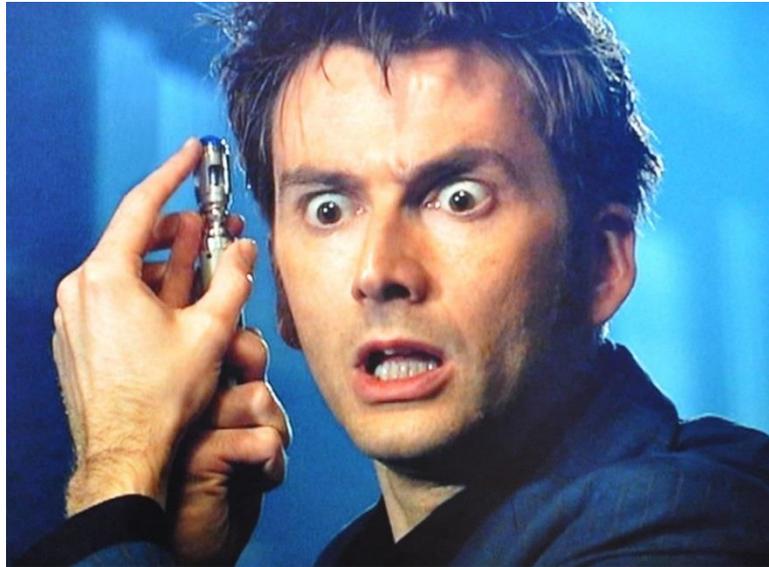
Finn didn’t even stop to think what she was doing. Instinctively she threw herself forward, flat to the ground, and reached out toward him. One of his hands reached up to her, and she seized his bony wrist in a convulsive grip, her other hand instantly coming forward to reinforce her grasp on him.

Where she was, the rock seemed still to be fairly solid, but his efforts to escape only succeeded in crumbling it further, and – horrifyingly – he was sinking down, not climbing out.

Disturbing images from one of her episodes in the Mind Machine were filling her mind – images of him dangling over an abyss. Her trying to pull him to safety, only for his hand to slip out of hers, because she didn't have the strength to hold him. The sight of him falling into bottomless darkness...

Well, not this time. She wasn't going to let go this time. Not this time. Whatever it took. Whatever it cost her.

She gritted her teeth, and held on...



## Chapter 15

### *“I’ve Been in a Fair Few Quarries in My Time...”*

And then others were there with her. Kedron lying alongside her on one side, Voros on the other, reaching to help.

“Stay back!” Kedron was shouting hoarsely at the remainder of the party. “Stay back!”

She hardly heard him, concentrating on hanging onto that wrist with all her strength.

The Doctor's other hand appeared, flailing in the air, seeking something solid to grip. Kedron reached out and grabbed it, and, him on that hand, Voros and Finn on the other, they started to pull the Doctor up and out of the hole. It wasn't easy, because of the way the edge kept crumbling under his weight, but at last he was there, out, safe, and, like them, lying full length on the ground, gasping like a fish.

The Doctor and Finn met each other's eyes; for a moment they still couldn't say a word, their lungs labouring for oxygen. But at last, trembling with relief, Finn managed to speak.

“Woh! For someone who's never going to have a flourishing career as a windbreak, you're bloomin' heavy!” she panted, trying for a smile that felt more like a grimace.

“Oi! You sound like Donna,” the Doctor accused her.

“Good,” Finn gasped emphatically, still breathless.

“Good?” The Doctor screwed up his face in puzzlement. “Why's that good?”

“Well, Donna was your best mate, wasn't she? So, if I sound like her – good!” she wheezed, happily.

Kedron was looking at them both quizzically as he sat up.

“I hate to interrupt this fascinating bout of nostalgia,” he said dryly, “but are you all right, both of you?”

They nodded, wordlessly.

“Then I think we should get further away from this hole,” he stated firmly.

“Oh, yes,” agreed the Doctor fervently, and carefully edged back toward where the rest of the group were waiting anxiously, first on his hands and knees, then getting to his feet. Finn followed his example; Kedron slapped Voros on the shoulder as they brought up the rear.

“Sorry about that, everyone,” apologized the Doctor, still puffing a little. “My fault!” He had his sonic out again and was scanning the site of the disaster with it. “Should’ve realized. The rock’s been – what d’you think’s the best word, Esker? – attenuated? Yes, attenuated. I *like* that word, don’t you? *Attenuated*,” he repeated with relish. “Which is why it gave way under my weight.” He caught one or two nervous glances at the ground underfoot, and added hastily, “Don’t worry – we’re all right here.”

“Attenuated by what, Doctor?” Esker asked grimly.

“By whatever it is we’re looking for. It’s obviously already here,” answered the Doctor in like manner. “Somewhere. So now we need to find it. See what it looks like. Find out what it is.”

“Can’t you detect it with that device?” Tengan asked.

“Only when it’s active,” the Doctor explained. “It seems to alternate between ‘passive’ and ‘active’. Once it goes to ‘passive’ mode, the signal fades.”

“So it’s got to be ‘active’ again – whatever that means – move before we can detect it?” said Ledramai. The Doctor nodded in confirmation.

Kedron looked at him consideringly, then straightened himself with a gesture that got everyone’s attention.

“Okay, everyone, listen carefully,” he said briskly, raising his voice slightly to make sure they could all hear him. “We don’t know what we’re looking for, but we know it’s either already here, or is at least in the vicinity. So be careful! If you see anything – anything! – even slightly out of the ordinary, you report it. All my team, keep your communicators on and ready to use – general broadcast setting, so everyone can hear everyone else. We’ll split into groups of three. Doctor, Esker – with me. Riada, Finn – you go with Ledramai. Diakonos, with Voros and Tengan, please.”

“Hold on,” said the Doctor. He waved the sonic screwdriver at Kedron. “We need to know where it’s safe to go, and where it isn’t. Finn’s got one of these, too, so both of us can scan for the energy field. The Diakonos’s group won’t have any way of detecting it – or where it’s been. You’ve just seen how dangerous that could be.”

Kedron nodded.

“Two groups, then – one down into the bowl, and the other around the rim?” he suggested. When the Doctor nodded, he began to amend his instructions.

“In that case... Ledramai, your group take the bowl. Voros, you’re with them. Diakonos, would you please stay here with Tengan, and keep watch from above? You’ll have a field of view that they won’t. Warn them if you see anything they can’t see from down there. But don’t move from here unless you have to, and if you do have to, head for the flyer – we know the ground between here and there is safe.” The Diakonos nodded.

Kedron turned to the Doctor and Esker. “We’ll investigate in that direction. Starting with that – some of the monitoring equipment might’ve recorded data that’ll give us some clues.” He gestured to his left, in the direction of the quarry staff building, a couple of hundred yards or so away. “Doctor, Finn” – he looked at each of them, seriously – “we’re going to be depending on you to tell us where it’s safe to walk and where it isn’t. Members of their groups – stick close to them! I don’t want anyone else doing what the Doctor did.” His tone was severe, but his eyes briefly gleamed with dark humour.

Finn extracted her sonic screwdriver from her gilet and checked it was on the right setting, trying not to feel the weight of responsibility for other people’s lives that was now hers to carry. When she looked up, she caught the Doctor’s eye; he’d obviously deduced what she was feeling, and winked at her. For no very good reason that she could identify, she immediately felt better.

“So how do we get down there?” she asked, putting on a businesslike front. Kedron pointed toward the staff building.

“The stairway cut into the cliff – see the metal handrails, over there?”

“Thanks,” she said. “Well, we’d better go, then...”

As they began to move off, the Diakonos reached out a hand to stay her as she went past.

“Take care, Fionnula, won’t you?” he entreated.

Touched by his concern, Finn smiled at him.

“How could I refuse, when you ask me so nicely?” she teased gently. He inclined his head in acknowledgement, and let her pass on to join the others, who were all being very careful to follow the exact route the Doctor was taking as he led the way, scanning the ground ahead ceaselessly.

He stopped at the head of the stairway down into the bowl; here the cliff face was not sheer, but sloped at an angle that had allowed the stone staircase to be carved out of the living rock. The Doctor scanned with special care, and checked the readings.

“Okay,” he said briefly. “Safe to use. But be careful anyway. I’ve been in a fair few quarries in my time, so I know what I’m talking about!” He was addressing them all, but he was looking at Finn as he spoke. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. And don’t do quite a few things that I would, but I’d rather you didn’t!”

“Still doesn’t narrow the range that much, does it?” she mocked him fondly.

“Well – be careful, all the same,” he repeated.

“I will if you will,” she retorted. “Come on, everyone. Let’s do this.”

And she began to descend the steps, sonic out in front of her, Ledramai, Riada and Voros right behind her.

The Doctor stood watching them go for a few moments, his face expressionless. Then he abruptly turned toward the building.

“Right!” he declared, with energy. “Like she said – let’s do this!” And he strode off, Esker and Kedron following in his wake.

The staff building was evidently meant to be more functional than comfortable, but it housed kitchen and bathroom facilities as well as a room that was evidently meant for the workers to relax in when they wished. But more than half of it was given over to a long room that ran the whole length of the structure, with a window of equal length, from which anyone who was not working on any of the data terminals could survey the entire width of the bowl.

The Doctor made straight for the window, and looked down to his left to check on the progress of Finn’s party. They were nearly at the foot of the stairway, Finn in the lead, sweeping her sonic from side to side like a radar scanner. He watched until they had got to ground level, then abruptly turned his attention to the nearest data terminal, which, like its companions, had all been left on when the quarry had been abandoned.

Esker watched from over his shoulder.

“There are sensors in all the working shafts,” she said. “That system, there.” She pointed. “That might tell you something.”

The Doctor scanned the information –atmosphere analysis, humidity readings, motion detection, and the like – and suddenly pointed at the last.

“There! Movement in the rock – recorded about half an hour ago.” He looked at the location diagram on the screen, and then at Esker. “Right where that hole opened up.”

“Nothing more recent?” Kedron asked, from his station at the window.

“No –” the Doctor was beginning, but then he broke off. Esker’s finger shot past him, pointing at the screen.

“There! Something’s happening!” she gasped. “In the main shaft – more movement! And whatever it is, it’s coming this way! It’s coming out!”

Kedron’s head shot round in the direction of the black maw that was the entrance to the main shaft, his eyes running over it swiftly. Suddenly his communicator crackled into life. It was Tengan’s voice, and it was urgent as he barked a warning.

As he heard what Tengan was saying, the Doctor leapt to his feet – but it was already too late.

\*

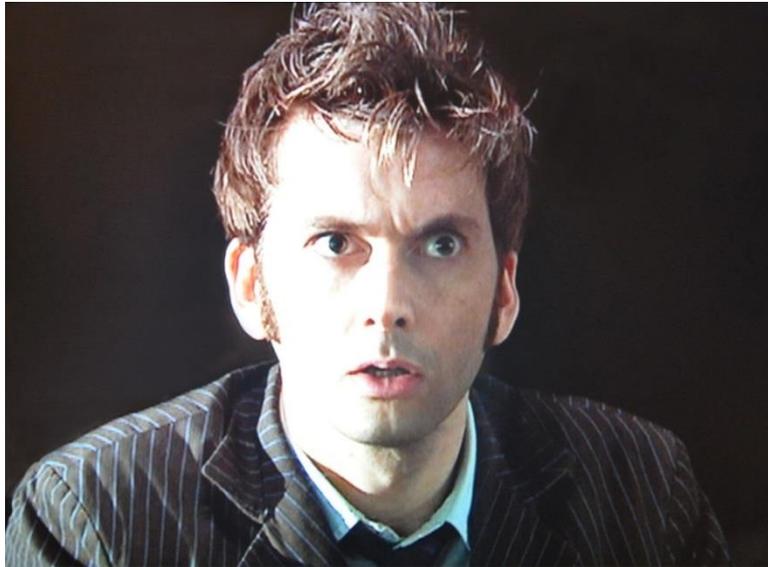
On the clifftop, Tengan was watching the progress of the little group in the quarry below, when the Diakonos suddenly reached out and grasped his arm.

“Tengan – in the tunnel mouth,” he said tensely. “Can you see anything?”

Tengan immediately switched his attention to the dark entrance, and saw what the Diakonos had seen. Immediately he activated his communicator.

“Ground party! Ground party! Ledramai! There’s something moving in the mine! Can’t see what it is – too dark – but I think it’s coming out! Get clear! Get out of there!”

Then they could do nothing, but watch helplessly as the thing that had been inside the mine began to emerge, heading inexorably toward the four tiny figures below.



## **Chapter 16**

### ***The Black Cloud***

Ledramai, Voros and Riada were loosely clustered around Finn as she proceeded across the floor of the quarry to the centre of the bowl. When she glanced up at the figures of the Diakonos and Tengan, some two hundred feet or more above them, they seemed very small and far away. So did the figure she could just about make out in the window of the building above and behind them – Kedron, probably. But even with such vigilant guardians monitoring the progress of her party, somehow she felt very exposed, out here on such open ground; it was an uncomfortable sensation.

She stopped, and swung the sonic round in a slow semi-circle that took in the mouths of the various dead-end rock trenches facing them. They were much bigger than she’d first thought, and the sides were heaped with broken rock where the ceilings of what had originally been tunnels had shattered and collapsed over time, but it looked as if there was a clear path – of sorts – into each one.

She continued to monitor the readings on the sonic; her sweep would soon reach the gaping mouth of the main shaft to the right. She didn’t like the look of that dark maw. Riada evidently felt the same.

“You’re not thinking of going in there, are you?” he asked, a touch nervously. Voros grinned.

“Not unless Kedron tells us to – and even then, he might get an argument,” he said cheerfully, glancing at Ledramai for her confirmation, and getting it.

“Let’s start on these, first,” she suggested, indicating the trenches. “When we’ve worked our way round to the entrance, then we’ll see what he says.”

Finn continued her slow sweep of the bowl, but the path of the sonic still hadn’t reached the mine entrance when Tengan’s voice erupted from both Ledramai’s and Voros’ communicators.

“Ground party! Ground party! Ledramai! There’s something moving in the mine! Can’t see what it is – too dark – but I think it’s coming out! Get clear! Get out of there!”

Everyone tensed and swung round to face the mine – and what was emerging from it.

At first glance it resembled an enormous cloud of smoke, except that no smoke could ever be so impenetrably black, so black it almost looked solid, despite its apparently gaseous composition and the way it seemed to bulge and billow as it moved forward. It flowed slowly out of the entrance, gradually revealing just how extensive it was – and it was heading straight for them. Just a cloud with a heart of darkness – but a darkness that instantly inspired terror. Just to look at it created an immediate, instinctive need to flee.

Finn found that she was quite unconsciously – or subconsciously, maybe? – pointing the sonic screwdriver at the oncoming mass. She glanced at the reading.

“That’s what’s been killing everyone!” she exclaimed. “It’s the same energy field! We’ve got to get out of here!”

Ledramai pointed toward the staircase by which they had descended. “That way!” she gasped, and began to run, the others in her wake, but it was as if the thing had heard her. Its path changed slightly, and it began to surge along the side of the bowl toward the staircase. They’d never get there before it did. Thwarted, they collectively came to a halt, and Ledramai twisted her head around from one side to the other, desperately searching for an alternative escape route.

“It’s going in that direction,” Riada said jerkily, pointing. “Let’s go the other way!” He turned on his heel and began to run for the largest of the trenches. Ledramai bit her lip in momentary indecision.

“Come on, Ledramai!” Voros exhorted. He grabbed Finn, who was also hesitating, by the shoulders and gave her a vehement shove to start her moving. “It’s all we can do!” He, too, began to run.

Ledramai glanced back at the inexorably advancing mass, still not sure if it was their best option; then, for want of a better alternative, started to follow. As she did so her foot caught on a loose piece of rock lying on the ground, sending her sprawling. The communicator she had still been holding flew out of her hand, skidding swiftly across the dusty surface and coming to rest some twenty feet away. Lying full length on the ground, she flung a desperate glance over her shoulder, and saw that the black cloud was beginning to spread toward her. She’d never reach the communicator in time. She scrambled to her feet and, with one agonized glance at the small device lying in the dirt, abandoned all idea of retrieving it and ran after the others. Voros had sent Riada and Finn on along the trench and was waiting for her, poised on the balls of his feet to run on.

“Come on!” he yelled at her savagely, and yanked at her shoulder as she sprinted past him, as if that would help. As they ran, Ledramai flung one glance back at the mouth of the trench. Only roiling blackness was visible, but whether it was coming toward them or continuing on its way, she couldn’t tell in that brief moment. Then the trench bore slightly to the left, and all sight of the black cloud was cut off.

It was difficult to run along the trench, with all the broken and piled rock that had slid down from the shattered piles heaped against the walls and now littered the floor. Ledramai gave the massed piles of stone no thought as she pounded along on the uneven surface. Not until she heard an unexpected sound behind her, and realized what it was, even as it abruptly grew in volume and intensity. She stopped and turned, but it was already too late.

Whether because of the vibrations of her feet as she ran – perhaps in combination with those of Finn and Riada before her – the rocks at the top of the slope of detritus she had just run past had lost whatever fragile stability they had had. They were sliding down, tumbling down with increasing speed, like a wave that has crested and crashes downwards with all its weight. And Voros was in the path of the wave. He had no time to escape. The rocks came sliding, tumbling inexorably downward, catching his lower legs and tipping him violently sideways. Then the rest of the slide came down and flowed over him, piling up, burying him beyond retrieval.

Ledramai let out a shriek of horrified denial and protest, and began to head back toward the heap of rocks, despite the fact that more were still coming down. Then she realized the futility of what she was doing, and came to a halt. Shoulders heaving, eyes blurred, she stood there for a few moments. Then, turning in her original direction with a violent wrench of her body, she ran on.

The trench came to an abrupt end some thirty yards or so further on, terminating in a flat, sheer rockface. Riada and Finn were there, wild-eyed and breathing in short, rapid gasps.

“What’s happened?” Riada demanded. “What was that noise? Where’s Voros?”

Ledramai shook her head, fighting back her tears.

“Rockslide,” she managed to say. “Buried him! There was nothing I could do...!”

There was a moment of shocked silence.

“And what about that thing? Is it still coming?” Riada asked urgently.

Ledramai shook her head, still trying to catch her breath. “Don’t know,” she panted.

Finn looked up. Over the rim of the trench wall on the left she could see the staff building. The Doctor was up there. He must be able to see them.

“Call the Doctor!” she exclaimed. “He’ll know!”

“I’ve lost my communicator,” Ledramai told her, desperately. “And Voros’s is buried with him. I can’t!”

“What are we going to do?” Riada quavered. Then his eyes widened in terror as he saw something behind Ledramai. Finn’s hands flew to her mouth as she stifled a horrified gasp. Ledramai pivoted round, her guts clenching inside her.

But there was no more time. Nowhere else to run.

It was there. It had come. Come for them.

\*

Above, in the staff building, Kedron was shouting into his communicator. His knuckles were white as he held it to his mouth. “Ledramai! Voros! *Ledramai...*!” Esker was staring in frozen horror. The Doctor wasn’t yelling. He said one word, just once, barely above a whisper.

“*Finn...*”

As if she could hear him.

But it was useless. They could only watch impotently as the black cloud inexorably engulfed the three tiny figures in the distance.

The Doctor stared wildly as the thing below flowed sinuously on, vanishing into and through the rockface at the end of the trench, but he didn’t wait to see it go. He headed for the door, coat-tails flying behind him, and hurtled along to the head of the stairway. Kedron and Esker were behind him, and the Diakonos and Tengan were approaching from the other direction, but he ignored them all, and hurled himself down the steps at near suicidal speed. Reaching the floor of the bowl, he pounded across it, long legs eating up the distance to the trench opening. The rest followed as quickly as they could, urgently negotiating the uneven surface until they came up to him.

He had come to a stop about fifteen feet from the end of the trench, and fallen to his knees beside what lay at the foot of the rockface. They came up behind him, and saw.

Esker and Tengan both wore the same expression, disbelief combined with the impulse to be sick. The grief of the Diakonos was almost tangible, but there was another expression in his eyes, too, as he looked down at the Doctor’s face as if he was assessing his reactions. Kedron’s mouth twisted briefly; then he, too, looked at the Doctor.

“How is that *possible*?” he demanded.

The Doctor didn’t reply, as he reached out a hand, slowly, toward what lay on the ground in front of him.

## **Chapter 17** ***Paying the Price***

In his laboratory at the H2 Propulsion centre, Arrem was intent on the analysis of a particularly intricate circuit with its designer, Forias. Their latest satellite was almost ready for launch; this circuit just needed a final check before it was installed. Then they’d be ready to move the latest Sky rider and its payload out onto the pad. Peering at the complex construction of the circuit, he was barely aware that anyone else was there until Forias

tapped him on the shoulder and nodded in the direction of the door. He looked up, and saw his assistant, Bekkah, hovering there.

"I'm sorry, Arrem, but the Diakonos would like to speak to you," she apologized.

"Me?" Arrem raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Did he say why?"

"It's a message about Riada. That's all he said." There was a degree of reserve in her tone, but Arrem didn't register it.

"What's that boy been up to now?" he wondered rhetorically, grinning at Forias. "He'll have me going grey before my time – and I've told him so! Oh, well... All right, Bekkah, put it through to here, will you?" He nodded casually in the direction of the communication screen nearby.

Bekkah hesitated.

"He said you'd probably want to take it in your office," she said diffidently.

Arrem raised his eyebrows again, but the Diakonos always had a good reason for everything he did. He put the circuit down on the bench.

"Won't be long," he said to Forias. Bekkah made way for him as he left the lab, but stayed where she was, watching him go. Forias regarded her with curiosity.

"Something wrong?" he enquired.

"I – don't know," she said slowly, her eyes still on Arrem's disappearing back. Then he turned out of sight, and she brought her eyes round to meet those of Forias. "But – I think – maybe there is..."

\*

The Diakonos emerged into the corridor outside the medical centre. Like all corridors in Vusunus, it was built of stone, with a flagstone floor. In this one, though, there were some wooden benches distributed at even distances along the inner wall. He turned to his right, and saw the disconsolate figure sitting alone there, staring at the floor with unseeing eyes; elbows resting heavily on knees, hands dangling slackly from bony wrists.

He went and sat down beside the Doctor.

"You're not to blame, Doctor," he said gently, though his eyes betrayed his own grief. "Your intention was to help. To find out more about what we were facing. You couldn't have known what would happen."

"Yes, I could," the Doctor contradicted in a low voice, without lifting his head. "Because it always does. It's what I do. Put other people into danger. They die. I don't. Even when it's my fault. They pay the price. I don't."

"That *you* pay no price is so clearly untrue I shan't waste my breath refuting it," the Diakonos told him with placid reproof.

"But I told her I'd look after her!" the Doctor argued. He straightened, turning to look at the Diakonos, and his eyes were huge and tragic. "I *promised* her! And then, when it came to it, I didn't! I let her walk right into it. I *sent* her right into it! How's that *looking after* her?" he demanded bitterly.

"Don't you think she'd understand?" the Diakonos said. "And forgive you? Would she have expected anything else of you? She, of all people, with your mind in hers?"

The Doctor's head snapped up with a look of angry misery in his eyes. He couldn't argue, but it didn't abate his wretchedness. Not one iota.

\*

Kedron met Arrem at the main gate. Conscious of his own pain, he felt it overwhelmed by the sheer raging fury of Arrem's, who met his attempts at condolence with a black glare.

"I want to see him," he said, through shut teeth.

Kedron opened his mouth to tell him that, no, he didn't. But he closed it again, and acquiesced. Arrem was in no mood to hear anything he might have said. Every stride, as Kedron escorted him through the castle, expressed boiling resentment as well as grief.

“The Diakonos said there was a survivor,” he ground out.

“One,” Kedron agreed quietly.

“Why wasn’t it *him*?” The demand was a furious protest at fate.

“We don’t know why there was even one,” said Kedron quietly.

“It should have been him,” Arrem muttered. “It should have been *him*.”

Kedron didn’t reply.

\*

The Diakonos had put a hand on the Doctor’s shoulder, and was about to speak again, when the door to the medical centre opened. Esker stood there, her red-rimmed eyes eloquent. Both men turned to look at her, registering the curious mixture of emotions she was displaying.

“Doctor...” That was the only word she spoke, but clearly the Doctor heard whatever it was that she hadn’t said. His face, his whole body language, changed instantly, and he shot bolt upright. Two long strides and he’d pushed past her and through the door.

Esker looked at the Diakonos, who was going through a similar transformation. He merely looked his question, but she nodded.

“Yes,” she said. Her eyes were moist and overbright.

He released a long, sighing breath, and rose to follow the Doctor into the centre. The door led into another, shorter corridor; the medical research rooms were on the right hand side, the hospital cubicles on the left. He opened the first door on that side, quietly, so as not to disturb the occupants. He had a brief glimpse of the Doctor leaning over the bed, but before he could go in, Esker was behind him, tugging at his sleeve.

“Diakonos,” she breathed urgently. “Kedron’s on his way up. With Arrem. I think Kedron’s afraid there’s going to be trouble.”

The Diakonos sighed, and closed the door again, equally quietly. Even as he did so, the main door burst open, and Arrem stood there, breathing heavily, his head lowered like a bull about to charge. Behind him, Kedron was looking at the Diakonos. *Watch out*, his eyes were saying.

“Where is he?” Arrem shouted. “Where’s Riada? Where’s *my son*?”

\*

The Doctor leant over the bed, staring urgently at the girl lying on it, as she opened her eyes.

“Doctor...” she whispered.

“I’m sorry, Finn,” he muttered in a low voice. “I’m so sorry...”

Anyone else would have asked her how she was feeling at this point, but not him, of course. She wouldn’t have felt up to answering that one straight away in any case. But she did lever herself up into a sitting position, and then swivelled herself around so that she was sitting on the edge of the bed, before analyzing her sensations. She felt a bit strange, but she didn’t know how to describe it, exactly. Then memories started to stir, and she looked at him with more attention. There was relief in his eyes, but grief, too. Alarmed, she looked round the room as if expecting to see someone else, but there was no-one. She shot to her feet, and reached out to seize the sleeves of his coat with a white-knuckled grip.

“Where’s Ledramai?” she asked, hoarsely. “And Riada?”

The Doctor said nothing, but the expression in his eyes was eloquent. Her face crumpled.

“*No-o-o-o...!*” It was a low and piteous wail of protest.

The Doctor gathered her into his arms. She clung to him, shaking, for a while. Then she relaxed her hold and took a step or two away from him, wiping the glistening trails of moisture from the corners of her eyes; she drew a deep breath, and squared her shoulders.

“Were they – like all the others?” she asked, striving to sound impassive.

The Doctor nodded.

“Then, why not me as well? Why them and not me?” The questions came out savagely.

“That’s what *I* want to know! Why *not* you? It *should’ve* been you!”

Finn took a couple of steps backwards in alarm as the door was thrown open and a middle-aged man she had never seen before charged into the room, shouting the accusation, glaring at her as if he hated her. The Doctor instinctively stepped in front of her, facing the man, one arm extended protectively across Finn’s body to bar his path to her.

“Arrem!” Kedron snapped, hot on the heels of the stranger. “Don’t touch her! It’s not *her* fault!”

“But she’s alive, and he’s not! *Why?*” the man demanded savagely.

“Arrem – please calm yourself...” The Diakonos was now in the room with them; Esker hovered in the doorway behind him.

“*Calm* myself? My son is *dead* – dead like *that* – and you want me to *calm* myself?” Arrem shouted. Finn flinched; the Doctor looked grim. The man’s anger, his resentment toward Finn, was now explained.

“Who is this girl? And what’s so special about her that she can be touched by that – that *thing* – and not die like everyone else?”

“This is Fionnula,” said the Diakonos calmly, “and that is the Doctor. And they’re going to help us to locate and identify this threat. That’s what they were doing when this terrible tragedy took place. And now they will be more motivated than ever to do so.”

“Too late for Riada!” Arrem snapped.

“Too late for many people,” the Diakonos reminded him gently. “But hopefully in time to save many more who face the same threat.”

Arrem stared at him furiously – but then it was as if something inside him snapped. His face suddenly contorted, and he covered it with his hands; his shoulders began to shake.

The Diakonos turned to Esker and sent a message with his eyes. She nodded and stepped forward, putting an arm around Arrem’s shoulders.

“Come with me, Arrem,” she said in a husky voice. “You need something to help calm you. I’ll see what I can find.”

Arrem lowered his hands and looked at her, realizing that this had been his son’s colleague, and that she had lost him, too. Tears streaming down his cheeks, he nodded slowly, and obeyed the mute pressure of her arm, urging him to go with her.

Kedron saw the expression on Finn’s face, and stepped forward quickly.

“Finn, it’s not your fault!” he said sharply. “Come on, Doctor, tell her!” But she was going to take some convincing, he could see. She’d survived a terrible death, only to face the full force of Arrem’s furious grief.

“But he’s right,” Finn quavered. “Why me? *Why* aren’t I dead, like the others?”

The Doctor shoved his hands into his pockets and shrugged, as if it didn’t matter.

“Don’t know,” he said. His very offhandedness was the clue that, in his own way, he was as affected by Finn’s distress as she was, but she was in no state to appreciate that. Sudden anger flared on her face.

“You’re *supposed* to know!” she accused him. “Work it out! You’re the genius in the room, aren’t you? So *be* one! Tell me why I’m still here, and they’re not!”

His face contorted into a frown.

“Look, it’s just survivor guilt! Let go of it!” he snapped. Kedron couldn’t believe his ears; didn’t the Doctor know how upset Finn was? She needed comfort, not this peremptory issuing of an order!

And Finn, it seemed, couldn’t believe her ears, either. She rounded on the Doctor with an incredulous, accusatory stare.

“Oh, that’s rich, coming from *you!*” she retorted.

The Doctor jerked back, as if she’d slapped him.

“*Let go of it?*” she parodied, scornfully. “What is this? ‘*Do as I say, don’t do as I do?*’”

He'd seen her angry before, but not with him. Not like this. And because there was so much truth in her accusation, and he couldn't refute it, he'd never felt so angry with *her*.

"Yes!" he agreed, hotly. "Yes, that's exactly it! Do as I say, don't do as I do! That's *exactly* it!"

"I've been living with survivor guilt since I was eighteen years old," Finn said through clenched teeth. "This is just another one to add to the pile. But of course you know much more about it than I do, don't you? Because *you've* been doing survivor guilt so much longer than I have. And *you* haven't managed to let go of it!" She double-tapped at her forehead savagely, reminding him how she knew what she knew. "So what gives you the right to tell me to do something you can't do – or *won't* do – yourself?"

"Because I *have* been doing it longer than you have!" the Doctor shouted. He'd been trying to make allowances because he knew how upset she was, and therefore was saying things that he knew full well she'd never normally say, but that accusation of '*won't*' had really stung him. This was the downside of Finn having his mind in hers – because sometimes she knew truths about him that he himself tried to forget. "So long that I know just how damaging it is! *And I don't want that for you!*" He glared at her, frustration and rage boiling inside him; then he turned on his heel and stormed out.

In the momentary silence that ensued, Kedron watched Finn's face crumple, the tears begin to flow. Then she gasped, "Doctor...!" and ran out after him. But when Kedron made a move to follow her, he found the Diakonos's hand on his arm, holding him back. Surprised, Kedron tried to free himself, still bent on pursuit, but the Diakonos shook his head, sadly but firmly.

"Why not?" Kedron asked, reluctantly acquiescing.

"They need to resolve this themselves," the Diakonos said quietly. "And they will. But they need a little time. Let's give it to them, shall we?"

"But why wasn't he more gentle with her? Surely he could see the state she was in!" Kedron protested.

The Diakonos sighed.

"The Doctor carries more griefs than you can comprehend, Kedron. Such a burden will inevitably distort his responses sometimes, and he will not always express himself – " He broke off and sighed again. Then he went on, "Be patient with him. He is in more pain than you can ever know. Finn knows it. And at heart, she is a peacemaker. Don't worry. Their distress, intense as it feels to them now, will pass. And they will be united again. Never doubt it."

Kedron looked into the profound depths of wisdom held in the Diakonos's eyes, and nodded. The Diakonos would be right, after all. He always was. But that didn't mean Kedron had to remember the look on Finn's face and like it.

## Chapter 18

### *The Answer to Arrem's Question*

Finn knew from the start that she didn't have a hope of catching the Doctor. He could run so much faster than she could, always had. But she had to follow. In her own self-absorption, she had lashed out and wounded the one person in the universe she never wanted to hurt, and she hated herself for it. She had to make it right, as quickly as possible.

So she followed, doggedly, sometimes breaking stride to wipe each fresh flow of tears from her face. Followed him out of Vusunus, down into the wooded slopes, but not to the Garden of Starlights; instead he turned in the other direction, where a high shoulder of the mound on which Vusunus was built thrust outward from the huge walls before dropping steeply toward the town below. There were no trees on the crest of the rise; indeed, this whole area was less wooded than that they had come through.

The Doctor, ignoring her resolute pursuit, had reached the top of the rise and stopped there, his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets, forcing the skirts of his greatcoat wide around him. Finn, panting with the speed

she had had to make to stay within range, found herself at the foot of the slope that led up to where he was standing, and stopped, too, looking upwards.

The whole, enormous sky glowed orange in the rays of the sinking sun. Standing motionless at the crest of the rise, the Doctor showed as a sharp, black silhouette, like an outline cut from a piece of paper – not a man at all, but only a figure-shaped absence of light. The rigid, almost savage set of his shoulders spoke louder than any words could have.

“Doctor,” Finn said, at last, to his unyielding back. “Doctor, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Truly...”

She saw him nod, briefly. But he didn’t turn round.

She sighed, and stared up at him, troubled. Then she looked around; the dying light was still sufficient to show her a fallen tree not far away, its massive trunk flat to the ground and one of the broken-off branches protruding at just the right height and angle to provide a little sheltered space in which to sit comfortably.

She settled into place, and set herself to watch over the Doctor, prepared to wait for as long as it took for him to emerge from the mood he was in. Wondering if he knew how terrible and how guilty she felt – not about herself, but about what she’d done to him.

The next thing she knew, he was shaking her shoulder; his face was still set and expressionless, but his touch was gentle. She blinked, realizing that not only had she failed in her vigil by falling asleep, but that it was now early morning; the sky above the crest was now another colour, the lemon-washed pale blue of a new day, and the air was cool.

He stared at her unfathomably for a few moments; it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. Then he grinned briefly, and gave a jerk of his head to indicate she should follow him.

“Come on! Work to do!” he exhorted, as he strode off. And she knew that was the only recognition she was ever going to get of his acknowledgement of the validity of her feelings, his tacit admission that she’d had a point. And the only indication of his acceptance of her apology.

The twist of Finn’s mouth was wry, as if she’d bitten into something astringent. But she obediently got to her feet and, rather stiffly, followed his rapidly disappearing figure back toward Vusunus.

\*

Both the Diakonos and Kedron were waiting at the gate for their return. Finn could see Kedron’s intent look as they approached, and saw him relax, as if he could see the crisis had passed. She smiled at him, a smile touched with both gratitude and resignation, and then at the Diakonos, who returned her look with understanding.

“Morning, all,” said the Doctor brightly, as if nothing at all had happened. “No new developments overnight?”

Kedron’s face set slightly.

“Only a report of another death. A man from Edahvun, called Lathrin. He was travelling home to his wife and children. She reported him missing. They found” – he hesitated slightly, thinking about what they must have found – “that is – they found him out on the Edahvun Grasslands. Which means it happened before the creature got to the quarry at Elianya...”

Finn fought down her memories and her reactions to them and took a deep breath, aware she was about to broach a dangerous subject.

“So that still begs the question – why did I survive when no-one else has?”

“Ah – well – got an idea about that,” the Doctor admitted, with a hint of smugness that Kedron thought was distinctly misplaced in the circumstances.

“One you’d care to share with the rest of us?” the Diakonos prompted gently, as if even his patience was feeling a little tested.

“Care to?” Finn snorted. Inside, tensions still roiled, but she was determined not to let them show. “He’s positively *panting* to! Look at him!” She nodded at the Doctor, her face twisted with a travesty of a smile. “He’s just bursting to do his *I’m-the-genius-in-the-room* thing...”

The Doctor looked at her with a slightly hurt expression.

“Perhaps I could offer my chamber of office as the room in which he can do it?” the Diakonos suggested.

Which was why, shortly afterwards, everyone had foregathered there; the Doctor, Finn, the Diakonos, Kedron, Esker, and Arrem. Mahhrk had also been summoned, but he hadn’t come yet. Finn wondered briefly what could have kept him; it would have to be something important, in the circumstances.

“Right!” said the Doctor briskly. “So, first – ”

“First,” Finn interrupted, “I want the answer.”

“What answer?” Esker asked, sensing the tension that lay behind Finn’s insistence.

“The answer to Arrem’s question,” she said flatly, careful not to look at Arrem himself. She and he wore similar expressions, Kedron thought, studying them both; their faces were pale, set and strained, their eyes red-rimmed. But he saw how Arrem looked at her, saw the realization of her own feelings about her survival, to which he had given no consideration, spread across his face and tinge his grief and rage with something close to shame.

“So what is it, then?” Finn persisted grimly. “What is so special about me? Why are they dead, and I’m not?” She was striving for a normal tone of voice, but it was a perilously fragile attempt.

The Doctor scratched the back of his head reflectively.

“First I thought it might be because you’re not from this planet, and they were,” he began. “Some sort of physiological difference. But it’s not that. Though – suppose I’d better check...” He whipped out the sonic screwdriver and scanned Kedron, then Finn, then looked pleased as he compared the readings. “No, that’s definitely not it. I was right. You’re just the same. So that is what it is! That’s the only way you’re different!”

“*What* is?” Finn demanded, almost angrily.

“Artron energy!” the Doctor announced triumphantly.

She stared at him as his mind in hers provided the background explanation to his words. The Diakonos nodded; he, too, understood. But the other four looked from the Doctor to Finn and back again, seeking comprehension.

“Artron energy?” Arrem prompted.

“A form of energy the TARDIS uses.”

“TARDIS?” said Arrem blankly.

“The Doctor’s craft,” said Kedron. “The blue box we passed in the courtyard.”

“Bit more than a box, Kedron,” said the Doctor somewhat indignantly. Then he caught Finn’s eye, plainly urging him to stick to the point. “Well, anyway... When you travel in her, you absorb artron energy as a kind of background radiation,” he went on quickly, skipping the bit about it being temporal energy; Arrem had enough to take in, without complicating matters. “That’s what Finn had, and Ledramai and Riada didn’t. Which means” – he looked again at Finn, his excitement at the implications visibly growing – “which means that that thing doesn’t like artron energy. Tried to eat you, and couldn’t stomach you, so it spat you out!”

Finn looked pained.

“Thanks for that imagery,” she said, sounding much more her normal self now.

“Are we any closer to knowing what the creature is?” the Diakonos asked. The Doctor shook his head.

“Not something I’ve come across before,” he said.

“Well, if we’re going to hunt it, we need to call it something,” said Kedron pragmatically. “We can’t just keep calling it ‘that thing’.”

The Doctor frowned at his use of the word ‘hunt’, and was about to challenge him on it, but Finn cut across him.

“Call it the Brollachan,” she said. The Doctor glanced at her, considered the suggestion, then bobbed his head in agreement.

“The Brollachan? What’s that?” Kedron demanded. He’d never heard the word before.

“A story. A myth,” said Finn bleakly. “From Earth.” She looked across at him. “Not one of our nicer stories.”

Kedron turned back to the Doctor. “So – what is the Brollachan?”

“A creature that doesn’t have a body of its own,” the Doctor said. “A shapeless, malevolent supernatural being that in its own form has only eyes and a mouth, but it can take the shape of other creatures when it wants to. A creature that can sometimes be captured, but never confined. One story says that a hunter thought he’d captured one, but when his friends came to inspect his catch, there was just a smear of jelly. The monster had dissolved...” His voice trailed off as he caught Finn’s expression of outraged disbelief and her glance at Arrem.

“Nice one, Doctor,” she muttered, her voice loaded with sarcasm. The Doctor registered the look on Arrem’s face and opened his mouth, then quickly decided to shut it again.

“Since Kedron is right, and we need a name for the creature ,” the Diakonos observed calmly into the awkward silence that followed the Doctor’s *faux pas*, “let’s use the one Finn has suggested. The Brollachan. Very well – what do we do next?”

“Build a Brollachan trap,” said the Doctor, as if it was obvious.

“But you just said it couldn’t be confined,” Kedron objected.

“No,” the Doctor contradicted him. “I said the creature in the *myths* couldn’t be confined. This isn’t a myth, Kedron! Keep up!”

And with that he spun on his heel and ran out of the room.

For a moment they were all so taken by surprise that nobody even moved, let alone spoke. Then Finn sighed.

“The instruction to ‘keep up’ can sometimes be literal as well as metaphorical,” she observed to the room at large. Her tone was so dry that, in spite of themselves, no-one could help smiling; not even Arrem. Then they heard raised voices in the corridor, and the Doctor burst back in, with Mahhrk on his heels.

“Mahhrk! Where have you been? What’s happened?” the Diakonos asked quickly, as he caught sight of the younger man’s face.

“Perea!” Mahhrk gasped, breathless with the speed he had been making to bring his news. “They’ve found a survivor!”

“From Perea?” Kedron said quickly. “But that was the first place to be attacked! Where’ve this survivor been all this time? Who is it? How did he escape?”

“His name’s Veohrun,” said Mahhrk, answering the second question first. “A carpenter and woodworker. They don’t know how he escaped. They found him just wandering about. He hasn’t been able to tell them a very coherent story. Whatever happened, we do know he saw his family – ” He broke off and swallowed, then went on, “What he saw has – broken his mind. Made him mad. So he hasn’t been able to say much that’s” – he searched for the right word – “helpful... But he has told us something.” He glanced sideways at the Doctor, who nodded urgently at him to continue.

“What?” Kedron prompted impatiently.

“When he saw it – the creature – ”

“We’re calling it the Brollachan,” the Diakonos interjected. Anticipating Mahhrk’s next question, he added swiftly, “It was Finn’s idea. She’ll tell you why later.”

“Go on, Mahhrk,” said Esker. “What about it?”

“It was small. Smaller than it is now. He said it was the size of a house. A black cloud, the size of a house.”

“Smaller?” said the Doctor quickly. “Are they sure?”

“They checked. That’s what he said. He said it went through the village house by house. One at a time. That’s why he’s so sure. Because he saw it go through his own house, and– ”

“So it’s growing,” said the Doctor, cutting across him. “Every time it absorbs a source of calcium, it grows. You know what that means?” He looked round the group. “Unless we stop it, it’s not just going to be a threat to all life on Eutychia. When it runs out of people and animals and vegetation it’ll began to feed on the physical sources of the calcium within the structure of the planet. Getting bigger all the time. In the end the planet itself’ll break up. Eutychia will be completely destroyed.”

There was a shocked silence.

Then Finn spoke.

“Don’t worry,” she said brightly. “Not gonna happen.”

Esker looked at her quickly. “Why not?”

“Because the Doctor’s going to *stop* it happening. Aren’t you, Doctor?”

“Me? *Me?*” demanded the Doctor indignantly. “Save this planet? Everyone and everything on it? From *that* thing? Is that what you think I’m going to do?” Everyone stared at him, suddenly anxious at his tone. Everyone except the Diakonos, who merely smiled quietly to himself.

“Yup,” returned Finn with unwavering assurance.

The Doctor suddenly grinned widely.

“Well, as a matter of fact – yes, I am,” he agreed. The collective relief around him was almost palpable, but he ignored both it and the old-fashioned look Finn gave him, and fixed his eyes on Kedron.

“We need to know where it’s going next,” he declared. “Are you tracking it?”

“We’ve extrapolated the line of its progress so far and issued special alerts to the settlements on its projected line of travel,” Kedron stated, “but a warning has been broadcast to all settlements, everywhere, instructing them to evacuate instantly if required. I’ve also despatched some flyers to scour the area either side of its anticipated path. As soon as anyone spots it, we’ll know.”

“Right. Good. And assuming it’s a good little Brollachan and stays on course, where’s the next likely target site?”

“Iryahla,” Kedron replied promptly. “If it travels at the same rate, it’ll be there tomorrow afternoon.”

“No other targets likely to distract it on its way?”

Kedron shook his head. “No quarries within miles, and no other settlements. They’re few and far between out that way.”

“There’s a map on my desk,” said the Diakonos. The Doctor leaped over to it and scanned it eagerly. Mahhrk, who was the nearest, helpfully reached out his forefinger and touched first the location of Vusunus, then that of Iryahla. The Doctor studied the geography with a look of growing triumph on his face.

“Oh, that’s good,” he said approvingly. “That’s very good... Couldn’t be better!” He tapped a spot on the map with a long forefinger. “That’s where we’ll build our trap, then.” He looked around at all of them. “Now, I’m going to need some stuff, and some help...”

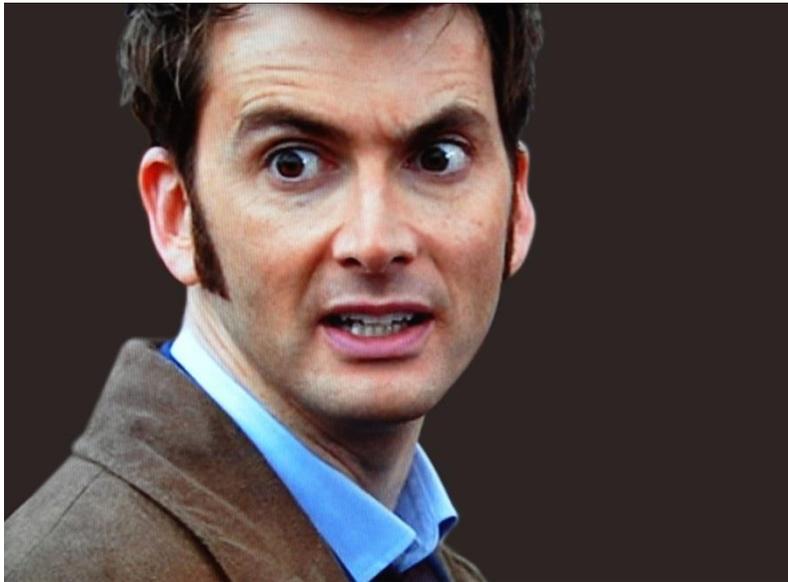
“I want to help,” said a low but determined voice. Whatever Arrem was still feeling was now covered with a veneer of forced calmness. “If you’re going to catch that thing, I want to help.”

“So do I,” said Esker, with emphasis.

“You can both help,” the Doctor assured them. “Arrem – your specialism is rocketry, yes?”

“Yes. Anything you need that I or my laboratory can supply – it’s yours,” Arrem said.

“Good man,” said the Doctor briskly, clapping him on the shoulder. “Right! This is what I’m going to need...”



## Chapter 19

### *The Brollachan Trap*

Kedron surveyed the scene below him. He was standing, with Tengan alongside him, on what would have been an unbroken, flat plateau of dark brown stone that rose some thirty feet or so from the surrounding grassed plain and stretched out several hundred yards in every direction from the point at which he stood. What kept 'unbroken' from being the appropriate adjective was a wide channel, close to one hundred feet across, that cut through the low plateau. Whether a primeval river or an ancient earthquake had created this canyon he neither knew nor cared. What did matter was that this was where the roadway to Iryahla ran. And that the Brollachan had been located and, by the most incredible stroke of fortune, its line of progress towards Iryahla, if it did not unexpectedly change direction, would bring it almost exactly to the mouth of the canyon. Flyers were monitoring it from safe distances, ready to report any deviation in its route.

Kedron looked down at the weapon in his hands. When he'd called it that, the Doctor had been quite angry with him.

"It's not a weapon, it's a tool!" he'd contradicted, severely. "A special tool for a special job!" And he'd frowned at Kedron for even suggesting the idea.

But to Kedron it was a weapon. "Just got to run up a few tools," the Doctor had said, and vanished into the TARDIS. Then the big blue box had made a noise such as Kedron had never heard, and – for a few incredible moments – vanished completely, before reappearing. And the Doctor, helped by Finn, had emerged with armfuls of the things he had made. How he could possibly have done that in such a short time? And in such a confined space? Had it not been for Finn's confirmation that that was what he had done, he'd have been more sceptical over such a fantastic claim. When they had the time, he intended to press for an explanation, but that hadn't been the moment. And they did need the Doctor's help – now.

What the Doctor had stepped out of the TARDIS with was a supply of slim, three-foot long tubes, each holding a charge of artron energy that could be released by the press of a button.

"It's more of a stockwhip than anything else," the Doctor had said.

"What's a stockwhip?" Esker had asked.

"A whip that a ringer uses," said Finn.

Esker looked blank. "What's a ringer?"

"A man who herds cattle in Australia – that's a continent on Earth. He uses a stockwhip to control the movements of the animals," Finn explained. She'd looked across at Mahhrk and added, "That one's a real story." They'd shared a brief smile.

“He doesn’t use it to hit the cattle,” the Doctor had said, with a pointed look at Kedron. “When he cracks the whip, it makes such a loud sound they shy away from it and move in the direction he wants them to go. No violence involved. That’s what these are for. We don’t want the Brollachan heading through the plateau where we can’t get to it. We need to herd it along the canyon to where we’ve set up the apparatus to catch it. Not kill it” – the Doctor directed another glance at Kedron – “just catch it and confine it. Those bursts of artron energy’ll be like the cracks of a stockwhip to the Brollachan. It’ll shy away from them, and head in the direction we need it to go. But make sure you don’t over-use them! The store of energy in each of those rods is finite. I don’t want any of you running out of it.” He hadn’t needed to explain why; the look on his face had been eloquent enough.

Kedron turned, looking out over the plain. Nothing to be seen there yet, other than his own people, spread out and all intently staring in the same direction he was. His eyes were drawn to follow the line of the road across the plain into the mouth of the canyon on his right and along between the walls of rock until it emerged again on the other side of the plateau, almost immediately to the left of where he stood. All along the lips of the canyon stood more men, all equipped with the Doctor’s artron ‘stockwhips’, ready to stop the trapped creature from taking refuge in the rock itself, forcing it to stay out in the centre of the roadway where it could be seen and herded to the end of the canyon.

There, on the roadway some thirty feet or so beyond the exit from the canyon, stood what the Doctor and Arrem and Esker had, between them, built. Tengan followed the direction of his gaze.

“Doesn’t look like much, does it?” he commented. And Kedron had to admit it didn’t. Just a series of metal poles arranged in a semi-circle, nets of wire stretching between each pair of poles. At the centre of the semi-circle, positioned well back within it, stood what appeared to be simply a metal table, with two boxes about five feet high, one either side of it. The silver surfaces of the boxes were dotted with dials and gauges and flashing lights, and from each protruded what looked like a funnel about nine inches in diameter, each aligned with the other across the table, a distance of no more than three feet between their two mouths. That rather flimsy-looking setup didn’t look to him capable of trapping anything, let alone something the size of the Brollachan.

“The Doctor says it’ll do the job,” he said, with more confidence than he felt. “And the Diakonos trusts him.”

“And we trust the Diakonos. So that’s that, eh?” Tengan finished the line of reasoning, and grinned at him. “Cheer up. The Diakonos is never wrong.”

“That’s what I’m banking on,” Kedron admitted.

“Where is he, by the way? I haven’t seen him since we got here.”

“He’s in the flyer. With Aihleah. When she heard Mahhrk was in on this thing, she insisted on coming. For all her quiet manner, she’s one determined lady when it comes to him. She wasn’t going to let her man go into danger without her! But I think Mahhrk had a word with the Diakonos on the quiet. If he keeps her with him in the flyer, they’re here with the rest of us, but hopefully well out of danger themselves.”

“Well, I hope the Doctor gets this thing,” said Tengan, suddenly grim. “For Voros’ sake. And Ledramai’s.”

“And Riada’s,” said Kedron, almost absently. “Or perhaps most of all for Arrem.” He was watching Arrem, who, with Esker, was busy adjusting the settings on the controls of the two boxes under the Doctor’s energetic direction. Then his eyes went to Finn, standing alongside Mahhrk, to one side of the apparatus. She was not watching the Doctor and his companions; instead, she was staring along the length of the canyon. The way by which the Brollachan would come. She looked both tense and forlorn at the same time. And, despite Mahhrk’s presence alongside her, somehow very alone.

Suddenly Kedron’s communicator came to life. He lifted it swiftly.

“Yes, what is it?” he barked.

“Sir, it’s coming! We can see it!” A somewhat nervous young voice was emitted from the speaker. “Sir, it’s – it’s *enormous!*”

Kedron and Tengan looked quickly toward the plain. Was that it, that distant smudge, looking like smoke? Those tiny dots in the sky above it must be the flyers.

“How far away?” Kedron snapped.

“The flyer pilots say about five miles, sir. But it’s moving quite fast...”

“You know what to do,” Kedron said firmly. “Keep well clear, but drive it this way. Make sure some of you get round behind it so it can’t retreat.” He changed the setting on the communicator. “Kedron to all units! It’s coming. Distance currently five miles. Be ready. And remember not to overuse the artron beams. I don’t want any of you unprotected, or giving it an escape route. We need to catch this thing, so it can’t harm anyone else ever again. So be careful!”

He lowered the communicator, and clapped Tengan on the shoulder.

“I’m going down there,” he said, with a brief thrust of his chin down at the group below. “Mahhrk’s a good man, but I don’t want to leave him as the only one down there with one of these.” He gestured with the tube.

“Pity he can’t see it off with his khitarah,” Tengan joked. “He’d be a safe pair of hands with that. A world-saver for sure!”

Kedron threw him a tight smile and turned away. He hurried down the rough path that took him down from the top of the plateau to where the Doctor had set up his trap.

“It’s coming!” he announced, as he ran across to the frail-looking setup of poles and wires.

“How near is it?” Esker asked. Her characteristic smile was nowhere in evidence; like Arrem beside her, she looked tense.

“Less than five miles, and closing.”

“Well, it can come when it likes,” the Doctor announced, rubbing his hands together. “We’re ready for it! Right, out of the trap, everyone. Once those cables are connected” – he pointed to two metal cables stretching out from the bottom of each box toward the outermost poles of the semi-circle, but not yet touching them – “keep clear, all of you. Got that?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, but ran across to the leftmost pole, followed by Kedron; Arrem and Esker likewise to the right, not far from Finn and Mahhrk. Checking that everyone else was clear, he and Arrem connected the cables to the poles. Instantly a network of silver lines of energy crackled into life all over the structure.

“Nobody touch that, whatever you do,” the Doctor reiterated sternly.

A taut silence fell as they strained their eyes along the length of the canyon; a silence that was broken by a brief chirrup from Kedron’s communicator.

“Perinn? What’s the situation?” he barked into it.

“It’s only just over a mile from the mouth of the canyon now, sir,” came Perinn’s voice; he sounded very nervous.

“Is it coming on the right line of approach?”

“Not quite...”

“Well, start using the artron tubes!” Kedron snapped. “We’ve got to make it travel along the canyon, not let it get into the rock where we can’t see what it’s doing! And make sure some of you circle round behind it so it can’t retreat!”

“Yes, sir...”

“And keep this communication open! I want you to tell me exactly what’s happening!”

“Yes, sir,” Perinn repeated. And he did a pretty good job of it, considering the nervousness he was patently suffering from.

“The tubes are working, sir. That thing doesn’t like the energy bolts at all. It’s almost as if it – *flinches* away from them...” Kedron glanced sideways and caught the Doctor’s smug expression.

“We’ve got it encircled now...” Perinn went on. “Yes... Yes... It’s about to head into the canyon mouth, sir! Can you see it?”

“Yes,” said Kedron grimly. “Yes, we can see it.”

It was as if the far end of the canyon was suddenly obscured by a dark mist.

“Ground crew, stay at the end of the canyon. Everyone on the cliffs – keep it headed this way! And remember what I said about not letting it into the rock!”

Everyone stared along the canyon at the oncoming dark blur. The men atop the lips of the canyon were doing a brilliant job of it; flashes of artron energy fired down the walls kept the Brollachan from changing course, others aimed just behind it kept it moving forwards. Finn's mouth was suddenly dry; it was getting nearer and nearer.

"Mahhrk – over there!" Kedron shouted, pointing to one side of the exit from the canyon. "Make sure it doesn't turn that way as soon as it comes out! I'll take the other side!" He left the Doctor's side to run over and take up his new position. Mahhrk threw Finn a quick smile, then moved to face Kedron, holding the slim white tube at the ready; his fingers, alternately clutching, relaxing, clutching again around the cylinder looked nervous, but the dark eyes that met Kedron's, the eyes that were usually so amiable and ready to smile, were uncharacteristically hard and determined. Kedron nodded his approval, and looked back into the canyon.

Then it was upon them.

The Brollachan began to flow out of the canyon mouth. Up on the tops of the cliffs the men who had been herding it along the roadway were arriving, having run alongside it, keeping pace with its progress, even when the energy in their tubes had become exhausted. There were only a few now who were still able to fire, but enough to prevent the Brollachan retreating. Kedron held his tube tightly, raised in the direction of the creature, ready to act should it turn in his direction.

For a moment, it seemed to pause, as if it sensed peril lay ahead.

"What's it doing?" Arrem yelled at the Doctor. "Why doesn't it come on?"

"Dunno," the Doctor called back. "But we need it to come forward a few metres! It still isn't in reach of the energy field! Kedron, Mahhrk – whatever you do, don't let it turn! It's got to come forward!"

As if it had heard him, the Brollachan began to move again. Turning. Away from the trap, and towards Mahhrk.

The fingers that could so expertly and inspirationally pluck beauty from the strings of a khitarah tightened almost convulsively around the tube as they aimed it just in front of the flowing substance of the creature and fired. The Brollachan recoiled from the discharge as if it had touched an electrified wire, but as soon as the energy stream ceased it tried to come on again. Mahhrk released another burst, but again it flinched and then persisted in its course toward him.

"Aim your fire over *there!*" Kedron was yelling at the men on the clifftop who still had energy charges left in their tubes. "Turn it *this* way!"

"Mahhrk!" Finn was yelling at the same time. "Don't let it get too close! Get further back!"

"I can't!" he returned, between gritted teeth. "I've got to stop it getting away!" He fired burst after burst of artron energy, but each time the Brollachan merely paused, then stubbornly kept creeping toward him.

"Doctor! What do we do?" Finn screamed.

"We've got to distract it! Get it headed back over here!"

"But *how?*"

"You've got to –"

But his reply was cut short, as Arrem and Esker took matters into their own hands. The Doctor and Finn both saw them glance at each other briefly and nod, as if they were reading each other's minds. Then, together, they ran forward – straight at the Brollachan.

## Chapter 20

### *Esker*

"Arrem! No! What are you *doing?*" the Doctor shouted.

"Distracting it!" Arrem returned, without looking round.

Finn stared in horror. They were making bait of themselves, trying to draw the creature away from Mahhrk and towards themselves – and the trap. And it was working. Whatever the Brollachan possessed in the way of

sensory perception had registered their presence. Together, they were a bigger food source than Mahhrk, and they had no artron energy with which to hurt it. The Brollachan began to turn away from Mahhrk, and toward them.

The Doctor was torn between fear for their safety and the knowledge that what they were doing was successfully drawing the Brollachan into the range of the energy field trap. Kedron, not far from him, was seething with indecision; should he abandon his position to reinforce Mahhrk, or stay where he was in case the creature turned in the other direction? Finn was standing with her hands cupped over the lower half of her face, taut with anxiety for both Mahhrk and the two scientists, not knowing what she could do that would be of the slightest use.

“Careful, Esker!” the Doctor warned. “You’re getting close to the field – don’t get caught in it!”

Esker nodded tightly, but didn’t look round. She and Arrem were backing toward the trap, and dared not take their eyes off it as it slowly followed them; it was only a few feet away from them.

Then disaster struck.

Arrem’s foot came down awkwardly on a fist-sized piece of rock lying on the ground, that he had not seen behind him, and he lost his balance. His ankle turned, and he went down heavily. He immediately tried to scramble back to his feet, but the damaged ankle wouldn’t support him, and with an exclamation of pain he went down again. Esker reached down and desperately tried to help him up, but his weight was too much for her.

Two minds with a single thought; without so much as a glance at each other, Finn and the Doctor did exactly the same thing. Ran to help. Mahhrk and Kedron started to do likewise, but they were both too far away. The Doctor got there first, of course, and got his shoulder under one of Arrem’s arms. Moments later, Finn had done likewise. But it had all taken time, and the Brollachan was bearing down on the desperate group.

Esker flung one glance at the black mass looming over them, and one at the Doctor, Arrem and Finn. There was no option about what had to be done. She almost hurled herself away from them, then stopped again to face their assailant.

The Brollachan extruded a black, writhing tentacle from itself toward the group of three in front of it. The Doctor and Finn could do nothing except turn themselves in on Arrem, protecting him with their own bodies. Only inches away, the tentacle suddenly stopped, sensing the artron energy in their cells, then withdrew.

But there was another target. It focused on Esker, and began to move toward her again.

“Esker! RUN!” Arrem almost choked over the cry he emitted.

“Too late, Arrem,” Esker said, clearly but calmly. “This has got to be done. I’m not going to let what happened to Riada and all the others happen to anyone else.” As she spoke, she continued to back away from the oncoming creature, now only inches away from her.

“Esker! No! NO!” The Doctor’s face was distorted with anguish as he realized her intention.

She ignored him. In her peripheral vision, she could see Kedron on her right, Mahhrk on her left, both trying to find a clear path between the Brollachan and her into which to aim their tubes, but she was too close to it. It was flowing around and away from the Doctor and Finn, and massing over her. Only another couple of steps, and she’d be in the energy field. If it followed her there, it would be caught in the trap.

Logically, it was the only thing to do. It was a pity, she thought, as she took those last few steps, that all the logic in the world didn’t prevent you being so terrified as you died.

She stepped into the energy field at the very moment that the Brollachan reached her. Its mass masked her from everyone’s view, but they all heard the crackle of energy. For a moment, everything seemed to fall still. Then something began to happen to the Brollachan. It was flowing forward, but not of its own volition. Its black, gaseous body was being drawn towards a single point – the point in mid-air precisely equidistant between the mouths of the funnels protruding from the two small boxes on the table. The trap had sprung.

Kedron watched with astonishment as the whole huge mass was sucked to that point, its blackness beginning to spin like a maelstrom, faster and faster, drawn inexorably into the trap. Flowing ever more rapidly, the essence of the Brollachan was being drained away in some way that he didn’t understand. Less and less of it remained, accelerating ever more urgently toward that point between the boxes – and then, with a last rush, it was gone.

In its place, mysteriously suspended above the table, was a round silver sphere about a foot in diameter, hovering in mid-air. And that was all.

Except for Esker's body, lying motionless on the ground.

Kedron began to move toward it, but the Doctor snapped, "Don't! The field's still on!" He shrugged out from under Arrem's arm and went to disconnect the nearest cable from the metal pole to which it was attached. The energy field that had been flickering over the wire nets of the trap died.

"All right," said the Doctor sadly. "It's safe now."

Kedron fell to his knees beside Esker.

"She hasn't been –" he began, then choked off.

"It wasn't the Brollachan that killed her," said the Doctor heavily. "It was the energy field. She sacrificed herself to make sure it got drawn into it."

Finn remained crouched down on the ground next to Arrem; like her, he was weeping silently. Someone came up to her, and put a hand on her shoulder; she didn't look, but she knew it was Mahhrk. Above them on the cliffs, Tengan and his colleagues stood silent.

A movement caught the Doctor's eye. It was Aihleah, running toward them, the Diakonos following in her wake. They must have seen the capture of the Brollachan, but they couldn't have known at what cost. Not until Aihleah, making for Mahhrk, saw the body on the ground. She stopped abruptly, horrified, and stared for a moment. Then she went straight to her husband and they clung together silently.

The Diakonos looked down at Esker, then at the Doctor.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

"She chose." It was Arrem who answered, not the Doctor. He levered himself awkwardly to his feet. Finn wiped away her tears and hurriedly lent him her support; his damaged ankle still wouldn't bear his weight.

"She chose," he said again. "To give her own life so that others could be saved. She knew it was the only way. She did it for Riada. For everyone. 'I'm not going to let what happened to Riada and all the others happen to anyone else', she said. She did it so we could trap that *thing*." His voice turned hard and bitter as he uttered the final noun.

"And you have," said the Diakonos, in that same gentle tone.

The Doctor turned and went to the table behind them. He came back carrying the silver sphere, and gestured with it.

"It's in here."

"What is that?" Kedron asked.

"Stasis sphere," said the Doctor. "It's frozen in there in a single instant of time."

"But – but it was so huge," Kedron objected. "How can it fit in something so small?"

"Time Lord technology," said the Doctor. "Bigger on the inside than the outside. We're good at that."

Kedron looked at him, clearly wondering what he meant, and what a Time Lord was. But one glance at the Doctor's face warned him this wasn't a good moment to pursue the matter.

"Well, we've got it now," said Arrem vindictively, his face and voice still hard. "And now we're going to *destroy* it."

The Doctor's head shot round at that, and he returned Arrem's gaze with equal implacability.

"Oh, no, we aren't," he contradicted flatly.

Arrem wasn't backing down.

"That thing killed my son," he said relentlessly. "And hundreds of others. It *deserves* to die!"

"It's not an intelligent creature," the Doctor returned swiftly. "It's not *malicious*. It's not *hostile*. It's acting on *instinct*, not aggression! It doesn't know what it's doing. That doesn't mean it deserves *destruction!*"

Arrem's face was stony.

"An insect that bites me is only acting on *instinct*, but I crush it just the same," he said flatly.

“Well, then, there’s the difference between you and me,” said the Doctor flatly. “Because I *don’t*. But what I can do – what I *am* going to do – is make sure that this particular creature can’t ‘bite’ anyone ever again. By keeping it in that stasis sphere, where it can’t do any more harm.”

“How can you be sure it can’t get out? How can you guarantee that it’ll *never* get out? How can you guarantee that sphere of yours won’t break down in some way, and it’ll be free to kill again?” Arrem challenged.

“Arrem, I give you my solemn word that when I leave, the Brollachan will never trouble Eutychia again,” said the Doctor, his eyes blazing.

There was a short silence, as Arrem and the Doctor continued to confront each other, and everyone else watched, transfixed by the conflict; the Diakonos with sadness in his eyes, Kedron alert and watchful, Mahhrk and Aihleah still in each other’s arms, but staring wide-eyed at the two protagonists. Then, at last, Arrem dropped his eyes. The Doctor instantly dipped his head once, emphatically, as if to accentuate the fact that he’d won the exchange. But Finn wasn’t so sure he had; Arrem was looking down at the ground, but because she was so close to him she could still see the look in his eyes, and it wasn’t the look of a man who’d conceded defeat.

\*

The return to Vusunus was a sombre one; the victory felt distinctly Pyrrhic. Finn, sitting beside the Doctor, looked round the population of the flyer. Aihleah was talking quietly to Mahhrk, trying to assuage his reaction to the danger he’d been in, the death he’d witnessed at first hand, while she herself was still coming down from the pitch of fear she’d felt for him. Their clasped hands were witness to the intensity of their feelings. Behind them, the Diakonos sat alongside Arrem. Finn wondered if the mere fact of his presence was doing Arrem any good, but she wasn’t hopeful; not a muscle of his face moved, and his eyes still held that stony determination that they had when he was arguing with the Doctor.

When she turned back again she saw Kedron, sitting facing them, had been making the same assessment as her. His eyes came back and met hers, and he regarded her without expression for a moment or two; assessing her, now, but keeping his conclusions private. Then he looked at the silver sphere resting in the Doctor’s lap; the Doctor was scanning it with the sonic screwdriver, checking the readings and nodding to himself as he did so.

“What are you doing?” Finn asked.

“Seeing what our little friend is composed of,” said the Doctor. “Want to try?”

Finn began to make a move toward the pocket of her gilet that held her own sonic, but then stopped, and shook her head.

“Not this time. What’s it made of?” she asked, but not as if she was very much interested.

“Ooh, lots of things,” said the Doctor, intent on his findings. “Very complicated little cocktail of gases and elements, this one...”

Kedron was still watching him.

“What will you do with that now?” he asked. “Arrem’s concerns are legitimate, you know.”

The Doctor nodded.

“I’ve got a place in the TARDIS where I keep things like this,” he said. “It’ll be safe there. I guarantee it.”

Kedron continued to regard him with that same lack of expression.

“That’s quite an undertaking to make,” he observed. “You’re not just guaranteeing Eutychia. You’re guaranteeing all planets, everywhere.”

The Doctor returned his look. “Yes, I am,” he agreed levelly. The sudden tension between the two made Finn shiver.

“The Diakonos says the universe is full of the unexpected and the unforeseen. How can you guarantee something like that?”

This time the Doctor made no reply, though his eyes continued to burn with determination.

And that was what it was, Finn realized. Determination. Because Kedron was right. The Doctor couldn’t possibly guarantee something like that. Not forever, not for all time. But he needed to say that he could. That

he *could* protect others. He *had* to think that – because of all the ones he hadn't been able to protect. Kedron couldn't understand that, but she could.

"If anyone can, he can," she interjected softly. "Please trust him, Kedron."

Kedron looked at her, and something he saw in her face made him think of what the Diakonos had said about the Doctor. "*Be patient with him. He is in more pain than you can ever know. Finn knows it...*" He turned his eyes back to the Doctor for a few seconds; then it was as if he had lowered his swordpoint. He let out a long breath, and turned to look ahead, over the pilot's shoulder.

The Doctor glanced at Finn, though he didn't say anything; but he was thinking about the way people always seemed to trust her. She had some quality that seemed to get them on her side, even when almost a total stranger. Robert Harkness, Jason Cunningham's chief of security, and Professor Laryan on Felindre had both reacted to her the same way as Kedron. She got them on her side – and she was on his side. Utterly and unequivocally. Always.

But Finn didn't notice the glance. She had looked away, further down the flyer, and found the Diakonos looking at her steadily, a slight upward curve at one corner of his mouth. And though all three of them had been keeping their voices low, somehow she was sure he had heard every word.

And he was smiling at her.

## Chapter 21

### *The Empty Room*

The stasis sphere rested on the Diakonos's desk, where the Doctor had somewhat unceremoniously – well, 'plonked it' was the description that came irresistibly into Finn's mind, and made her smile; only the Doctor could treat something so potentially devastating with such irreverence.

She was alone in the Diakonos's office. Aihleah and Mahhrk, both still quite shaken, had gone to walk in the Garden of Starlights; Kedron and Arrem to see to the arrangements for Esker's body. And the Diakonos had asked the Doctor to go with him to break the news of Esker's death to her staff. So now she was here, alone, with the stasis sphere and its contents. She looked at the featureless metallic surface, and thought about the creature trapped inside it. At least it was unaware of its fate; the very nature of a stasis ensured that. The Doctor couldn't let the Brollachan threaten any other planets or their populations, but neither could he ever kill an unintelligent creature simply because it was acting according to its nature. The stasis sphere was the only answer.

She looked up as the door opened and Arrem came in. His shoulders were sagging and he kept his eyes lowered as he came over and sat down opposite her. Finn looked at him, biting her lip as she tried to decide what she should say. He'd lost his son and his friend within hours of each other; no wonder he looked like that.

"I wish there was something I could say," she ventured hesitantly, still wondering if he secretly blamed her for being alive, even though he'd made no further reference to that.

"There isn't," said Arrem, still without looking at her. "But thank you for wanting to. I was too hard on you, I realize that. But I was" – he heaved his shoulders up, and let them drop again – "angry. So angry..."

"I'm sorry," Finn said helplessly.

"Now I've got to take – him – back with me. I want to put him beside his mother..."

Finn closed her eyes, overwhelmed with empathy. So he'd lost *everyone*. Just as she had.

"I – I don't know what to say," she stammered, a lump in her throat.

Arrem sighed.

"Don't try," he said heavily. There was a pause. Then he added, almost as if it was an afterthought, "I saw the Doctor. He said to tell you he wanted to talk to you about something."

"Oh. Right." Finn felt slightly thrown; somehow it didn't feel right to just abandon Arrem, even if the Doctor did want her. "I'd better go and find him, then. But – are you going to be all right?"

“Don’t worry about me,” Arrem told her, his eyes still lowered. He hadn’t looked at her once since he came in. “I’ve got work to do. Things I have to do. That’ll help.”

Finn got to her feet, but hesitated, still troubled. But there was nothing she could think of to say or do. Reluctantly, she went to the door and went out without looking back, not wanting to intrude on his grief any further.

Which was why she didn’t see the way his eyes followed her from under the lowered eyelids as she left, or the way they burned once she had gone and he was alone.

\*

Bekkah, sitting alone at her workstation in the laboratory at the H2 Propulsion centre, was suddenly aroused from the reverie into which she had drifted. Word had got round about what Arrem was doing, and she couldn’t concentrate for the tight feeling in the pit of her stomach. Then the communicator unit on her desk buzzed, making her jump. She reswallowed her heart and answered it.

“Bekkah, I’ve got something I need you to do...”

Her heart leaped again, but in a different way, and she cut across the words.

“Arrem! Are you all right? Did you – did you succeed...?”

“Yes. I’m all right, and we did succeed. I’ll tell you all about it later.” He sounded almost impatient with her, as if she shouldn’t be bothering him with such nugatory concerns. “I’m on my way to you now. Get Forias. Get the whole team. I’m bringing the test forward. I want everyone ready to go as soon as I get there.”

“But – but *why*?” she stuttered.

“I haven’t got time for explanations,” he snapped. “But it’s *absolutely vital* that that Skyrider is ready for launch as soon as possible. Just do it, Bekkah! You’ll understand why, soon enough.”

\*

Finn was getting frustrated. She couldn’t find the Doctor anywhere. She’d gone to Esker’s laboratory – which hadn’t been a comfortable experience, given the news that the staff there had just had communicated to them – but the Doctor and the Diakonos had left, and nobody seemed to know where they’d gone. She was reduced to traversing every corridor she came across, and asking everyone she met if they’d seen the Diakonos, but nobody had.

Then, as she approached the medical centre, she saw a familiar figure, just leaving.

“Kedron!” she called.

He turned.

“Is everything all right?” he asked quickly.

“Yes! Oh, yes,” Finn assured him. “It’s just that I’m looking for the Doctor, and I can’t find him anywhere. Have you seen him?”

Kedron shook his head.

“Where can he *be*?” Finn demanded, exasperated. “Arrem told me he wanted to see me! If it was as important as all that, why didn’t he say where he was going to be?”

“Arrem told you?” Kedron didn’t know why an alarm bell should start sounding in his head at that piece of information, but it had. “How long ago? Where was this?” He tried to keep his tone normal, but Finn looked at him oddly before she answered.

“In the Diakonos’s office. I don’t know how long ago... It feels like I’ve been running around these corridors for *ages*!”

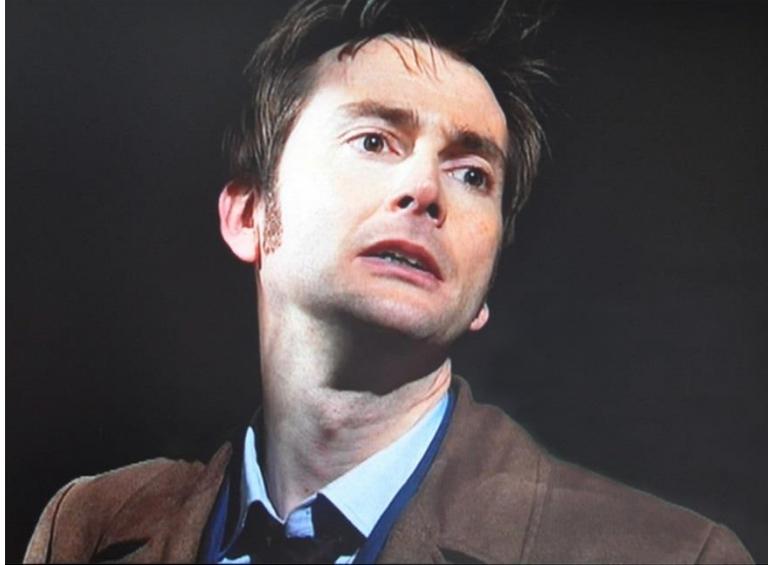
Kedron forced a smile.

“You could try the West Tower,” he said. “The Diakonos has a room there where he goes when he needs to do his really serious thinking. Perhaps he’s taken the Doctor there.”

Finn's face lit up hopefully. "Brilliant!" she said eagerly. "Thanks!"

"You're welcome," Kedron said lightly, and kept the smile stitched onto his face until she was out of sight. Then he strode swiftly away, heading for the Diakonos's office. He flung open the door, only to see an empty room. Much, much emptier than it should have been.

Because it wasn't only Arrem that was gone.



## Chapter 22

### *Mirror of the Soul*

Kedron had been right. The Diakonos was taking the Doctor to the West Tower. They were walking slowly along one of the many corridors in Vusunus, mostly in silence. Esker's team hadn't taken the news well. And it was the kind of news that the Doctor, although he'd had to give it in similar situations so many times throughout his long life, had never become accustomed to breaking.

"I have a question to put to you, Doctor," said the Diakonos, breaking in on his thoughts.

"What's that, then?" the Doctor asked, almost abstractedly, with no suspicion of what was coming. The Diakonos halted and turned to face him. That was the warning that it wasn't going to be an ordinary question, but he still wasn't ready when it came.

"What will become of Fionnula, if something happens to you while she's with you?" the Diakonos asked.

The Doctor's face went very still for several seconds. Then he shrugged, as if it were of no importance, and looked away.

"She knows the score," he said levelly. "Better than anyone."

"You say that so – *easily*," mused the Diakonos. "One might be tempted to think you didn't really care about her."

The Doctor rounded on him like lightning, with an expression of pure rage.

"THAT IS *NOT* TRUE!" he shouted, his voice cracking with the sudden intensity of his fury.

"Of course it's not true," the Diakonos agreed with complete equanimity. "Yet the question remains. He *will* knock four times, Doctor. What happens to her then?"

The Doctor's expression changed. Now his anger had a different focus, mixed with desperation and resentment. He leaped forward and seized the smaller man by both shoulders.

"Who will? *Who's* going to knock four times?" he demanded.

The Diakonos raised one eyebrow at him, pointedly yet composedly, and did not answer.

The Doctor stared wildly into the calm, timeless eyes. Then his shoulders sagged.

"You can't tell me," he said dully. "Of course not. You can't tell me. You mustn't tell me."

“Just as, so often, you have known things you were unable to tell others,” agreed the Diakonos. “You, of all people, understand that necessity, Doctor.”

The Doctor released his grip, and stepped back.

“Yes,” he said, in the same dull voice. “I understand.”

“Yet understand this, too,” the Diakonos went on. “All need not be lost.”

The Doctor looked at him quickly, not understanding, but alerted by something in the gentle voice.

The Diakonos beckoned.

“Come with me, Doctor. I have something to show you.”

The Doctor followed him silently through the stone hallways until they stood outside a heavy wooden door.

The Diakonos pushed it open, and looked at the Doctor.

“Come,” he said.

The room they entered was circular, without windows in the sheer stone walls. It was completely empty, but for one thing.

A mirror.

Save that its dimensions were something over ten feet tall and six wide, it appeared to be a perfectly ordinary full-length dress mirror, in a beautiful and ornate gilt frame, but the Doctor’s eyes narrowed as he studied it. He had a strong feeling that of all the potential adjectives for this mirror, ‘ordinary’ was one of the least appropriate possible.

“What is that?” he asked.

“You might call it my ‘Mirror of the Soul’,” said the Diakonos, moving alongside him.

“Oh, very Chris de Burgh,” the Doctor commented, taking refuge in flippancy. “What does it do?”

“Like any mirror, it reflects,” said the Diakonos, moving forward to stroke one edge of the frame reverently.

“But not physical appearance alone. Nor simply the here and now. If it were to reflect you, Doctor, one of the things it would show you – perhaps I should say *remind* you – is how you have gained the respect, and the affection, and sometimes even the love of those who have been your companions over the centuries. But now your song is ending, and there is still a companion to consider. One who, in many ways, is the closest of them all, for reasons you well know. I ask again – what will become of her?”

The Doctor looked at him with eyes filled with anguish, and shook his head, unable to speak.

The Diakonos laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t despair, Doctor,” he said. “There is something that can be done for her.”

The Doctor’s head jerked, almost as if someone had flicked him across the face, and his eyes fastened on the Diakonos, demanding, hoping.

“The Mirror reflects many things, and shows many things,” explained the Diakonos gently. “It retains many things. And, sometimes, it even causes them to be.”

The Doctor stared at him, beginning to comprehend. There was a silence, while the Diakonos waited for him to work through the implications.

“I think I understand what you’re planning to do,” the Doctor said slowly, at last. He looked into the timeless eyes for several seconds before he spoke again. “I’ve got no reason for saying this – which makes me *very* uncomfortable” – and here his eyelids flickered briefly – “but – I believe you can do it.” Despite his evident reluctance to admit it, his tone nonetheless carried conviction.

“Do you *want* me to do it?” asked the Diakonos, gentle and grave.

The Doctor nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I do.”

“And *why* do you want me to do it?” the Diakonos probed gently.

The Doctor looked at him with dark eyes.

“You know why,” he said.

“For yourself?” the Diakonos persisted.

There was a pause. The Doctor's eyes unfocused into self-examination; he knew he had to give an honest answer, and it was hard – *so hard!* – not to want what the Diakonos was offering. So hard *not* to want it for himself, for what it would apparently mean for him. But at last he looked up, and his gaze was unwavering.

“No,” he said flatly.

The Diakonos returned his look, and nodded with an air of satisfaction.

“Is there anything you need from me, to make it happen?” the Doctor demanded abruptly.

“Look in the Mirror again, Doctor,” said the Diakonos; his tone of approval was subtle but clearly detectable. “Just stand in front of it, and look.”

The Doctor looked at him intently for a moment or two longer. Then he placed himself directly in front of the Mirror, feet spread, hands thrust into his trouser pockets, and stared at his reflection – a tall, slender man in a blue pinstripe suit, red daps and a brown trench coat, dark hair flying in all directions as if with an energy of its own, large dark eyes staring back at him. He felt a slight, momentary tug as if inside his chest somewhere, but the sensation was gone almost before he had registered it. As he gazed at the Mirror, he had a vague impression of dancing gold motes between himself and its surface for a second or two – but then they were gone. He looked round at the Diakonos questioningly, as if to say, *Is that it?*

The Diakonos smiled at him. “Thank you, Doctor,” he said with satisfaction. “Now I have everything I need. From both of you.”

“But she won't know?” the Doctor pressed, still speculating on exactly what had been done, and how.

“Not until the time is right. She'll know when that is.” The gentle, kind eyes were fixed on him with an expression that conveyed an absolute sense of reassurance. “And so will you.”

The Doctor looked at him quickly, startled, despite himself, and evidently on the point of asking another question. Then he gave a tiny shrug, and his face relaxed, as if a burden had been lifted from him. He met the Diakonos's eyes directly. In response, the Diakonos smiled that benevolent, tranquil smile of his.

Into the pause that followed fell the sound of a tentative knock on the door.

“Doctor? Are you in there?” came a familiar voice, muffled by the thickness of the wood.

“Fionnula,” said the Diakonos, raising his voice slightly. “Come in, do.”

The door swung inwards just far enough to admit her head and shoulders as she leaned round, clasping the edge of the door with one hand.

“Sorry – am I interrupting?” she enquired, half-apologetically. “It's just that I've been trying to find you, and Kedron said you might be here...” She cast a brief and curious glance at the Mirror, then looked back at them.

“Of course you're not interrupting,” the Diakonos assured her. “I've just been showing the Doctor my ‘Mirror of the Soul’.” He gestured behind him.

“What, like the Chris de Burgh song?” Finn asked promptly.

The Doctor couldn't help smiling, and the Diakonos laughed outright.

“Your thought processes can be so alike as to be quite uncanny,” he observed, smiling.

“Given our history, that doesn't exactly come as a surprise,” Finn informed him dryly. She glanced at the Mirror again, and a thought seemed to strike her. “Although, not *exactly* like the Chris de Burgh song, of course,” she contradicted herself.

“What do you mean?” the Doctor asked. Finn looked at him, slightly surprised.

“Well, *his* Mirror of the Soul wasn't a mirror, was it?” she reminded him. “It was a diamond from another world that fell out of the sky.”

The Doctor's eyes widened. He felt a strange, unnerving thrill shoot through his body, as if he'd had – what? A forewarning...?

“What did you say?” he demanded, frowning to mask the sense of shock echoing in his chest.

“A diamond from another world that fell out of the sky,” she repeated patiently, giving him a puzzled look. “Why? What about it?”

He didn't answer, just shook his head – but for a few moments it was as if his face had congealed into paralysis, and deep in his eyes was a look of incipient fear, as if aware of something unidentified but terrifying approaching from far off.

“Doctor! What's the matter? What is it?” Finn demanded, alarmed. Yet again she had the feeling there was something he wasn't telling her, and this time it felt even more serious.

The Doctor turned his eyes slowly back to her, as if only vaguely realizing she was there.

“I – don't know,” he said, as if the words came with difficulty. “A diamond from another world that fell out of the sky'...” he repeated. “It was as if...” His voice trailed off, and he stared at her blankly. But she saw him shudder; briefly, but intensely.

“What about it?” she persisted. “Why's it important?” He looked, she thought with a shudder of her own, as if someone was walking over his grave.

“I don't know,” he said again, and for some reason looked at the Diakonos, who looked back at him solemnly. *He* knew, Finn felt sure. But the Diakonos merely moved his head to one side and back, in such a tiny movement that it would have been easy to miss; Finn certainly wouldn't have noticed it had she not been watching him so closely. But whatever question the Doctor was silently asking, the answer was clear.

The Doctor gave a sort of start, and she saw him shudder again, less obviously than before. Then he shrugged, and in something more like his normal tone, said, “Doesn't matter.”

“Hope not! You'd better keep it as a 'diamond in the dark', if this is what it's going to do to you,” she said, trying for a lighter tone, letting go of him and stepping back. Normally, she felt sure, he'd have noticed the reference, and probably joked about it, but clearly he was still profoundly disturbed.

“Yes...” he said abstractedly, as if trying to track down a crucial thought or memory that was escaping him. Or, she thought, as if he'd had a premonition...

Suddenly running footsteps could be heard approaching along the corridor outside, and the next moment the door was violently thrown forward out of Finn's grasp; she had to step aside hurriedly to avoid collision with the newcomer. Kedron stood framed there, one hand clutching the jamb, the other on the handle, his eyes wide and wild.

“Diakonos! Doctor!” he panted.

“What is it?” the Diakonos demanded. Clearly some kind of crisis had arisen.

“Arrem! He's launching a Skyrider!”

The Doctor got there first, of course.

“With the stasis sphere on board?” he snapped, horrified. Kedron nodded, still fighting for breath.

“We've got to stop him!” the Doctor shouted. “Come on!” He spun away from the Mirror and all but rugby-tackled Kedron in his urgency to get through the door. Kedron followed him instantly, Finn right behind.

Only the Diakonos paused. Before he left the room, he looked back at the Mirror.

Where the reflected Doctor still stood, even though the Doctor himself was no longer there.

The Diakonos looked back into the large, dark eyes, and nodded, once.

“Be patient, my friend,” he said softly. “She will have her reward. And so will you.”

He moved his eyes momentarily as his hand sought the handle to pull the door closed. When he looked up at the Mirror again, it was blank, empty. He smiled briefly, nodded again, and pulled the door to behind him as he, too, left the room in pursuit of the Doctor.

## **Chapter 23**

### ***Launch of the Skyrider***

Bekkah was confused and unhappy. The uncharacteristic fury with which Arrem had returned and driven them all to carry out his orders had completely unnerved her. Anger at Riada's death, she had expected, but not the element of – 'viciousness' was the only word she could think of, to describe the way he had looked and

sounded. Or, perhaps, ‘revengeful’...? And now Kedron, telling her to summon Arrem to speak to the Diakonos with such desperate urgency in his bearing. Something was going horribly wrong, and she was afraid.

“I’ll – I’ll go and get him,” she stammered, and almost fled from the screen.

Kedron stepped back and let the Diakonos take his place. A few seconds later the image on the screen changed from that of Arrem’s empty office to Arrem himself. He was clearly in a control room; the resemblance to NASA’s Mission Control, that Finn had seen images of so often, was unmistakable. In the background there were various people stationed at consoles, intent on their tasks; Bekkah stood nearby, visible over Arrem’s shoulder and looking distressed, but Arrem himself wore a steely expression as he faced the Diakonos. Finn could feel the Doctor almost quivering beside her with the need for urgent action.

“Arrem – ” the Diakonos began, but the Doctor’s impatience got the better of him. He leaped alongside the Diakonos and cut across him.

“Arrem, you’ve got to stop the launch!” he shouted.

Arrem raised his eyebrows in a caricature of polite enquiry.

“Now, why would I want to do that, Doctor?” he asked.

“Arrem, you must stop it,” the Diakonos said quickly. “You’re putting us all in terrible danger.”

“No, Diakonos, I’m not,” Arrem contradicted him. “We’ve *escaped* from terrible danger. And I’m making sure we are never in that danger again.”

“But you’re *not!*” The Doctor’s fingers clawed through his hair as if he was about to tear it out of his head in handfuls. “You don’t know what you’re doing!”

“Yes, I do,” said Arrem stubbornly. “And – ”

Suddenly he broke off and raised a hand, the forefinger lifted in implicit command that they listen, and they became aware that a sudden silence had fallen over the control room behind him, gradually being swallowed by a roaring sound in the background.

“And I’ve done it,” Arrem concluded triumphantly.

“Arrem!” The Diakonos took a step towards the screen as he realized what he was hearing. “Is that –?”

“Yes!” Arrem confirmed with relish. “That’s the Skyrider, on its way to the sun. With the stasis sphere on board. On its way to complete destruction. With that creature inside it!”

“But why? Why did you do it? In the face of the Doctor’s instructions?”

“Look, I know it’s thanks to him that we captured it in the first place. But even that should have been impossible! Don’t you remember what he said? That the myths about the Brollachan say not just that it couldn’t be captured, but that it couldn’t be confined.”

“I also,” said the Doctor with icy patience, “said this wasn’t a myth.”

“Yes, but how can you be so sure? What if it’s more like the creature in the story than you’ve told us? How could we ever be sure it wouldn’t escape, some way or another?”

“Well, you’ve made sure of that, haven’t you?” said the Doctor savagely.

“I’ve made sure it’ll be *destroyed!*” Arrem yelled. “Burned up in the sun! Gone forever!”

“Well, lovely theory, but it falls down at just one point. Small point” – the Doctor’s head bobbed in an exaggerated gesture of acknowledgement – “but a pretty crucial one, I’d say. And do you know what that is?” His eyes bored into those of Arrem, who started back at him defiantly.

“What point, Doctor?” Kedron interjected urgently.

“The point about its physical structure being gaseous,” said the Doctor, with heavy sarcasm. “The one which means it won’t be conveniently *burned up* when it hits the sun. The one where it’s not composed of the kind of gases that are decomposed by heat. Because I took a good look at it, and I *know*. The one” – he went on with his theme – “where it gets access to a whole, sun-sized mass that contains more calcium than it could find from the whole of this planet. Because calcium isn’t just an essential element in living organisms, Arrem. Oh, no! Look at the visible spectra of – ooh, *millions* of stars, and you’ll see strong absorption lines of singly ionized calcium. And guess what? Your sun’s one of them! And so, the one where it gets to grow and grow and grow, all the time damaging the atomic structure of the sun, until it goes nova and not only destroys Eutychia but gets itself spread

out in all directions. Haven't you ever heard of reproduction through fragmentation? That's what'll happen! A lot of little baby Brollachans, propelled through space until they eventually hit other sources of calcium, other planets. And so on, and so on. *That point,*" the Doctor finished grimly.

Arrem's facial muscles sagged for a moment, as if, just for an instant, doubt had been admitted into his certainty. Then he gave a swift shake of his head, clearly dismissing the attack on his actions.

"You can't be sure of that. And in any case the Skyrider's on its way, and there's nothing you can do to stop it." He folded his arms and regarded them with visible self-satisfaction.

Behind him, Bekkah hesitated, then suddenly took a step forward.

"But we *can* stop it!" she cried anxiously. "There's a self-destruct function built into every Skyrider, in case it malfunctions."

"Then use it, Bekkah!" the Diakonos urged her.

She cast one anguished look at Arrem, then scrambled behind her console and began urgently punching controls.

Finn looked at the screen with a sinking heart. She caught the Doctor's eye, and knew he was, as always, ahead of her.

"It's not going to work," she said, quietly.

Kedron looked at her quickly. "What d'you mean? Why won't it work?"

"Look at him," Finn said, gesturing at the screen, where Arrem hadn't moved so much as a muscle. "He isn't trying to stop her."

Kedron realized it was true. If Bekkah could issue the self-destruction command, Arrem would be trying to stop her. But he wasn't. He was smiling with that same air of self-satisfaction.

"I can't do it!" Bekkah wailed desperately. "He's disabled the function! He's locked it out! There's nothing I can do!"

"It's all right, Bekkah," said the Doctor abruptly. "We'll stop it. With your help. I need the the flight path of the Skyrider, quick as you can get it to me. OK?"

That got a reaction from Arrem. He peered suspiciously at the Doctor. "What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"I'm going to make sure that millions, maybe billions of other lives don't end up on your son's funeral pyre," said the Doctor with devastating certainty. Arrem's eyes filled with fury and frustration. With an angry gesture, he cut the connection; the screen went blank.

"Right," said the Doctor. "Finn, stay here," he added. Finn blinked at the tone of his voice as he turned to head for the door. She ran to catch up, and caught at his sleeve.

"Doctor, where are you going?"

"TARDIS," he said succinctly.

"Not without me, you're not," she said.

"Oh, yes, I am," he contradicted her. "What I'm going to do isn't safe. So you're staying here."

"I hadn't noticed much 'being safe' going on at any previous point in our association," said Finn pointedly.

"That was – different," said the Doctor, rather lamely.

"Oh? How, exactly?" she challenged him.

The Doctor frowned at her. "Ohhhh, you're doing the 'hands on hips' thing," he said, disapprovingly. "It's always a bad sign when they do the 'hands on hips' thing," he said to the room in general.

"I feel tempted to join her," Kedron told him. "What is it you're going to do that's so much more dangerous than what's already happened?"

"Look, I haven't got time to argue!" the Doctor expostulated. "I've got to get after that rocket!"

"I couldn't agree more," said Finn. "But I'm still coming with you."

The Doctor opened his mouth to argue again, but she cut across him.

“Look, Doctor –!” she began; then her expression changed. “Hang on, though – yes...” Suddenly she smiled at him with an air of triumph, as if she’d found an argument that satisfied her. “Yes, of course! Of course I’ll stay here safe while you go into danger, Doctor!”

“You mean it?” the Doctor exclaimed, not trusting this sudden *volte face*.

“Of course I do!” she confirmed, rather expansively – then added, “On *one* condition.”

The Doctor regarded her warily. “What?”

“If you can look me in the eye and tell me – honestly – that you’d do the same if you were me!”

The Doctor was silenced. Kedron held himself completely still, transfixed by the confrontation. Then the Diakonos stepped forward to within a couple of paces of the Doctor.

“She is your companion, Doctor,” he reminded him, gently but firmly. “Where else would she be, other than at your side?”

The Doctor tore his eyes away from Finn’s and looked at the Diakonos with an expression almost of shock at what he was implying.

“I just want to keep her safe!” he protested.

“She’s asking you for the truth,” said the Diakonos with gentle implacability. “*Would* you do it? If not, is it fair to expect her to do what you would not do yourself?”

The Doctor looked back at Finn, and was defeated. She looked back at him without conceding her determination, but with no air of victory. Just a slight shrug, as if telling him he should have realized the inevitability of the outcome. And then she threw the Diakonos a glance of gratitude.

Kedron found he’d been holding his breath without realizing it, and let it out in a soundless sigh.

“So, Doctor, what *are* you going to do?” he asked.

The Doctor, already on his way, paused in the doorway.

“I’m going to take the TARDIS and fly after that rocket,” he said firmly. “And as soon as I catch up with it, I’m going to stop it. The moment Bekkah’s flight path information comes through, I need you to pass it on to me. Immediately.” He ignored Kedron’s nod of confirmation and turned to give Finn a look still slightly tinged with disapproval at her decision. “Well, come on, if you’re coming,” he said, almost sternly.

“There is no ‘if’ – remember?” she said pertly, as she followed him out.

“Kedron, would you re-establish the connection and get that information from Bekkah, please?” said the Diakonos, mannerly even in moments of crisis. “And get Mahhrk here.” To Kedron’s questioning look, he explained, “He’s our best communications satellite expert. He can track the path of the Sky rider from the satellite network. We need him here, quickly.”

\*

Bekkah was so intent on her task that she had no attention to spare for Arrem, who had seated himself at one of the other consoles.

“Arrem? What’s going on?” Forias was the spokesman for the rest of the team; they’d all heard the exchange with the Doctor, but hadn’t understood. “Why did the Diakonos want us to abort the launch? Who is that – that Doctor?”

“Ask Bekkah,” came the taut reply. “She’s the one he’s working with now.”

Forias’s eyes turned toward Bekkah, as did everyone else’s. Other voices began to sound, demanding an explanation which she was too busy to give.

Which meant that no-one was watching what Arrem was doing at *his* console.

\*

“Right!” the Doctor said, shrugging himself out of his coat even as he raced into the TARDIS, pausing only to toss it into the usual crook of the pillar beside the top of the ramp before making straight for the console.

“Kedron!” he demanded of the viewing screen. “Got that information from Bekkah yet?”

“Just come through,” was the terse reply. “Here it is.”

By the time Finn, too, reached the console, the Doctor was already racing round it, manipulating controls like a madman. She stood back against the railing so as to keep out of his way, panting.

“Right!” said the Doctor again, flicking one last lever across with a flourish. The Time Rotor began to rise and fall, with that wonderful sound Finn loved so dearly. “That should put us right in the path of the Sky rider – just – about – now...”

The Time Rotor fell still again, and the Doctor looked in the scanner. Immediately he frowned.

“What’s the matter?” Finn asked.

“It’s not here,” he said. His eyes flicked over the controls. “These are definitely the right coordinates. But it’s not here! So where is it?”

\*

Bekkah straightened up from her console at last. Despite the clamouring voices around her, she’d managed to send Kedron the information the Doctor needed. She raised her hands, trying to quieten everyone down. When she had succeeded to the point where she could make herself heard over them, she began to speak.

“Listen, everyone...!”

But she got no further. Behind them, at the console where Arrem had been sitting, there was a sudden explosion. Everyone started, and turned to look. Then another console erupted in a cloud of smoke and sparks. Then a third.

“Arrem!” Bekkah exclaimed. “Where is he? Arrem!”

But he was gone.

“What’s he done?” she demanded.

Forias, gambling that no other consoles were going to erupt, ran to see which ones had been destroyed. No-one else moved as they waited for his assessment. And no-one was surprised at the bleakness on his face as he raised his head from the final console and looked at them.

## Chapter 24

### *The Planet That Once Was*

The Doctor flicked the screen back to Kedron.

“Kedron – it’s not here! Get Bekkah to check her figures.”

“Right,” said Kedron, and did something to the communicator. Moments later Bekkah’s face was alongside his on the scanner in split screen mode.

“Doctor!” she gasped. “Arrem’s reset the flight path, and we don’t know where he’s changed it to!”

“Then extrapolate from the current trajectory!” the Doctor snapped.

“We can’t! We don’t know what it is – we can’t track the Sky rider! He’s sabotaged the whole system! Forias and the rest are working to see if they can repair it, but – I think he’s been too thorough...”

“Where is he?” the Doctor grated.

“I don’t know! He’s gone!” She looked at him helplessly. “We’ve got no way to give you the information you need!”

“Don’t worry, Doctor – I’ll find it for you,” said a new voice, confidently. On the other side of the split screen, Mahhrk was sliding into the seat at the desk, Kedron making way for him. Aihleah was there, too. And in the background, a still, silent figure, which Finn could just make out as being the Diakonos.

Mahhrk’s fingers were flying over the control board.

"I'm bringing our satellite network up on my screen," said Mahhrk, with a note Finn had never heard in his voice before, but one that she recognized nonetheless; the tone of a man who is expert at what he does and has complete confidence in his abilities as a result. "Patching it through to you, Doctor..." Bekkah's face disappeared from the other side of the screen, replaced by a diagrammatic representation of the space around Eutychia, sprinkled with points of light that were not stars, but satellites. "I'm reprogramming them all to scan the space between us and the sun. Skyriders have a very recognizable signal signature. This won't take long..."

Kedron and Aihleah were both standing close behind him, desperately checking for any unexpected movement. Suddenly Aihleah stabbed a finger at the screen.

"There!" she gasped. "Look! ViewSat 17!"

The Doctor and Finn saw both men's eyes lock onto the place where Aihleah was pointing.

"She's right! There it is!" Kedron yelled triumphantly.

"Mahhrk, I need you to plot its trajectory, right now!" said the Doctor urgently.

"On it, Doctor," Mahhrk confirmed, his fingers flying faster than Finn would have thought possible. "I'm patching the live feed from ViewSat 17 through to you, so you can see for yourself."

The view on the scanner changed again, the diagram replaced by a real image. It was slightly fuzzy, as if the camera was zoomed in from a very great distance, but what could be seen was definitely a rocket. Against the black background, with no points of reference, it was impossible to judge its velocity, but Finn nevertheless got the impression that it was travelling at tremendous speed.

Suddenly Mahhrk exclaimed, and the Doctor and Finn both looked back at him. He was staring with apparent shock at something he could see on his screen.

"What -?" Kedron began, then his face, like Mahhrk's, congealed into horror as he realized what he was seeing.

"What is it?" Aihleah cried, looking at both of them.

"Mahhrk! What's the matter?" the Doctor demanded.

For a moment Mahhrk didn't reply; he and Kedron were staring at each other. Then he turned back and punched some buttons. The view of the Skyrider on the other half of the screen began to change; it began to get smaller, as the camera zoomed back, out of close-up mode to wide angle. As it did so, a lurid orange-yellow glow began to appear on the left side of the picture, a glow that gradually coalesced into a curve, and then a huge sphere. Eutychia's star, its sun. But the view of the pulsating sphere wasn't uninterrupted. Between the camera's viewpoint and the sun were hundreds, thousands of black objects. All sizes, all shapes. Scattered across the face of the great star.

"An asteroid belt!" exclaimed the Doctor.

"The Planet That Once Was," said Mahhrk. His voice was a strange mixture of anxiety and despair. "It's one of the reasons we had to develop such a comprehensive network of satellites. To monitor the behaviour of the asteroids. A few hundred years ago a rogue asteroid got displaced. Sent others on a collision course with Eutychia. The craters near Vevarorna -"

"Yes, I know! Fascinating, but not important right now," the Doctor snapped. "Arrem's set the Skyrider's flight path to take it through the asteroid belt, right, Mahhrk?"

"Yes..."

"So he's gambling it'll get through without collision."

"But what if it doesn't? What if it hits one of the asteroids on the way through?" Finn gasped, horrified at the implications.

"Could be a domino effect like you've never seen," the Doctor agreed tersely.

"But what about the stasis sphere?"

He didn't get the chance to answer that one, as Mahhrk interrupted.

"Doctor, what are you going to do? Can you help us?" The question fell halfway between plea and demand.

"Can I *help*?" The Doctor sounded positively indignant at being doubted. "Course I can *help*! Sorting things out! That's what I do, remember? Told you that when we first met!"

“And I endorsed that.” The Diakonos’s voice suddenly fell into the exchange, and he came forward to stand beside Aihleah, putting a hand on Mahhrk’s shoulder. “It’s true, Mahhrk.” His eyes turned to Finn. “The Doctor saves people. Does he not, Fionnula?”

Her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Yes, he does! And that’s why true justice should be even-handed, shouldn’t it?” It came out more like a demand than a question, and it was a tone the Doctor had only heard her use to the Diakonos once before, in the Garden of Starlights. When she’d told him, *‘I meant what I said’*, and the Diakonos had replied, *‘I would expect nothing less of you’*. The Doctor threw Finn a puzzled look, but she didn’t see it. She was staring at the Diakonos, silently insisting he answer.

And he smiled at her.

She gasped, then turned hurriedly away, brushing at her tears with the back of her hand.

“Well, come on, Doctor!” she said abruptly. “What are we going to do? Where are we in relation to the Sky rider?”

“Take a look outside the door,” he invited her. “Below us and to the left.”

She paused just long enough to be sure he meant it, then ran down the ramp and flung the door open. Staring down into the endless void brought her fear of heights welling up to roil in her stomach, but she didn’t have time to pay it attention now. Clinging tightly onto the edge of the other door, she looked where the Doctor had told her to.

There! There was a tiny silver shape, picked out by the light from the Sun, speeding toward the remains of the Planet That Once Was, spread out in a vast expanse over to the right of the TARDIS.

“Doctor, it’s almost there!” she gasped.

“Well, shut the door, then,” he said, as if she should have had more sense than to open it in the first place. “Don’t want anything getting inside by mistake, do we?”

“What do you mean?” She hurriedly obeyed.

All of a sudden he was grinning at her, as he always did at moments of extreme danger. “We’re going into an asteroid belt, remember! Lots of bits of rock flying about! Mustn’t get distracted – we’ve got a car chase on!” His face lit up with excitement. “Steve McQueen, eat your heart out! *Allons-y!*” he finished, with a yell.

And Finn had to grab wildly at the railing alongside the ramp as the TARDIS suddenly sprang into action.

From its position above and to the left of the asteroid field, it described a huge curve downwards toward where the speeding Sky rider had already penetrated the fringe of the belt, and hurtled after it.

Finn fought the lurching of the TARDIS to make her way back to the console, around to where she, too, could see the scanner screen to which the Doctor had his eyes glued as he pursued the fleeing rocket.

“Ever been flying by the seat of your pants before?” he enquired briskly.

“No – and I’m trying not to think about pants,” Finn told him. “I might need a fresh pair before long!” She found herself instinctively ducking and swerving every time an asteroid loomed on the screen. From the way they were being thrown about, she judged the TARDIS was behaving in much the same way.

“Don’t worry,” the Doctor said breezily. “The force field’s protecting the TARDIS. And us. Nothing can hit us.”

An enormous thump suddenly tilted the TARDIS at a steep angle, and Finn was torn loose from her hold on the console and sent flying backward into the pilot’s seat.

“Nothing can hit us?” she challenged, righting herself again. “Then what was that?”

“Oh, that was us bouncing off,” said the Doctor. “Doing a bit of ricocheting. They’re not hitting us, we’re hitting them.”

“Speaking as a passenger, a distinction without a difference,” Finn informed him tartly, pushing herself upright from the seat only to be sent lurching sideways. She grabbed at the console again and held on for dear life. “Now I don’t need to wonder what it’s like to be a pinball anymore, is this a good moment to ask if we’re catching up?”

“Not likely while we’re in the belt,” said the Doctor. “Our chances’ll be better once we get through.”

“If we get through,” Finn muttered. She fixed her eyes on the screen and the speeding rocket ahead of them, and as she watched, something began to dawn on her. Her brain was making an instinctive correlation between the path of the Skyrider and that of one of the asteroids ahead, ponderously rolling through space in supreme disregard of the intruders into its environment.

“Doctor...” she said, reaching for his sleeve. He glanced at her and back at the screen, and grasped in an instant what had taken her seconds to put together. That the path of the Skyrider was just about to cross that of the inexorably advancing mass of rock.

In the end it wasn't so much a collision as a glancing blow against the surface, but it was enough to disintegrate the rocket into a cloud of debris. There was a brief but brilliant flash of light, which subsided to show fragments of metal flying every which way through the void. But out of the cloud of wreckage, something small and shot onwards.

“There!” The Doctor stabbed at the screen with a long forefinger, then made some hurried calculations from the readings in front of him.

“Is that the stasis sphere? Not destroyed?” Finn asked breathlessly.

“No, deflected,” said the Doctor grimly. “But not enough. It's still going to intersect with the sun.”

“So what do we do?”

The Doctor regarded her in a way she found rather unsettling.

“Ever play cricket?” he enquired suddenly.

“What?” Finn gaped at the apparent irrelevance of the question.

“No? Oh, you should. Wonderful game! Used to be quite good at it, me. Back in my decorative vegetable phase...” He caught the look she was giving him, and got back to the point. “Anyway... The thing is, I was just wondering how good you are at catching.”

“Why do I get the feeling I don't want to know why you want to know?” she asked, darkly.

“We're up against the principle of inertia,” the Doctor explained breezily. “Old Isaac's First Law of Motion, you see. I had to nudge him a bit on that one, but he got it in the end... Thing is, an object not subject to any net external force moves at a constant velocity. So an object already in motion continues moving at its current velocity until some force causes its speed or direction to change. The problem here is, we're dealing with something that's moving at a very high velocity. With a lot of kinetic energy.”

“Meaning...?” Finn prompted him.

“When you apply force to change an object from being at rest to being in motion, you need the same amount of force to decelerate it back to being at rest.” The Doctor, in keeping with his theme, suddenly produced a cricket ball from somewhere, tossing it carelessly from one hand to the other. “If I throw this ball past you” – he made as if to throw it, but didn't – “it travels past you at high speed, yes? Or it would from your point of view, anyway. But if you were able to fly just in front of the ball at the same speed as it was travelling, it wouldn't look as if it was moving at all, because it effectively becomes stationary in relation to you. Both moving at the same speed, see? So it wouldn't reach you. But if you stop moving, and the ball doesn't...”

And this time, he *did* throw it. Right at her, with such energy that it smacked against the palms of the hands she instinctively raised to catch it with stinging force; the pain was so great that she wasn't able to hold on.

“Owww!” she gasped indignantly. “That *hurt!*”

“You're going to have to do better than that,” the Doctor reproved her, picking up the ball now rolling at her feet.

“What do you mean – do better?” she asked, still nursing her smarting hands.

## Chapter 25

### *Stasis Sphere and Inertia Shell*

Well, now she knew. With the result that she was now standing between the open doors of the TARDIS, once again fighting down her acrophobia as she stared out into space, focused on the silver sphere that seemed to float motionlessly a few feet away.

“I’m going to match the velocity of the TARDIS with the sphere,” he’d said. “So you can just lean out and bring it inside.” *Sounds so easy when you say it, Doctor...!*

“What then?” she’d asked.

“Apply sufficient force to absorb and dissipate the kinetic energy that resides in a body when its intrinsic velocity doesn’t match the intrinsic velocity of its surroundings,” he said quickly. Too quickly, she’d thought.

But she trusted him to know what he was doing, of course. She just wished it didn’t involve her having to lean out of the TARDIS over a gulf so vast she didn’t have any kind of measure for it. Her stomach seemed only too aware of the fact... But since she couldn’t fly the TARDIS, this had to be her job.

“How far away is it?” the Doctor called from behind her.

“About six feet,” she called back.

He made some adjustments to the controls, and the TARDIS edged nearer.

“How’s that?”

“Almost...” Finn reached out, but still it was too far. “Another foot!” she called.

“Right!”

It was as if she never moved, but the sphere simply floated into her hands. She clasped it firmly, and drew it toward her.

“Got it!” she gasped, and brought it slowly and carefully inside. At least, that was what it felt like, but she knew that really it was the TARDIS that was moving around the sphere, not the sphere moving inside the TARDIS. Warily she backed up the ramp, and came to rest there, still grasping the sphere between her trembling hands.

“Now what?” she asked, not daring to even look round.

The Doctor looked up. “Oh, it’s all right,” he said reassuringly. “You can let go now. It won’t move.”

Finn blinked, but did what he said, slowly pulling both hands away from the sphere. It just hovered in mid-air in front of her.

“How’s it doing that?” she demanded.

“Don’t forget it’s still moving,” the Doctor reminded her. “Same trajectory, same velocity as ever it was. It’s just that we’re moving at the same rate as it. What we’ve got to do now, is make *it* move at the same rate as *us*.”

“Isn’t that another distinction without a difference...?”

“No,” said the Doctor bluntly. “It’s giving us a nice optical illusion of being stationary, but it’s not. It’s still hurtling towards the sun, best foot forward. And if we try to manoeuvre the TARDIS in any way now, it’ll just rip on through the walls and go straight on. But if we match *its* intrinsic velocity to *ours* – well, everything hunky-dory!” He flashed her a quick grin.

“And how do we do that?”

“Inertia shell,” said the Doctor briefly. He flicked a switch, and she jumped as something appeared without warning to her right, down on the floor area below the console platform. At first she mistook it for a big glass cabinet, seven feet high and four feet square, but then she saw the shimmering of its surface, and realized it was some kind of forcefield.

“Right – just get it inside...” the Doctor muttered, and began tweaking controls. The stasis sphere started to float down and away from Finn until it came to a halt just inside the inertia shell; at least, that was how it looked, but she knew that it was really the Doctor moving the TARDIS in relation to the sphere again.

“Right – Finn, here! Chop, chop! We’re getting closer to the sun all the time, you know,” the Doctor reminded her. “So we haven’t got a lot of time.” As she joined him at the console, he pointed to a switch.

"I'm going inside the shell," he said. "Once I'm in, that switch'll set it going. I've fixed the controls so the TARDIS'll see to the rest. Once it's started, find something to hang on to. It's likely to get a bit" – he searched for the right word – "*lively...*"

Then, without warning he vaulted the railing and ran across to the inertia shell.

"Doctor!" Finn called after him, suddenly smitten with unease. She'd just realized there was something she didn't understand. "Why have *you* got to be inside the shell?"

He stopped and looked back at her, suddenly serious. Then he grinned at her, and waggled both his hands in her direction.

"Good at cricket, remember? Safe pair of hands!" And he inserted himself into the inertia shell, contorting himself to slide past the stasis sphere until he was standing behind it. Then he placed his hands on either side of it, bracing his chest against it, and nodded to her.

"This is more dangerous than you're telling me, isn't it?" Finn challenged him.

"It will be if you don't get a move on," the Doctor retorted. "Hurling towards the sun? Running out of time? That ringing any bells?"

She didn't like it, but she didn't have any choice.

"You're going to be all right, though? Aren't you?" she couldn't help saying, her fingers poised over the switch.

"Me? All right? I'm always all right!" he declared cockily.

"Yes," she said. "Of course you are."

He looked steadily back at her, and didn't reply.

"Well, you'd better be," she said meaningfully, and threw the switch.

The inertia shell began to fill with a pulsing glow of white light that grew in brilliance, gradually obscuring the Doctor and the stasis sphere he was cradling against his chest. For as long as she was able to see him, she could see his dark eyes fixed on her face. But it wasn't long before the light became so bright she could no longer bear to look at it, and had to turn away.

The TARDIS began to shudder around her, striving to contain the forces writhing within it. As the vibration grew worse, Finn reached up and laid her palm flat against the base of the Time Rotor.

"Come on!" she exhorted. "You can do it! Do it for him!"

Then she had to drop her hand and use it, like the other one, to hang on to the console for dear life as the vibration changed to violent shaking. There was a roaring sound in her ears, and the light was so bright it was filling the whole control room; even with her eyes screwed tight shut it pierced her eyelids painfully. The sound of a series of minor explosions told her that the console was giving out under the strain; had she been able to look, she knew she'd be seeing showers of sparks, clouds of smoke venting from the damaged areas.

Then a particularly violent convulsion of the TARDIS threw her away from the console to go staggering back with painful force against the railing. Her flailing hands failed to find a grip, and she slid to the floor. Her searching fingers found the base of one of the metal uprights, and she clung to it with both hands, gripping with all her might, while the roaring sound and the explosions from the console scaled up in pitch and intensity.

"*Keep it going!*" she encouraged the TARDIS, even blinded, yelling over the rising cacophony. "*Look after him!*"

The noise and the juddering continued, violently.

Then, as everything – the light, the sound, the shaking – rose to such a crescendo that surely the TARDIS was about to explode...!

Everything went quiet and still.

For a moment she stayed frozen in position, hardly daring to contemplate moving. Then she felt the TARDIS suddenly change direction. What was happening now...? Oh. Of course. The Doctor must have set the controls so that the TARDIS would divert away from the sun the moment the inertia shell had done its work. In case he... Finn sat bolt upright, suddenly stiff with alarm, and opened her eyes.

The light was fading, drawing back within the inertia shell. She released her hold on the railing and got to her feet, peering anxiously into the receding glare.

The pulsing glow sank back in on itself and extinguished, and with a brief 'whooshing' noise, the inertia shell vanished.

Leaving the Doctor stretched motionless on the floor, on his back, the stasis sphere resting on the floor beside him where it had rolled out of his limp hand.

Finn scrambled up, ran to him and dropped to her knees beside him.

"*Don't* be dead, *don't* be dead, *don't* be dead..." she chanted under her breath. She reached out and placed a tentative hand on his chest, but he didn't move. Nor could she detect any heartbeat under her flattened palm. From either heart.

"Don't you dare, Doctor! Don't you *dare!*" she said more loudly, halfway between entreaty and demand. Praying that it was just that her hand was not sensitive enough to detect the movement she sought, she bent down and laid her head on his chest, her ear pressed against the cloth of his jacket. Was that a faint, slow beat she was hearing, or not? Feverishly, she dug into his jacket pocket and fished out his stethoscope, hastily fitting the earpieces and placing the chestpiece over his left-hand heart.

Yes! A beat! Sluggish and weak, but a heartbeat!

And the right-hand heart?

Yes! Another! Equally faint and slow, but *there...*

She closed her eyes and expelled a long breath, feeling a hot tear force its way out between her clenched eyelids.

"Thank you," she murmured, almost dizzy with relief. "*Thank you.*"

"Oi," said a voice, weakly. "That's *my* stethoscope, you know!"

"That's all right," she said, without opening her eyes. "You can have it back now. Finished with it. Don't need to play with your toys anymore!"

Then she did open her eyes and look down at him. The tear slid down her cheek and fell on his face.

"*And* it's raining," he quipped, his voice gaining strength. He touched the salt drop off his skin with a fingertip, not looking at her. "Roof sprung a leak, has it?"

"Could be," Finn agreed. "Things got quite riotous in here for a while – I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she hadn't started a few joints..."

The Doctor began to get up, but sank back with a groan. Finn hurriedly shifted to help support him into a sitting position. A few deep breaths, and his incredible powers of recuperation enabled him to get to his feet, even if somewhat waveringly. She picked up the stasis sphere and stood up.

"Well held, sir! At least you didn't take your eye off the ball," she said, wagging it in front of his face. He chuckled.

"Are you the girl who once said puns weren't your strong point?" he teased.

"I've been taking lessons since then – from an expert," she said dryly, handing the sphere to him. "Here you are – one inertia-equalized stasis sphere. As per request!"

As he looked down at it, cradled in his hands, she turned away from him toward the console, and reached up to touch the column of the Time Rotor, as she had before.

"And are *you* all right?" she enquired, addressing the TARDIS.

The Doctor looked at her, surprised, then noticed the condition of the console.

"Ohhh!" he said, full of concerned sympathy, rushing across to survey the damage. "What's happened to you, eh? Who made all this mess?"

"She did," said Finn. "For you, of course! Nearly blew every gasket she had, keeping the inertia shell going. Protecting you. Poor thing! You owe her some quality-time TLC, I reckon."

"Just as soon as I've put this away," said the Doctor, nodding. He tossed the stasis sphere casually into the air a couple of times. "Right next to the Carrionites' crystal ball, I think..." He turned and left the control room.

He hadn't thanked her for her part in it, of course. But then, he didn't need to. She knew. And so did he. Two minds with but a single thought... Why use words, when they aren't needed?

Finn smiled to herself, and then up at the Time Rotor.

"Thank you," she murmured, putting a hand on the battered console. "You're incredible, you know that? So, thank you."

She circled the console slowly, looking with some dismay on the damage.

"Goodness, I bet that feels sore," she said to the TARDIS. "Hope he doesn't take long putting you back to rights. After all, what would he do without you?"

In the ensuing silence, the next words, quiet though they were, fell like hammer blows.

"What will I do without *you*...?"

The question was posed in a voice so low it was only just on the edge of her hearing.

She looked up, startled. The Doctor was back in the control room, standing in the shadows, feet spread and hands in pockets, looking at her with dark eyes.

That phrasing... She wasn't even sure she'd been meant to hear it. But she had. And it pierced her heart like a frozen spike. Because that use of tense clearly wasn't accidental.

Not 'what *would* I do without you', but 'what *will* I do without you'...

She opened her mouth to speak, but then caught the look in his eye. The warning there not to pursue the matter couldn't have been clearer.

There was a short silence. Then she drew in a careful breath, and put a bright smile on her face.

"Safely stored, then?" she asked lightly.

"Absolutely," the Doctor agreed, in a completely normal voice, bouncing lightly out of the shadows. "And you're right. Won't take long to sort this out." He surveyed the console. "Then we'll just pop back and tell the Diakonos and everyone that everything's all right before we go, yes? Don't want to leave them on a cliff-hanger, do we?" He looked at her cheerfully, as if the mood of moments before had never existed.

"Course not – you'd never dream of doing that to anyone, would you?" Finn agreed in the same light tone.

But that wasn't how she was feeling inside.

"Which reminds me," said the Doctor suddenly, in a completely different tone of voice. "When you see Jack. Tell him I did what he said."

She stared at him, taken aback by this unexpected turn in the conversation.

"What do you mean – *when* I see Jack'? When am I going to see Jack, for heaven's sake? Didn't we have this conversation once before? He's half the universe away, remember?"

"The thing about Jack," said the Doctor, gazing fixedly elsewhere, "is that you can never count on him being where you last saw him."

Finn studied him with troubled eyes.

"Doctor," she said. "What is it you know that I don't?"

"Lots of things. Too many," said the Doctor, still not looking at her. And this time, something in his voice silenced her, so that she heeded its warning and asked no more.

## Chapter 26

### *The Doctor's Song*

The Doctor must be hating this, Finn thought. Everyone in the courtyard of Vusunus, come to say goodbye. Although 'everyone', in this instance, only amounted to four: Kedron, Mahhrk, Aihleah, the Diakonos. Even so, she had the feeling he couldn't wait to get away. He was standing right in front of the TARDIS door, one hand on it, ready to open it as soon as he could. But he was deep in conversation with the Diakonos and Kedron right now. As she watched, Kedron broke away with a final nod at the Doctor, and headed toward her. Over his shoulder,

she saw the Diakonos and the Doctor resume their conversation. She wondered what they were talking about with such serious faces.

She abandoned that line of thought as Kedron came up to her. She held out her hand, and he gripped it with both of his.

“Thank you,” he said simply. “For everything you’ve done. I know you haven’t had an easy time of it here. But we’re grateful. I’m grateful. We were so lucky you and the Doctor turned up at just the right moment.”

“The Doctor’s got a history of doing that,” she said lightly, though she felt suddenly close to tears.

“I wish it hadn’t been at such a cost to you,” he said.

“Not just me,” she shrugged. “What about Arrem?” *And Esker, and Riada, and Ledramai? And everyone else who died on this planet because of the Brollachan? Not that it knew what it was doing...* She shook her head to dispel that line of thought, and asked, “Is he going to be all right?”

“The Diakonos’ll see to that, don’t worry,” Kedron said. “He says everything will be all right, now.”

“Does he?” Finn threw a quick glance at the slight, quiet man alongside the tall figure of the Doctor. Although ‘man’ wasn’t really the right word, was it? He’d confirmed as much himself. Still, it was easier to think of him as a man. She looked back at Kedron. “And he’s always right, isn’t he?” she smiled.

Kedron smiled back.

“Always,” he said. Suddenly he leaned forward, and kissed her on the cheek. Then he smiled at her again, and withdrew, to be replaced by Mahhrk and Aihleah, who’d been waiting their turn. Mahhrk had his arm around his wife’s shoulders; she had hers around his waist. They wore almost identical expressions, a mix of gladness and sadness.

“I wish we could have known you and the Doctor for longer,” Mahhrk said regretfully. “You’ve done so much for us. I wish you’d stay long enough for us to show our appreciation.”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret, Mahhrk – you’re lucky he came back here at all,” Finn confided in a stage whisper. “He doesn’t exactly overdo goodbyes, as a rule.”

“Ah,” said Mahhrk, nodding. “Well, I’m glad he made an exception this time. Because this way I can tell you you’ll always be remembered. Both of you. And particularly you.”

Finn frowned at him uncertainly. “Why me?”

“Your song,” said Mahhrk. “Aihleah recorded it, that night in the Glade of the Meeting Fire.” Finn looked quickly at Aihleah, who smiled conspiratorially at her. Finn pretended to frown for a moment, but she didn’t mean it, and Aihleah knew it.

“So it can be part of *our* planet’s culture now,” Mahhrk went on, pulling his wife even closer to him as an indicator of his own feelings. “I’ll play it, and sing it. And I’ll go on playing and singing it. I’ll call it ‘Finn’s Song’. So everyone will remember you. The girl who gave us a song from another world! The girl who helped save *our* world. Finn and the Doctor. We’ll never forget you, either of you.”

Finn shook her head decisively. “Not my song,” she said. “It’s about him. Though I didn’t know that when I wrote the words. Call it ‘the Doctor’s Song’, Mahhrk. Please.”

Mark saw the look in her eyes, and nodded.

“‘The Doctor’s Song,’” he agreed. “But we’ll always go on singing it. So it’ll never end.”

As she heard those words, something in Finn’s mind quivered restlessly, as if she was on the verge of remembering something. As if something in the Doctor’s mind in hers was on the point of surfacing...

But it didn’t – quite. She didn’t like the feeling of unease that came with the impression, nor the way the unease lingered after the sensation had gone. But when she tried to follow it up, dig down into his mind in hers for whatever it was, it eluded her.

She saw Mahhrk’s dark eyes fixed on her face, as if he could tell something wasn’t quite right. But she could hardly explain. So she smiled at him instead.

“‘The Doctor’s Song’ will never end,” she repeated, softly. “That’s a wonderful promise... Thank you, Mahhrk.”

“And now you must go,” said the Diakonos.

The Doctor nodded emphatically.

“Yeah, well – we’ll be off in a minute, promise. Out of your hair. Leave you in peace. All that stuff.”

The Diakonos looked at him gravely. “You know what I mean, Doctor. The Ood have called you. You should have responded long ago.”

The Doctor’s eyes were dark, and he didn’t reply.

“Doctor, you must not delay any longer,” said the Diakonos in a tone that bordered on urgency. “If you do not obey the summons of the Ood swiftly, you endanger everything you hope to have achieved here. You have already left it perilously late – perhaps too late, already, for some things. If you are to preserve Fionnula’s future – and your own – you *must* go. You cannot oppose the whole universe, the whole of Time, and emerge unscathed.”

The Doctor stared at him resentfully. But in his heart of hearts, he knew the Diakonos was right.

He’d been trying to delay the inevitable, pretending the summons hadn’t happened, in effect childishly shutting his eyes and hoping it would go away. Knowing all the time the futility of what he was doing.

He’d thought that only he would be affected by that. But now, it seemed – and he had no doubt the Diakonos was telling him the truth – he was somehow putting Finn into jeopardy by it, too. And she, of all people, didn’t deserve that from him.

He no longer had a choice.

Though, of course, when it came right down to it, he never really *had* had a choice, all along.

He said nothing, but his tortured eyes were easy to read.

“Do not despair, Doctor,” the Diakonos said swiftly. “A sacrifice made for another carries more weight than a choice made for oneself. You’re looking after her, are you not? Be assured that you – you *and* Fionnula – *will* get your reward. This is my personal promise, to both of you.”

The Doctor’s brow creased as he hesitated on the cusp of his uncertainty. He glanced over at Finn, making sure there was no possibility she could overhear him, before he spoke, his voice low and urgent and intense.

“But she’s going to disappear! Something’s going to happen to her, and she going to become a missing person! Did you know that?” A piercing look at the Diakonos’s face confirmed it. “You *do* know that! So what’s going to happen to her? Why does she just vanish one day and never go home again? Do you know?”

“Yes, I know,” said the Diakonos quietly. “And I can no more tell you about this than I could about the other question you sought the answer to. You *cannot* know at this time, Doctor. You can only wait for the future, just as she will have to. Every question has an answer. But every answer can only be given at the right time. And it is not yet the time.”

The Doctor searched his face intently, still trying to glean the knowledge he now knew he wasn’t going to get. Then he abruptly looked away and called, “Finn! Come on! Taxi’s at the door!”

Finn turned with one last gesture of farewell to Kedron, Mahhrk and Aihleah, and came toward them.

“I’ll be inside,” said the Doctor briefly, and slipped into the TARDIS.

The Diakonos turned to Finn and took both her hands in his.

“Farewell, Fionnula,” he said gently. “Though we will meet again, I promise you that.”

“Kedron said you’d told him *everything* was going to be all right, now,” she said; it was hard to speak past the sudden lump in her throat. “And that you were always right.”

The Diakonos smiled at her.

“And is *he* right? About *everything*?” she persisted, urgently. “What about the Doctor?”

“Remember what I told you, Fionnula. True justice is always even-handed,” the Diakonos reminded her. “Penalties must be applied for sins, rewards for good done. That never changes.”

“Well, you know which one I think he’s done more of,” said Finn defiantly.

“Yes,” agreed the Diakonos. “I know.” He took her into his embrace and held her to him for a few moments. Then he let her go, and watched her wipe tears from her cheeks with a hurried gesture; so the Doctor wouldn’t see them, he knew.

“Have faith, Fionnula,” he said reassuringly.

She stared at him wordlessly, then suddenly flung herself again into his receiving arms, burying her face in the hollow of his shoulder. He held her the way her father might have held her, had he still been alive. Then he took her head between his hands and kissed her on the forehead. She turned away toward the TARDIS, halting in the doorway to give him one last look.

“How long?” she asked, so many emotions combined in her tremulous voice that they could not be separated from one another.

He did not answer directly. “Watch for me, Fionnula,” he said, reassuringly. “And trust me.”

She swallowed, hard. Then the door closed behind her.

The wheezing, groaning sound of the TARDIS engines became audible, rising in volume. As the Diakonos watched, the TARDIS dematerialized.

And he smiled.

\*

Finn came up the ramp, blowing out a loud breath to dispel the last traces of the emotions she’d just been experiencing, and joined the Doctor at the console. He cocked an eyebrow at her, but didn’t comment.

“Right!” he said vigorously. “Now where to? Got any preferences?”

“Not home, then?” she said, surprised and relieved. She’d been half-expecting him to take her back, the way he’d been doing between their trips.

“Nah,” said the Doctor dismissively. “Not dumping you back on Earth where there’s nothing happening.” He found himself thinking again about her future disappearance. He couldn’t change that, it seemed; not since his future self had forbidden it. But that didn’t mean he had to rush her back toward it! Not yet...

Somewhat to his surprise, he realized she was chuckling to herself.

“What?” he demanded. Finn looked at him with eyes that were full of a decidedly impish amusement – though still more red-rimmed than she probably realized.

“You’ve just made me think about something my grandfather told me once,” she told him. “He used to get *The Reader’s Digest*. And, in it, he said he read about the best bit of graffiti *ever*.”

The Doctor lifted his eyebrows. “Oh? What was that, then?”

“Apparently someone once scrawled ‘*Is there intelligent life on earth?*’ on a wall somewhere, and underneath it, someone else added ‘*Yes, but I’m only visiting*’...” Finn looked at him with mischievous speculation. “I don’t suppose that was *you*, by any chance...?”

The Doctor looked at her with wide eyes and an expression of blank innocence.

“Okay, what now? Anywhere particular you want to go, or shall we do a bit of procrastinating?” he asked, with a blatant change of subject. He waited to see if she’d go with the prompt he’d fed her, and she duly obliged.

“Well, we *could* procrastinate, but then again, we could do that later,” she said innocently.

The Doctor grinned. “In that case...!” He abruptly fiddled with some of the controls.

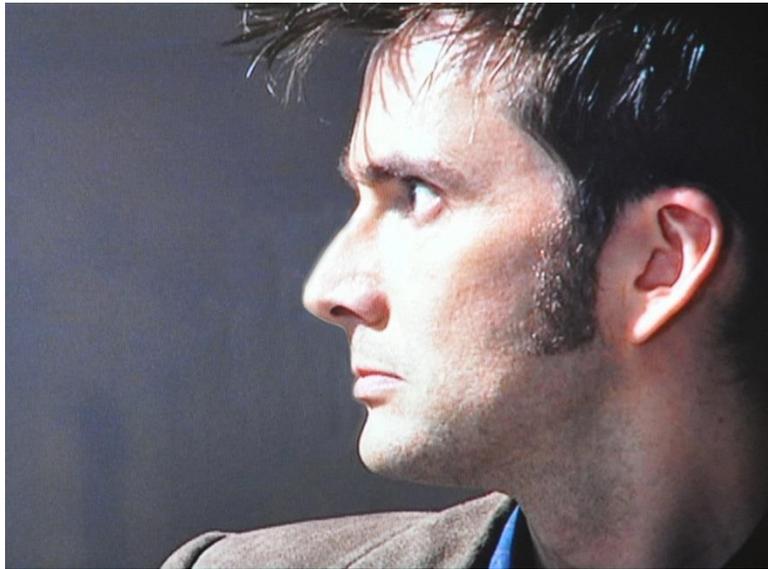
“Right, on our way,” he said. As if in confirmation, the Time Rotor began to rise and fall.

“Where are we going?” Finn enquired.

“Ariahq Seven.”

“And what are we going to do there?”

“Ah-ah-ah!” The Doctor brandished an admonitory forefinger. “Spoilers...!”



## Chapter 27

### *Revelation of the Sunsinger*

Ariahq Seven – or the part of it she could see, anyway – reminded Finn of a rainforest on Earth. Except that all the vegetation tended to various shades of blue rather than green. And she could see a fair bit of it, from here. The Ariahqua had built a huge platform above the tops of the trees, facing down a wide valley that stretched into the far distance. In the sky above the valley, gradually sinking down toward the billowing treetops, Ariahq’s sun was starting to set.

Hundreds of people were crowded against the parapet of the platform, raising a continual buzz of hushed but excited anticipation. On the right hand side, the last two at the end of the crowd, the Doctor and Finn likewise pressed against the parapet.

“That valley...” Finn breathed. “It’s incredible! Straight as a die, for miles and miles!”

“Forty-two miles, if you really want to know,” said the Doctor, squinting into the distance. Finn looked suitably impressed.

“So what is it we’ve come to see?” she asked. She had no idea what to expect, but the mood of the crowd had infected her, and she felt a rising sense of eagerness.

“Oi! Patience!” the Doctor reproved her. “They’ll tell you, in a minute.”

Even as he spoke, a woman’s voice was suddenly broadcast into the air around them.

“Welcome, everyone, to the Evening of the Sunsinger,” she said, smooth as any tour guide. “We’re delighted to see so many come to enjoy the most spectacular aural experience our planet provides. The song of the Sunsinger birds, who live only in this one valley, and give voice to one of the most beautiful sounds the galaxy has to offer as they sing the sun to its rest when it sets in the exact point where the Valley of the Sunsingers intersects with the horizon – something that happens just once a year! So this is a very special evening...”

Finn went on half-listening as the guide offered the speculations of various scientific studies on the reason for the Sunsinger’s behaviour and gushed enthusiasm about the nature and quality of its song.

“Have you been here before? I mean, have you already heard this?” she asked the Doctor.

He shook his head. “No – first time for me, too.”

“Well, thanks,” Finn said, with an eager smile. “I’m really looking forward to this!”

“So you should, the way she’s talking it up,” the Doctor said, listening to the commentary, but thinking about something Finn had said to him after they’d left Felindre. “*An experience shared is an experience doubled... Whatever’s going on, the dynamic’s improved by sharing it with someone...*” And her love of the natural wonders of the universe. Which was what had given him the idea of bringing her here.

“The birds will circle over the valley, joining in song, and then one by one they will return to their roosts until just one is left,” the guide was saying. “It has never been established how the last bird is chosen, but it is he that sings until the very instant the sun sets. Then – ”

She suddenly broke off her discourse and her voice took on a note of real exhilaration.

“There, ladies and gentlemen! There are the first Sunsingers, rising from the trees! Please keep silence, now, and experience one of the most beautiful natural choruses in the whole of creation!”

Obediently the spectators fell silent. Finn leaned forward eagerly. Out over the vast valley, she could see shapes beginning to rise from the forest; bird after bird rising aloft and joining each other in a huge column, circling around in unhurried curves as if they were being borne aloft by the updraft of a thermal. She couldn't see what they looked like – they were simply black shapes against the fiery colours of the sky – but she could hear them, their combined song becoming louder and louder. And the guide had been right. This *had* to be one of the most beautiful sounds in the entire universe. She simply didn't have the words to describe it. She looked at the Doctor, and he at her, and they both smiled broadly.

For long minutes the birds circled and sang. Hundreds, perhaps even thousands of them. Then, as the underside of the lurid orange disc at the head of the valley touched the horizon, slowly, one by one, they began to sheer off, groups of them swooping in huge, lazy curves back down to the forest, like starlings seeking their roosts for the night. Slowly the sky emptied of them, as the sun sank down below the horizon. Until there was just one small black shape, singing to the setting orb.

“Listen carefully, ladies and gentleman,” the guide suddenly interrupted, in a suitably hushed and reverential tone. “The sun is about to set, and he'll stop singing when it does. So make the most of this. His song will end soon.”

Just for a moment, the words didn't register with the Doctor. Then they did. His eyes grew wide and horrified; instantly his head snapped round toward Finn, praying that the guide's words hadn't acted as a trigger phrase.

To no avail.

He saw the play of expression across her face; the tightening of the muscles at the corners of her eyes, which became unfocused as she concentrated on the messages unfurling in her brain. He knew – he just *knew* – that she could hear Carmen's voice, that lilting Caribbean accent saying, ‘*You be careful, because your song is ending, sir...*’ And before her, Ood Sigma telling him, “*I think your song is ending soon... Every song must end.*” Then the relaxation of those same eye muscles so the eyes could widen as the import of her new knowledge sank in. The opening of the mouth in a gasp of dismay. The anguish in the look that she now turned on him, begging him to deny what she had just learned.

Neither of them spoke, just stared at each other with mutual consternation, as the last Sunsinger bird continued to warble out his unbearably beautiful song.

Until the sun sank below the horizon moments later, and the song ended.

Finn didn't wait to hear it. She flung herself away from the parapet and ran into the woods behind the platform, away from everyone else, at such speed that even the Doctor couldn't catch up with her for a moment or two. When he did, and reached out to grab at her upper arm, she twisted away from him and shook him off, violently, not even turning to look at him. She ran on, back to where the TARDIS stood beside a clump of bushes. She didn't slacken speed as she headed for the door, just snapped her fingers and kept going; the door swung open only just in time to admit her. She went up the ramp, then halted in front of the console, her back rigid and unforgiving.

The Doctor paused to close the door behind him, then followed her. Slowly he took off his greatcoat and dropped it into the receiving arms of the pillar, as he had done so many times, but quietly, without his usual flourish. Another pace or two toward her, and then he stopped.

“Finn...” he began, uncertainly.

She whirled to face him, arms folded, body language tense.

“Right,” she said, in a tone that brooked no refusal. “Song ending. Explain.”

“You’re sounding like Donna again,” he said, with forced lightness. But he couldn’t keep it up. After a pause, he began again, and the ache of sorrow in his voice was clear to be heard.

“Something’s going to happen. Soon... I didn’t want to tell you because...” He stopped, and started again. “Look – because of what happened between us when we met, you’ve been” – again, he changed what he was going to say – “you *are* my friend in a way that no-one else ever has been. Closer, in a lot of ways, even than Donna. Even Rose. And Rose is – was – ” He couldn’t complete the sentence.

She nodded. She knew.

“But you’re special, too,” said the Doctor urgently. “In a different way. You’re absolutely unique, in all of time and space. Because of having so much of me in you. You’ve been able to understand in a way that no-one else ever could. And you’ve never questioned me. Never made demands. Always trusted me. Tried to make things easy for me. Happy.”

He looked deep into her eyes. His own were dark and intent, with such pain in them she had no choice but to put her own distress aside; instinctively she came forward, reaching out to take hold of his hand, gripping it anxiously.

“Doctor,” she said, trying to keep her voice under control. Trying to understand. “What is it? Are you – are you saying goodbye?”

He was silent for long moments, and his eyes were shadowed with anguish. He said, “I don’t know.”

## Chapter 28

### *The Consequences of Prophecy*

“Doctor... What is it?”

“A prophecy,” he said grimly. “More than once. I’ve been told. By sources I trust. My song is ending. Soon.” He felt her hand tighten convulsively over his. “And the universe – Time – whatever you want to call the cause of it – doesn’t go to such lengths unless it’s something serious. I don’t know what it means. Yet. But...”

The expression in his eyes changed to desperation, the foreknowledge of impending loss, of grief.

“It means that any time I see you, might be the last time.” His mouth twisted as if he were about to cry, and his hand closed around hers in a crushing grip, as if he meant never to let go. Not just because she was herself, his friend, but because at that moment she represented everyone and everything he feared he was going to lose.

Finn stared at him. And as she did so, a lot of things started to fall into place.

Why he’d given her the sonic screwdriver.

Why he’d given her some more of his mind.

Why he’d allowed her to keep it in the first place.

He’d known all along that he was going to die. Assuming that was what the ending of his ‘song’ meant. Since before they’d ever met, he’d known. And he’d been fighting it, all the time, ever since. First by ignoring it. Then by trying to avoid it. But knowing all the time there was no escape.

It might also go some way to explaining why he’d kept visiting her the way he’d been doing. He’d been afraid to take her travelling with him on a full-time basis, like former companions, because of his awareness of the impending end of his ‘song’. He’d been afraid it would happen while she was with him. Put her at risk. Yet, conversely, he couldn’t bring himself to just abandon her, discard her. Not with the connection between them, his mind in hers. And while in one way he’d feared the commitment of a companion, in another, he couldn’t have borne to be completely friendless at this time. He hadn’t wanted to bear the burden of that knowledge alone.

She’d been the compromise.

She remembered reading something, long ago, about the way people behave in life-threatening situations; how the urge to reproduce is intensified in such circumstances, no matter how illogically, even when there is no hope of surviving long enough to do so.

That, in a different way, was what the Doctor had been doing.

He'd given her as much of his mind, of himself, as she could safely absorb, in an effort to ensure he lived on. In her. Even though she was only a human, with only a human lifespan. Of course, he might regenerate, not die. But, even so, he'd be changed. This way, he would live on as he was now, as the man, the personality he was now. While she lived on, with his mind in hers, he wouldn't truly die...

But she closed her eyes, trying to contain her pain at the possibility that he might. How could she bear to be separated forever from this special, special man? Who, in his own way, was telling her that he knew what she felt about him, and was now telling her what *he* felt about *her*.

She opened her eyes again, knowing they were luminous with as yet unshed tears, and gazed at him, seeing how drawn and sad his face was. How could it not be? He was facing yet more loss, having borne so many losses already. How could he bear it? Even a Time Lord's hearts couldn't bear an infinite burden of grief. What could she possibly do to ease it for him?

Impulsively, she reached up to take his face between her hands.

"Doctor, listen. That's always true. For *anyone*. Anything can happen to anybody, at any moment. We've both learned that in the hardest way possible, haven't we, you and I? It's *always* a possibility that any time you see anyone might be the last time. But you don't go through life thinking like that. Of course you *know* it. But you *ignore* it. You bury it deep down in your awareness and you get on with enjoying the time you have with your friends, and your loves, and you make the most of them while they're there. Because you know they *won't* always be. It's inevitable they won't always be. Because life is transient. Not Life, with a capital 'L' – that always survives, in some form or another. But individual lives *are* transient. We can't change it. But what we can do is celebrate and treasure what we do have, for as long as we have it, yeah?"

She tightened her hands around his face, and gave it the tiniest shake for emphasis, willing him to listen to what she was saying. His eyes, huge and dark, were searching hers almost hungrily, and he opened his mouth as if about to say something.

She instantly forestalled him by putting an imperative finger over his lips.

"No, shut up," she ordered. "For once in your life, keep quiet. Let me finish what I'm saying. Or I might never get to say it."

He looked startled, but obeyed. She dropped the finger, and went on.

"Look, right now you're still here, and so am I. And so are lots of your other friends. Maybe this thing you're afraid of is 'soon'. But 'soon' could be a relative term. Time's been going on for quite a while, and it'll go *on* for quite a while, too! And 'soon' isn't 'yet'. Not yet! So here we are. Still here. And even if it does turn out to be sooner than we think – well, hasn't it been just *brilliant*?"

She smiled at him, even as a tear escaped and trickled down her cheek. She ignored it.

"You say I'm special. Which, coming from you, means something! But hasn't it *all* been special? Not just the things we've done together, you and me. All the things *you've* done! All the other friends you've done them with! Haven't they been special for *you*? Isn't that something to be glad of? To celebrate? For as long as 'always' means something?"

He let out a sound halfway between a sob and a laugh, and pulled her to him.

"Oh, Fionnula Thornton," he whispered into her hair. "You just don't realize how special you are, do you?"

Her face was buried in his chest, but he felt her body tremble with laughter. He hoped it was laughter, anyway...

"Of course I do," she said, her voice muffled by his jacket. "I've got so much of you in me, how could I *not*? And anyway, don't forget – "

She broke off, suddenly, with a small gasp as if she wanted to take those last four words back, make them unspoken.

Something in her voice made the Doctor pull back, letting her go, to look at her searchingly. “What? Don’t forget what?”

Finn looked away, obviously reluctant to answer.

“Come on! Don’t forget *what?*” he persisted.

“I don’t want to hurt you any more than you already are,” she said, almost pleading, but he didn’t relent; his eyes silently insisted on a response.

“All right, then! Look,” she said, almost crossly. “Not long after Mynydd y Seren, someone said something in casual conversation to me about something breaking his heart. That got one of your memories fired up in my head. You said that to someone – I don’t know who. A man who looked like he came from the Victorian era. You said, ‘*They break my heart.*’ You were talking about us – your friends. Your companions. Because sooner or later we all leave, for some reason or another.”

“Yeah,” said the Doctor, recognizing he couldn’t avoid the subject. Not now she’d raised it. “I said that to Jackson Lake. And you were right about the Victorian bit. Met him in London. Fighting the Cybermen. He’d lost...” He hesitated, then rolled his shoulders in a shrug. “Anyway, he understood what I meant.”

She suddenly turned and took a few paces away from him, then stood there, her hands thrust deep into her pockets, her shoulders slightly hunched. The Doctor watched her silently, puzzled. He couldn’t work out what she was thinking.

After a few moments her shoulders straightened, and she stretched her neck upwards, her head tipping back slightly, as if she’d passed some sort of crisis. Then she relaxed into a more normal posture, but remained facing away from him as she spoke.

“So don’t forget it works both ways,” she said unexpectedly, still sounding something close to angry.

“What d’you mean?” he replied, almost involuntarily.

“Losing someone you care about. All right – you lose us,” she agreed. “But *we* lose *you*, you know. And it breaks *our* hearts. For most of us, that happens *afterwards.*” She spun round to face him, her eyes sombre. “But knowing you – knowing *about* you – as I do, do you think I don’t already *know* you won’t always be part of my life, Doctor? That one day something’ll happen and I won’t see you again? Doesn’t matter what the reason is. It’ll happen! You’re the best and closest friend I’ve ever had. Ever will have! I’ll never be as close to anyone ever again as I am to you! Even though we haven’t actually spent that long in each other’s company, when you stop to add it up... But at some point it was always going to end, wasn’t it? Maybe because something happened to me. Maybe because something happened to you. But *it was always going to end!* Don’t you think *I* might find that just a bit heart-breaking?”

She looked at him almost angrily; her eyes were too bright, too shining now.

“Because I know you choose never to come back.” She double-tapped her forehead almost savagely, reinforcing the point that she had his memories. “Even Sarah Jane – you only came across her again by accident, not because you set out to. None of the others knew it ahead of time. *But I do.* So don’t think you’ve got a monopoly on the heartbreak thing, will you? Or that this one loss is going hurt me any less than all those others have hurt you!”

She spun away again, her body rigid with emotion.

Silently, he came forward and put a hand lightly on her shoulder. Initially she was braced and unyielding, but after a few moments she relaxed under his touch.

“I’m sorry,” said the Doctor quietly. “I’m so sorry.”

“So am I,” she admitted, lifting a hand to wipe her eyes. She turned back to face him. “I always swore to myself I wasn’t going to do this to you. Put you under emotional pressure. I knew how hard it’d already been for you. I never intended to add to it. I meant to keep my distance. Be your friend. *Help* you. And now look at me. Best laid plans of mice and men, and all that. *I really* didn’t want to do this to you.” She looked up at him with troubled eyes. “Sorry, Doctor.”

There was a brief pause.

"I always knew I'd die some day, I suppose," he said at last. "It's just – you always think, *not yet*. *Not now*... But this time, it is going to be *now*..."

"Come off it! You're not going to die," Finn said roughly, almost scornfully. "Don't they say nobody truly dies until all the lives they've touched have ended as well? You've already made too much difference! All the things you've done, all the lives you've affected, throughout the whole of history! On that basis, how long do you think it'll take the Universe to get over *you*? At a conservative estimate" – she pursed her lips, as if doing a mental calculation – "ooh, I'd say approximately *never*, wouldn't you? And for what it's worth, you'll certainly be here as long as I'm around. Even if I am only a human. You're *here*, Doctor!" She double-tapped her forehead, staring at him. "*I've got you!*"

There was a tiny movement of his head, that with great imagination might be defined as a nod, and another silence.

Then a thought seemed to strike Finn, and she looked at him penetratingly.

"Does the Diakonos know?" Then, when the Doctor didn't reply, "He *does*, doesn't he?" She thought back to some of the things the Diakonos had said to her, and she was sure. "He does." It was no longer a question.

The Doctor couldn't put off the moment of truth any longer.

"I've been summoned, Finn. He told me I've already nearly left it too late. He said I'd be putting you in danger if I put it off any longer. You said 'soon' wasn't 'yet'. But it is."

She closed her eyes as if in pain. When she opened them, he was already operating controls. The TARDIS was taking her home. Taking her to the end. The end of time with the Doctor.

She'd known it was going to happen; she'd admitted as much to him. But only now did she know how much she'd been avoiding the reality of the moment. Presumably because she'd known it was going to hurt this much. And it felt so much like abandoning him, just to let him take her home like this, without putting up a fight. She longed to do that. But if she did that, it would only cause him even greater distress, and it would be to no avail. He wouldn't take her with him; she knew that. So it was pointless to put anything into words. There was too much to say, and words had become too small a medium. Besides, there was no need. He'd been inside her mind; he already knew what she'd say. And she had his mind in hers; she already knew what he'd say.

So neither of them said anything, and when the TARDIS was on its way and he slumped back onto the pilot's seat, staring at nothing, she simply came and sat beside him. He was taking this parting so very hard; she could sense it. Not just because he was parting from her; because of what he believed the future held for him, it was what this parting represented about that future. She had to try to help him. Maybe she could ameliorate her own distress by addressing his.

"Well, I hope you're going to look after yourself," she said, slipping her arm through his and giving it an encouraging squeeze. "And keep looking after *us*. The Earth, I mean. For as long as you've got. With your shield or on it, Doctor. Promise me?"

He threw her a glance that she found hard to read.

"I'm still looking after *you*," he said.

That's what he'd said on Eutychia. "*I'm still looking after you. I want you to remember that. Even if – for any reason – I'm not here at any time. I'm still looking after you.*" Of course; he'd already known this was coming. Even then, he'd been trying to tell her. While not telling her, of course.

"Then I'll be all right, won't I?" How *hard* it was, this business of trying to be brave, trying to be cheerful, when your heart was breaking! But she was determined to be both, for his sake. "It's a Kylie thing, isn't it? Can't get you out of my head! Your song's turned out to be the biggest earworm of them all."

He couldn't help smiling. At least she'd made him smile. At least she'd done that much.

Then the TARDIS landed. With a final squeeze, Finn disengaged her arm from the Doctor's.

They sat in silence for a while, both contemplating the Time Rotor with expressionless faces. At last, without looking at him, Finn gently slapped him a couple of times on the thigh with a '*well-I'd-better-get-on-with-it*' gesture and got to her feet. She stood for a moment, still gazing at the Time Rotor. Then she leaned forward and rested her palm on it for a moment.

“You beautiful old thing,” she murmured. “Thanks for everything.”

Then she dropped her hand and turned to walk on around the console, toward the ramp. The Doctor followed her for a couple of paces, but then stopped, and let her go on alone, down the ramp, to the door.

She’d thought that coming to terms with her family’s death was the hardest thing she’d ever had to do, but that was no longer true. The hardest thing she’d ever had to do, she was doing now. Not going back to the Doctor and flinging her arms around him – she dared not; because if she did she’d never, *never* be able to let go – but instead, walking away from him, leaving him, walking out of the TARDIS. For the last time.

She couldn’t do it without stopping and looking back at him once more. One last message to reiterate. She raised her hand, and double-tapped her forehead. He nodded. Then she stepped out of the TARDIS, and the door clicked shut behind her.

## Chapter 29

### *Finale...*

Finn crouched in a crevice in the rocks, trying to control her panicked gasps for breath. If she stayed here, perfectly still, her presence shouldn’t be detected. And she knew how crucial it was for her that it wasn’t.

Beside her, the peat-coloured waters of the Dart tumbled past, purposefully heading down the valley, just as if nothing was happening. And yet so much had. Was.

These final days of December had been too much. Everyone else around her going about their lives, caught up in the run-up to Christmas, while all the time she had been waiting for something, some hint of what had happened to the Doctor. She was convinced that with his mind in hers, she’d know when something did. But one week – two – three... Nothing. Nothing at all.

In the end she couldn’t bear being cooped up in her house any more, pacing, waiting. On an impulse she’d come back here, back to Dartmeet, just to be at the place where she’d last been with him on Earth. The place which represented the nearest she could get to him, now.

Despite the clear blue sky and winter sunshine and the popular location, there hadn’t been many people about. Too busy with the holiday season, probably. Which had suited her mood perfectly. And such as there were, she had actively avoided. She’d heard some of them nearby, coming along the path by the river toward where she was, and had immediately acted upon the instinct which urged her to conceal her presence from them – hide where she could see them, but they couldn’t see her. Afterwards, she wondered why that instinct had been so strong and so instant. But at the time, she’d had no leisure for contemplating that. Because that was when it had happened.

When every single one of them had become the Master.

She’d watched the transformation; felt the force acting on them try to invade her the same way. But it was as if she was shielded, by something that deflected the force, so that it slid away, unable to touch her. She’d recognized what it was – the Doctor’s mind, in hers. It was as if he was standing there, forbidding entrance to the attacker.

*I’m still looking after you...*

But everyone else...! Everyone else was now the same man.

She’d been able to identify him instantly. The Doctor’s memories that had come racing up into her head didn’t contain that startlingly blond hair, but the slim build, the blunt, clever features, the compelling eyes – the Doctor knew them all, and now so did she. There was no mistaking him. The men, the women – everyone had become the Master.

Except her.

She didn’t know what was happening, but she did know that she mustn’t be found.

And she also knew that whatever was going on, it had to involve the Doctor. The end of his song – it must be near, now. The Master’s presence showed that.

What could she do?

For the moment, nothing. Except hide. Make sure she wasn't found. Keep clear of everyone until she had a better idea of what was happening.

She'd stayed where she was, listening to the excited conversation of the several Masters clustered only twenty yards or so away, gleaning what she could. Learning that it wasn't just a local phenomenon, nor even a national one. The whole world had become the Master.

Which meant the whole world had just become her enemy.

Briefly, she wondered why she alone seemed to be immune from what had happened. It could only be something to do with the Doctor's mind in hers; that was the only thing that made her different from all other human beings. Was that what he'd meant when he'd said he was still looking after her? Had he known something like this was going to happen?

There was no way of knowing. But the further away she was from everyone else, the safer she would be. Cautiously, she'd crept away from the group, making her way downstream, heart in her mouth the whole time lest she encounter any other Masters. And when she'd reached the place where she'd brought the Doctor – such a short time ago, and yet now it seemed so long ago! – she'd found this crevice in the rocks alongside the river, where she could remain hidden and yet still see if anyone came along the path. Now she began to think furiously, trying to work out what to do for the best.

Pulling up the Internet on her phone merely confirmed what she'd overheard. Any live pictures showed Masters, no matter which country she researched. How was it being done? And could it be undone? She swallowed nervously; the alternative didn't bear thinking about.

But who could she ask? Everyone seemed to have suffered the same fate. Even – she realized with horror, shying away from the thought – even Sarah Jane, who would have been the person she would automatically have turned to...

Which was when she realized that there *was* somebody she could ask. Someone who was more likely than anybody else to know what was happening, and how. And someone who would have been unaffected by this mass conversion of the human race into one rogue Time Lord.

She summoned up the number on her phone and made the call. Within two seconds, the connection was made, and – keeping her voice low, so there was no chance of her being overheard – she murmured the five words on which all her hopes hinged.

“Mr Smith – I need you!”

She couldn't help gasping with relief as the familiar voice sounded in her ear. Thank heaven Sarah Jane and the Xylok between them had made this arrangement whereby she could contact him whenever she needed to, using a special number he'd allocated for her use only. Already, she felt less alone.

“Finn! Are you all right?” he asked promptly.

“Yes. Sort of,” she amended. “I'm in hiding. But – the Master... I've seen what's happened to everyone. Mr Smith, what's going on? What about Sarah Jane?” She couldn't bring herself to ask about Luke or Clyde or Rani.

“I have not been able to contact her,” Mr Smith said with a lack of expression so marked that it spoke volumes. “I have therefore been forced to conclude that she has been affected by the phenomenon you have witnessed. I have detected only three exceptions on the entire planet. Everyone else has been transformed into a replica of the Master.”

Finn's brow creased. “Three? Who are the others?”

“Donna Noble and Wilfred Mott are the only other human beings beside yourself who have not suffered this conversion. This has been confirmed by my monitoring of mobile telephone communications; a conversation that took place between them not long ago.”

“And what about the Doctor? Is he here?”

“I have detected the presence of the TARDIS on Earth,” said Mr Smith. “It is currently located on an estate in south-east England belonging to one Joshua Naismith.”

Finn thought swiftly. The Doctor's memories were fresh on this; how he had had to invade Donna's mind to save her life and protect her from ever remembering him again, and his previous contacts with Wilf, Donna's grandfather. Maybe he'd had to do something similar for him at some point. If so, it would be the common denominator between the three of them, explain their immunity to the transformation that had affected everyone else.

"How's it been done? What did the Master *do*?" she asked.

"I have been able to ascertain that Joshua Naismith is in the possession of some alien technology belonging to a race called the Vinvocci, intended for medical use. The most logical explanation is that the Master has gained access to this device and has used it to overwrite all humankind with his DNA."

"Can it be reversed?"

"I am unable to answer at this time."

Finn bit her lip. She couldn't put into action her instinctive impulse, to go to find the Doctor. She'd never travel from Devon to the South East without being detected.

"What can I do, Mr Smith?"

"Are you safe in your current location?"

"As safe as I can be." She described her circumstances and her hiding place. "But anyone – any Master – might come along at any moment."

"If you are able to, you would be wisest to remain where you are for the moment," Mr Smith advised her. "I will contact you if there are any new developments. Please make sure to put your phone into silent mode for your own safety."

"You bet," Finn muttered. After a pause, she said, "Thank you, Mr Smith. It's – good to know you're there. I was feeling very alone."

"You are not alone, Finn," Mr Smith reassured her. "I am here, and I will do my best to look after you. As Sarah Jane would wish me to do."

*You're not the only one to promise that*, Finn thought, remembering the Doctor's words. Aloud, she said, "I know you will. Thank you." She ended the call.

And then, despite everything, she fell asleep. Afterwards, she could never believe she'd done that. How strange that, with the world and the Doctor in peril, cramped into this crevice in the cold rocks with the winter waters of the Dart chattering in her ears, she'd even been *able* to sleep! Perhaps it had been some kind of self-protective mechanism kicking in. But sleep she had, though she never knew for how long.

When she woke, it was suddenly. Incautiously, she began to move. Then two things happened, almost instantaneously. She remembered where she was and why; and, with a sudden surge of adrenalin, she realized what had woken her.

Voices.

Two speakers, but only one voice, of course. The same voice. The Master's voice.

*The ultimate case of talking to yourself*. Despite the danger she was in, the thumping of her heart, for one brief moment she smiled inwardly as the thought flashed into her mind. *Bet that's what you'd've said, isn't it, Doctor?*

But he wasn't there. He was somewhere else. And he must be in even more danger. If the Master was such a threat to her, what peril must the Doctor be in?

But she had more immediate matters to think about. The rough path through the trees skirted the edges of the rocks some fifteen feet or so above the level of the river. She could still hear the voices, though because of the noise of the river she couldn't hear what they were saying. Carefully – and very, very slowly, so as not to draw attention to herself with any sudden movements – she shifted her position to be able to look up to where the voices were coming from.

Two of them, standing on the path, looking down at the river, one upstream, the other down. Finn crouched lower in her hiding place as one of them suddenly left the path and came down onto the flat rock platform not far

away to once again scan the valley in both directions. He turned and shook his head at the other Master, and climbed back up to the path.

Just as he reached his companion they froze, suddenly, with an odd look mirrored on the two identical faces. Something was happening – what? Then their heads began to move...



### **Chapter 30** **...and Vale**

Finn stared, transfixed, as the transformation began to reverse itself. That superfast shaking of the heads that she had witnessed earlier was now happening again, but instead of becoming the Master – they were becoming themselves again!

She watched as the shaking ceased. The two Masters were gone, leaving in their place a middle-aged couple, visibly bewildered. Finn couldn't hear what they were saying to each other, but at least it was now a man's voice and a woman's voice, not the Master's. They turned away, heading upstream, and were soon gone.

When they were out of sight, Finn stood up, but didn't move to follow them. Despite appearances, how could she be sure it wouldn't happen again? She had no intention of revealing her presence to anyone until she could be sure of that. But if the transformation had been reversed for those two poor puzzled people, maybe it had for everyone else. For Sarah Jane...

She was reaching for her phone, on the point of contacting Mr Smith again. But she never got that far.

She became aware of a troubling sensation. A quivering. So faint as to be imperceptible at first, but swiftly gaining strength. The ground under her feet. Everything about her. Even the air. Vibrating. Trembling. Shaking. Rising in intensity with every passing second.

Desperately seeking for a sense of stability that was no longer available, she flattened herself against the boulder, her fingers arched like claws as they gripped at the stone. A preternatural wind had sprung up and was whistling along the river valley, buffeting at her, and making the branches of the leafless trees quiver and rustle wildly. Suddenly aware that there was a growing darkness about her, she instinctively looked up.

Where the sun had been shining in the sky, there now loomed – impossibly! – a huge planet. It looked immense, bearing down on the much smaller Earth. Its vast globe was orange in colour – dark orange laced with a network of lighter, jagged lines, as if the whole planet were criss-crossed by lines of fire. It was sheerly terrifying as it rolled through space toward her own world.

But she knew what it was. In her mind, a memory had exploded into life. Not hers, but the Doctor's. She gasped.

That was *Gallifrey* in the sky above her!

How was such a thing *possible*?

And the Doctor... It must mean the Doctor was in danger! Something very terrible was happening, and he must be caught up in it. Because he would be. That was, after all, what he did...

She experienced a vague blur of background thoughts rising in a tumult from his mind in hers, so that she understood, without registering the exact details, why it was so *not* possible for Gallifrey to be where it now was. For that impossible planet to be there, things must be so bad that she hardly knew how to formulate the concept.

*“The Timelock is broken...”*

Where had that thought come from?

But he was here. The Doctor. Fighting. She knew, without knowing whence the certainty came, that that was what he was doing. Fighting for Earth, as he always did, and always would. Fighting for her and everyone like her, for everyone on the planet, for the entire planet’s future. And he wouldn’t give up. He would do it, or -

Or he would die trying.

End of song.

She closed her eyes, picturing him in her mind, and with intense concentration shaped her thoughts into identifiable words.

*Doctor. Doctor, you can do it. You’ll save us. I know you’ll save us. I can’t be there with you, wherever you are. Not in body. But I’m still with you! I’ve got you, here, in my mind! I’ve still got you! Doctor, you can do it! You WILL do it! I know you will!*

She would never know if he heard her. If anything she was saying was getting through to him in any form. Her telepathic ability was only inherited from him, perhaps wasn’t strong enough to do what she now wanted it to do. Nevertheless she took everything she had and poured it into her words – support, reassurance, confidence, belief, faith; even love. Perhaps especially love. Her message, to her Doctor, at the time of his greatest need.

The massive orange globe filled the whole sky, eclipsing everything; the darkness was growing.

*Doctor!* she shouted silently in her mind. *Doc-tor! Doc-to-o-or...!*

Then, incredibly, everything fell still, held motionless for a span of time for which she had no reference points against which to measure.

She opened her eyes and looked up at Gallifrey. It had stopped moving. It was no longer rolling toward the Earth like the Juggernaut of Krishna, bringing unstoppable destruction. It was frozen where it was, even while it continued to burn.

Then everything burst into a frenzy of convulsion, shaking more violently than before. The unnatural wind became even stronger, tearing at her hair, her clothes, her face.

But then – the darkness began to recede.

She looked up. Something was happening to Gallifrey. It was fading! Rolling backwards in the sky, away from the Earth, it was dissolving like mist.

In her head, Finn heard a distant, distant voice – a woman’s voice – crying out in anguish.

*“Gallifrey falling! Gallifrey fa-a-a-alls –!”*

The Doctor’s home world vanished into invisibility. The sky was blue again, and untroubled. The supernatural wind was gone. The sun shone joyously once again.

And the girl leaning against the rock beside the river bent forward, covered her face with her hands, and wept, her shoulders shaking, tears streaming between her fingers.

Crying with joy because he’d done it. Crying with loss, because she didn’t know if his song had already ended.

Suddenly she felt her phone vibrating. Gulping back her tears, she looked to see who was calling. Mr Smith.

“Finn,” he said as soon as she’d accepted the call. “The transformation has been reversed worldwide. I have been able to contact Sarah Jane, Luke, Clyde and Rani. They are all safe. Are you?”

She could have cried again with relief. For a moment or two, she almost did. Then she was able to reply.

“Yes, I’m fine. Mr Smith – that was *Gallifrey!*”

“Confirmed,” he agreed. “My conjecture is that the timelock applied to the planet was temporarily broken, but has now been restored. It is more than likely that the Doctor is responsible for that restoration.”

“Is he –?” Sudden hope... “Can you contact him?”

“I can no longer detect the presence of the TARDIS. Either the Doctor has left the Earth, or he is still here but has travelled to some other time. I am sorry, Finn.”

The sudden lump in her throat prevented her from replying for a while.

“It’s what he does, though, isn’t it?” she said at last, her voice quavering. “He saves us, then he leaves. It’s what he does... Thank you, Mr Smith. I’ll...” She stopped to draw a deep breath. “Give my love to Sarah Jane and – and everyone... I – I need some time...”

“I will do so,” Mr Smith confirmed. “I will wait to hear from you. I hope that will be soon.” With almost human tact, he ended the call.

Numbly, not fully aware of what she was doing, Finn slowly, heavily scrambled from her refuge and along and down to the flat rocks just upstream. She went to the very edge of the platform of stone. This was where she and the Doctor had sat with their feet in the summer-warmed waters of the river. Now they flowed with the cold of winter. So many changes... She stared into the peat-brown water without really seeing it.

Then, gradually, she realized that something was happening to her.

She could feel her skin horripilating, and the familiar sensation of the Doctor’s proximity was resonating in her head.

She looked around, quickly. Where was he? There’d been no sound of the TARDIS...

Then she saw him. Watching her. He was on the other bank of the river, standing motionless among the leafless trees and dead bracken, his hands shoved deep into his trouser pockets, pushing back the folds of his long, brown trench coat.

For an instant, her heart lifted. But then she saw his face. No joy, no delight, no pleasure. Expressionless – or, rather, seeming that way. But even from where she was, the look in his eyes was clear. Rage, and grief, and the knowledge of imminent, inevitable loss.

He’d come to the end of time. The end of his time. His song was ending.

Ending now.

She swallowed convulsively, trying to dissolve the hard, painful lump that had instantaneously materialized in her throat. But it wouldn’t go away.

*He was.* He was going away. He’d come to tell her so. He’d come to say goodbye.

Completely in character, her eyes were filling. If only she could have touched him, spoken to him! But he was too far away for either. Perhaps deliberately. Perhaps he wouldn’t be able to cope with his own impending tragedy if he came near enough to her to be touched, to try to say the unsayable. And she so longed to comfort him! Now, more than at any other time, and knowing what she did – knowing *him* as she did. But what could she possibly say, now the moment had come?

Suddenly, she knew.

At that distance, across the thunder of the river, there was no way he could possibly hear her.

But he would be able to read her lips...

She looked directly into those distant, tragic brown eyes, and opened her mouth to try to get the words past that terrible constriction in her throat.

*“I’ve still got you,”* she whispered to him. *“I’ve still got you.”*

And raising her hand, she slowly and deliberately double-tapped her forehead.

He just stared at her, his face set and still. Then he gave one small, almost imperceptible, hard nod, and she saw his lips move, giving her his answer.

*“I’m still looking after you...”*

He held her gaze for a few more precious moments. Then he turned, and was gone.

Stunned, she stood staring at the place where he had been.

After a while, moving like an automaton, with no clear idea of what she was doing or where she was going, she turned and almost unconsciously walked across the rock shelf and down onto the little sandy beach adjoining it. A rock of suitable height offered; she sat down on the cold stone – or, perhaps more accurately, almost collapsed onto it, as if her legs would no longer support her – and after another look at the far bank, lowered her eyes to the river, streaming past her fixed gaze in a smoothly curved surface before breaking into a white froth as it encountered the next set of protruding rocks interrupting its flow.

She ought to feel something. Surely she ought to feel something? Not just this blankness, this – what? Expectation? Suspension? Waiting for something? As if it wasn't yet over.

She had no idea how long she spent in that strange state of deferral. But then... She started to her feet.

A strange sensation, growing in her head. Like a distorted version of the way she felt when he arrived. But this was not an arrival. It was – oh, so far off! But not just in distance. In time. What she was receiving was coming through time, as well as space. So faint! But nonetheless clear.

So many emotions. Sadness. Loss. Lament. A growing turbulence of – something. And then, clear in her brain, words.

His words. In his voice. Coming to her across years and miles.

Heartbreaking words.

*"I don't want to go..."*

Then a sense of something swelling to a climax. Exploding! Unbearable pain and sorrow. A strange, savage wrench in the link between his mind and hers. Severance.

But not before a sense of – oh, how to describe it? *Renewal. Transformation.* A sensation that swiftly faded beyond her detection.

The Doctor – her Doctor – was gone. Not dead. But changed. Regenerated into a different man. The man he had been, at last, as he had feared for so long, lost to himself. And to her. Forever.

*"True justice should be even-handed,"* she'd said to the Diakonos, and he had agreed. But the Doctor's only reward had been misery, distress, crushing loss. Where was the justice in *this*? And yet...

*"Have faith,"* the Diakonos had said. And he had smiled...

She stood frozenly, staring at the place where she had last seen the Doctor, hours – or was it only minutes? – ago. Then, by degrees, as if she was a film being played back in slow motion, she sank to her knees, never taking her eyes from the spot, and the tears coursed unheeded down her face, falling to the ground, instantly vanishing into the sand as if they had never even existed, or meant anything of any importance.

Yet, even as she wept, that smile of the Diakonos kept coming back to her mind, and a thought kept circling there, over and over.

The Doctor's last words to her.

*"I'm still looking after you."*

What had he meant? What could he *possibly* have meant?

She raised her eyes and looked across the river, and double-tapped her forehead.

"I've still got you, Doctor," she said aloud. "I've still got you."

And in her mind a dying whisper replied, fading slowly into time and silence.

*"I'm still looking after you..."*



## 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: "Missing Persons" is the fifth 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 February 2014 (see <http://www.whofic.com/viewuser.php?uid=12695>).

### Chapter 1: Water Always Wins

- The events in Bowie Base took place in "The Waters of Mars" (episode 4.16, 2009).

### Chapter 2: The Disappearance of Fionnula Thornton

- With reference to the names of the Carlisle family in this story, those who have followed David Tennant's career will recognize Andy, Katie, Dan and Lucy as being character names from the BBC radio series "Double Income, No Kids Yet" (broadcast from 2001 to 2003), in which he starred with Elizabeth Carling, while Peter Carlisle, of course, is a nod to his character in the BBC television series "Blackpool", first broadcast in 2004, in which he appeared with David Morrissey, Sarah Parish, Steve Pemberton, Bryan Dick and David Bradley, among others.

### Chapter 3: Joiking Forbidden

- Dartmeet is a popular tourist destination in the centre of Dartmoor in the English county of Devon (Ordnance Survey grid reference SX672731).
- The Doctor's friend Arthur is, of course, Arthur Dent, the bewildered hero of "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" by Douglas Adams. In "The Christmas Invasion" (episode 2.X, 2005), the Doctor describes him to Rose as a "very nice man".
- A haiku is a form of Japanese poetry; a joik is a style of singing by the Sami people. The song is not necessarily about a person or place, but an attempt by the joiker to evoke that person or place through song. (You **joik** someone, you do not joik **about** them.)
- The Doctor made the claim to have played the tuba at the first Prom in "Music of the Spheres", a 7-minute special broadcast as part of the Doctor Who Prom in the 2008 BBC Proms season.

### Chapter 4: Room for More

- Fionnula Thornton first met Captain Jack Harkness when she accompanied the Doctor to Kvitverden, as described in "Ice World" (2 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983)).
- The character of forensic pathologist Harry Cunningham was played in the BBC series "Silent Witness" from 2002 to 2012 by Tom Ward, who also played Captain Latimer in "The Snowmen" (episode 7.x2, December 2012).
- For an explanation of how Finn has some of the Doctor's mind in hers, please see "Serendipity" (1 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011)). When Finn double-taps her forehead, she is indicating that she has access to the Doctor's memories.

### Chapter 6: "Who's The Daddy?"

- Quite apart from being an implied pun (!), "Who's the daddy?" is a British slang expression indicating that someone is the best, most powerful, etc. I understand that a well-known example of its use (though I haven't seen it myself) is to be found in the film "Scum", where the line is delivered by Ray Winstone.

### Chapter 7: Eutychia meets Earth

- Eutychia is the name of the Greek goddess of happiness.
- Greek scholars will recognize the word 'Diakonos' as conveying the thought of one who serves, or ministers.

## Chapter 8: The Best Khitarah Player on the Planet

- *I'll let you in on a secret – any resemblance in this story to Mark Barnwell, an incredibly skilled and popular Spanish, Latin and Flamenco guitarist who lives in Cornwall in the UK here on Earth (do visit [www.markbarnwell.co.uk](http://www.markbarnwell.co.uk) – it really is worth it!), and to his wife Ailia, is entirely intentional, whereas any resemblance to any of the real inhabitants of the planet of Eutychia would be entirely unexpected...*
- *Fionnula Thornton's first sighting of the Diakonos is to be found in "Felindre's Fortune" (4 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=42902](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=42902)).*

## Chapter 11: A Question of Justice

- *Finn's first meeting with the Doctor is described in "Serendipity" ([www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=37011)).*

## Chapter 13: The Garden of Starlights

- *'Trancers' (1985) is a science fiction film starring Tim Thomerson and Helen Hunt. The music was written by Phil Davies and Mark Ryder, and is the first film in a series of six (to date...). In the film, individuals can travel back in time by means of a 'time drug' which allows them to leave their own body in the present and take over the body of someone in their ancestral bloodline; the effect is temporary and only lasts for the effective duration of the dose administered, but the procedure can be repeated to allow multiple 'trips' into the past.*
- *The exclamation by David Bowman – "My God – it's full of stars!" – is quoted from the novel '2001: A Space Odyssey' by Arthur C Clarke. It is not heard in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film version, starring Keir Dullea and Gary Lockwood, but is used in the sequel "2010", made in 1984 and starring Roy Scheider and Helen Mirren; Keir Dullea briefly reprises his role as David Bowman in that film.*
- *'Lēoht' is the Old English word for 'light'.*

## Chapter 14: Elianya

- *The scenario in the Mind Machine in which Finn failed to prevent the Doctor falling down a cliff face can be referenced in "All In The Mind" (3 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=40138](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=40138)).*

## Chapter 17: Paying the Price

- *The reason why Finn would be susceptible to survivor guilt can be discovered in "Ice World" (2 of 7, [www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983](http://www.whofic.com/viewstory.php?sid=38983)).*

## Chapter 18: The Answer to Arrem's Question

- *Artron energy is a form of energy used by TARDISEs. Those who travel through the Time Vortex absorb artron energy in the form of a background radiation. It manifests visibly as a blue electricity-like force.*
- *Readers of Alan Garner's 'The Moon of Gomer' will be familiar with the concept of the Brollachan. The 'Spooky Stuff' website provides a description of brollachans in 'Scottish Folklore: The Brollachan' (<http://www.spookystuff.co.uk/scottish-folklore-brollachan.html>) (note: other websites are available!). The reference to dissolving into jelly is taken from the entry under the 'Vough' (or 'Fuath') in 'The Encyclopaedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore' by Patricia Monaghan (p466) – a brollachan is there defined as the immature form of a vough/fuath.*

## Chapter 22: Mirror of the Soul

- *In "The Waters of Mars" (episode 4.16, 2009), Carmen tells the Doctor: "...You be careful. Because your song is ending, sir... It is returning – it is returning through the dark. And then, Doctor – oh, but then – he will knock four times..."*
- *"The Mirror of the Soul" is a track from Chris de Burgh's 2006 album "The Storyman". His song "Diamond in the Dark" is available on the album "Spark to a Flame" (1989). (And did anyone notice*

the reference to a 'heart of darkness' in Chapter 16...? My all-time favourite, from "Power of Ten", 1992.)

- In "The End of Time" (episode 4.18, 01.01.2010), the diamond that fell out of the sky was identified by the Master as a Whitepoint Star, a gem unique to Gallifrey.

### **Chapter 23: Launch of the Skyrider**

- *Reproduction by fragmentation: fragmentation is a form of asexual reproduction seen in many organisms such as certain types of animals (for example annelid worms and sea stars), fungi and plants, where a new organism grows from a fragment of the parent and develops into a mature, fully grown individual.*

### **Chapter 24: The Planet That Once Was**

- *One of the most famous cinematic car chases of all time is that portrayed in "Bullitt" (1968), starring Steve McQueen.*
- *In "Time Crash" (episode CIN2 (Children In Need Special), 2007), the Tenth Doctor – referring to the stick of celery worn by the Fifth Doctor on his lapel – commented that "not a lot of men can carry off a decorative vegetable".*
- *'Inertia' may refer to an object's 'amount of resistance to change in velocity' (which is quantified by its mass), or sometimes to its momentum, depending on the context. The term 'inertia' is more properly understood as shorthand for "the principle of inertia" as described by Newton in his First Law of Motion; that an object not subject to any net external force moves at a constant velocity. Thus an object will continue moving at its current velocity until some force causes its speed or direction to change. An object that is not in motion (velocity = zero) will remain at rest until some force causes it to move. (So, as EE 'Doc' Smith observed in his Lensman novel "Galatic Patrol", "it takes something to absorb and to dissipate the kinetic energy which may reside within a (body) when its intrinsic velocity does not match the intrinsic velocity of its surroundings.")*

### **Chapter 25: Stasis Sphere and Inertia Shell**

- *In "The Shakespeare Code" (episode 3.2, 2007) the Carrionites were imprisoned by the Doctor in a crystal ball which he stored in the TARDIS for safekeeping.*

### **Chapter 28: The Consequences of Prophecy**

- *References to the ending of the Doctor's 'song' were made by Ood Sigma in "Planet of the Ood" (episode 4.2, 2008) and by Carmen in "The Waters of Mars" (episode 4.16, 2009).*
- *The Doctor's encounter with Jackson Lake takes place in "The Next Doctor" (episode 4.14, 2008).*
- *An earworm is "a catchy piece of music that continually repeats through a person's mind after it is no longer playing" (thanks for the definition, Wikipedia – like it!).*

### **Chapter 29: Finale...**

- *The events in this chapter and the next correlate with those in "The End of Time" Part 2 (episode 4.18, 01.01.2010).*
- *Mr Smith is a highly intelligent crystalline life-form called a Xylok, who forms the core of Sarah Jane Smith's super-computer in the attic of her home at 13 Bannerman Road, Ealing. He features in all five series of "The Sarah Jane Adventures" (2007-2011).*
- *At the conclusion of "Journey's End" (episode 4.13, 2008), when Donna has become 'the DoctorDonna', to save her life the Doctor has to wipe her memories of their travels together her mind, telling Wilf and Sylvia that if Donna ever remembers him, even for a second, she will die.*

### **Chapter 30: ... and Vale**

- *As already indicated, the events in this chapter correlate with those in "The End of Time" Part 2 (episode 4.18, 01.01.2010).*
- *Meaning of 'vale' (Latin): farewell, goodbye.*



*'Doctor Who' and all of its elements belong to the BBC.  
No copyright infringement intended.*