

STARING INTO THE ABYSS

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He didn't often think of her: he made his excuses, found his comfort in them and let her live quietly in the corner of the corners in his mind. His life was hectic. He did what he had to do. He had no regrets. No regrets. Hollow words, but mostly they sufficed. But there were moments – the devils in the detail – and sometimes, sometimes . . . But mostly, he didn't think of her. Often.

“Jamie! Polly! Look out!”

\* \* \*

He sat with wires spiralling around him, cross-legged on cold metal flooring, his frock-coat's tails spread out behind him. The computer was complicated, but ancient: nothing that should cause him too much trouble. Just connect wire A to inlet C and perform a little technical jiggery-pokery and the planet would be saved and they could all go back to the TARDIS for a nice hot cup of tea. It was just a matter of concentration. Focus on the task in hand and . . . Did they have any of those crumpets he'd picked up from the Moonbase left?

'Doctor . . .' said Alron, his eyes on the little bead of molten metal that was drawing an arc across the bulkhead door.

'Och, leave him be. He knows what he's doing,' Jamie muttered, still looking around the storeroom for something to use as a weapon. 'Y' do know what you're doing, Doctor?'

Wire A to wire C. Simplicity itself. Oh no, wait!

A flash and a belch of smoke.

'Oh my!' said the Doctor, and wiped his brow with an oversized spotted handkerchief.

How did he get himself into these predicaments? All he really wanted was to see the universe, find a little excitement. But there was always someone who needed his help, some innocents in danger, and they all looked to him to make things right. But did he really know any better? He just muddled through the best he could, really. He made his decisions and hoped things turned out for the best: usually they did, but sometimes . . . sometimes .

..

And he thought of her.

‘Doctor!’ Polly screamed, and the moment passed.

Wire A to outlet C. No, no, *inlet* C.

‘There!’ he said, grinning from ear to ear.

The glowing dot of molten metal kept moving.

‘Ah.’

‘When I say run . . . Run!’

The Daleks trundled after them, barely even straining for top speed and yet his lungs were already burning. Ben was helping Polly – more than half-carrying her, in truth, taking the weight from her injured ankle. Jamie was up ahead, holding the door with all of his strength. The sweat was dripping down his head, pulling his shirt taut over his body. Blasts of heated plasma scorched the air as they rained around them.

‘Come on, Doctor!’ Jamie yelled.

It was hardly surprising that he didn’t spare a thought for her, then.

‘Come on, Duchess.’

Polly gave him a half apologetic smile, and turned to catch up with Ben. They practically danced as they left, breathing in 1966 air again, making plans, seeing a future only seconds away. He was pleased, of course: he had

returned them home, safe, alive, together. And yet . . . There was a sadness there, a pang in his hearts that reminded him something was missing, something he had given away aeons ago. Something he had pushed away.

Would she survive? Had she survived? Had she prospered? There were ways to find the answers, of course. There were always ways. But there was only one way to find the answer he really needed.

Had she forgiven him?

Had he forgiven himself?

‘Och, y’ look pretty as a picture, Victoria.’

‘Have you got a family, Doctor?’ she’d asked.

A thousand pictures came into his head; a thousand memories built up over a thousand years. But families were the people who were always there for you, the people who forgave your foibles and loved you all the same. There was no love like that of family: no love as deep, and no hatred as strong. Did he have a family? He had Jamie and Victoria, Polly and Ben, Dodo and Stephen, Ian and Barbara and . . . and . . .

‘One day, I will come back,’ he muttered. ‘But not just yet, I think.’

Would she wait? Was she waiting still?

Did she miss him, as he missed her?

Poor Victoria. Separated from her family by the widest of chasms, never again to see their faces save for in cold and dusty memories. But there were wider chasms, stronger barriers, and none so strong as those we build ourselves. Poor Victoria, so young and innocent and loving. Her he could protect, her he could keep strong and brave and untouched. He could redeem himself through her, relive his mistakes and keep himself from making them again. Through her, he could alter history.

Victoria, Jamie, the TARDIS: his family.

He spun, divided from himself, a reflection of an imp on a thousand shards of glass. He tumbled as he spun, torn this way and that. And as he spun, he lived it all again, every second, every moment. As he lived it, he grew unsure whether he was even there, spinning through time, or whether he was back there again, alive.

But still he spun, reflected.

Victoria gave him a quick, chaste peck on the cheek, and then ran to rejoin her new family. The sadness was there, again. A lurch and a yawn inside and something detached itself and spun away forever. And yet there was a certain amount of pride, and joy, even. He had watched her grow. She had been little more than a child when he had adopted her, taken her into his family, and he had helped her grow, guided her as best he could into

womanhood. Now she was an adult, capable of making her own decisions and leading her own life.

She had left him, and it had been her own decision.

Not like . . .

‘Jamie, Zoë: when I say run . . . I said “When I say”! Oh!’

‘So this is what I’ve become. A dandy and a clown.’

It felt like he was being chided by a teacher: old Bruiser passing on one of his withering looks and a disdainful comment. In that moment, he could see himself as the others must have seen him. Cold, stern, so certainly and unassailably *right*. He could see why it had all had to go, when he’d changed. He knew that he couldn’t go on looking at the universe as if it had offended him by not working to the rules he thought it should. Glancing to his side, he could see his future self thinking the same thing, so perhaps old big-nose wasn’t so bad after all.

Just one word now could stop it, they were thinking. Just one word of warning and years of uncertainty could be erased. Just one word and she would know, know that he had never stopped loving her, that he never would.

But the universe needed all their help, and the moment passed.

WE ARE IMPRESSED, DOK-TOR, the Cyberleader proclaimed, his hand clenching and unclenching, controlled by a reflex that could no longer exist. YOU POSSESS A FINE MIND.

He ummed and ahed, almost embarrassed by the compliment.

The Cyberleader towered over him, making his impish frame seem even more tiny. And yet the onlookers could tell which was the more powerful. Jamie's eyes practically shone with belief.

YOU ARE STILL WEAK. YOU STILL POSSESS FEAR. THAT WILL BE NO MORE. WHEN YOU ARE LIKE US.

'The Doctor's no afraid of y', beastie,' Jamie shouted, but the Cyberleader paid him no heed. His blank metal eyes were staring into the Doctor's.

Something inside the Doctor stirred.

He thought of her, then. Standing outside the TARDIS, begging him to open the doors. Standing barefoot and lost in the space where the TARDIS had been, crying his name. To no avail.

He felt afraid: did she hate him?

YOU WILL BE LIKE US.

And just for a moment, it didn't seem like such an unattractive proposition.

And still he spun, each moment a lifetime.

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Bombs rained down on them, shrapnel and fire eating its way across the landscape. This was wrong. This shouldn't be happening: not now, not here.

He didn't think of her.

And still he spun.

'What's happening?' he shouted.

And he was alone. Zoë gone, taken from him. And Jamie, brave constant Jamie, torn from his side and not even allowed the comfort of remembering what he had lost. Would it be a comfort, to forget? To never know? Would it have comforted her?

He was alone. All alone.

'The decision will be made for you,' the court intoned, and in the moment he had left he realised that now he knew how she must have felt.

And then he was gone, sucked into the Matrix, trapped in a thousand shards of glass, spinning.

\* \* \*

Darkness. Nothing. He didn't think of anything, especially not her.

'What's happening?' he shouted, and the spinning stopped.

He was alone, but he was back on solid ground. Or the idea of solid ground. He patted himself all over, pleased to find that not only did the check trousers and frock coat still fit, but also he still found them suitable attire. He ran a tentative hand through his hair: still a shock of thick dark hair.

'Thank goodness,' he breathed. They hadn't carried out their threat, yet.

Nothing moved.

'Well? Come on, I haven't got all day, you know.'

Still nothing moved.

'Patience, Doctor,' said a voice beside him. 'We have all the time there is, after all.'

He turned. Stood beside him – a good head taller – was an imperious figure in a long white robe. A hook nose and neat white hair: one of the judges from the trial. Still firmly in the frying pan, then.

'Ah. Hello, Lemuel,' the figure frowned: a small victory, then. 'Or do you prefer Goth, perhaps?'

'Please, Doctor, a little respect. You are awaiting punishment, after all.'

'Ah, yes. Guilty of interference on the grand scale. Bit rich of you of all people to accuse me of that.'

Goth didn't so much as blink.

‘The Laws of Time must be seen to be –’

‘Believed?’ the Doctor suggested helpfully.

‘Upheld,’ Goth replied flatly, making no indication he had so much as heard the interruption.

The Doctor pushed his hands sulkily into his pockets: the reassuring weight of his recorder gave him a little comfort. Perhaps a quick tune? It might be his last chance, after all. Perhaps the Last Post? No, perhaps not.

‘Well, come on, then. Let’s get on with it. Unless you’re here to give me another of your interminable speeches.’

‘No, Doctor. The sentence has already been carried out.’

The Doctor looked surprised.

‘Really? This doesn’t look much like Earth to me.’



‘This life still has potential,’ Goth said grandiosely. The Doctor resisted the urge to stick his tongue out. ‘We have taken that potential, and stored it here in the Matrix. To make use of as we see fit.’

‘Oh no! Spend the rest of my days in this body as one of your messenger boys?’

‘We had a more . . . involved range of duties planned for you, Doctor.’

‘Those sort of “duties” tend to get me into trouble. The Laws of Time –’

‘Are upheld by us, Doctor.’

‘Or broken when it suits you.’

Goth said nothing, his face betraying none of his emotions. If he still had any.

‘What made you think I’d agree to your scheme, Goth?’

And Goth smiled.

‘Because, Doctor,’ he said, ‘when we have no need of you, you will spend your time here.’

And in an instant, Goth was gone, leaving behind only a solid wooden door, incongruous in the sparse wilderness. Slowly, soundlessly, it opened. Inside was an oak panelled room with a fire blazing in the hearth and two old armchairs soaking up the warmth. In one of the chairs sat a figure, gazing deep into the fire.

‘Goth?’ the Doctor asked cautiously.

‘Grandfather!’ she screamed, and threw herself into his arms.

\* \* \*

‘I’m the Doctor and this is Jamie. Well, he’s really a projection of my memories of Jamie, but we won’t go into that: it only confuses him. Now, what seems to be the problem?’

In an oak panelled room, in front of a blazing fire that was no more real than the armchairs or the people in them, the Doctor sat, gazing into the distance. She was sat at his feet, with her head on his lap, her eyes on the fire as it flickered and danced. His mop of hair was greying now, and sometimes he wondered how much time he had left to him. Mostly, he contented himself with the knowledge that he would have a lifetime, no more, no less.

‘Do you ever wonder,’ he asked, quietly, ‘what would have happened if I hadn’t left you?’

She barely moved. He couldn’t even be sure she had heard him.

‘I would have left you,’ she said, softly. ‘Eventually. Only I wouldn’t have had my time with David. And you wouldn’t be a great-grandfather.’

‘Do you miss them?’

‘Did you miss me?’

‘Always.’

‘But you still let me go.’

‘And I never stopped regretting it.’

‘Neither did I. But it still had to happen.’

She paused again, watching patterns in the fire.

‘We’re together now, that’s what matters,’ she said, her eyes still in the flames. ‘And when Andec and Marina and Miranda’s times come, we’ll *all* be together.’

‘But you can’t be sure.’

‘The High Council gave me their word. When the time comes, they’ll all be transferred to the Matrix, like I was. Like you will be.’

‘But you can’t be *sure*.’

She shrugged, wrinkling his check trousers. It was the only answer she gave.

They watched the fire, contented, for a while longer. Outside the room, the universe went about its business, content that should any wrinkles occur, there were those who could smooth them all away again.

‘Tell me about the mission, grandfather. Was it exciting?’

The Doctor allowed himself a smile.

‘Ah. Well, my old friend Dastari had been messing around with some things that he really shouldn’t have been . . .’

And somewhere a heavy oak door swung silently shut on a room within a room in the corner of the corners of his mind.