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DOCTOR • WHO

The Centre of the Universe

BY AZAR

The Centre of the Universe

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Classic Who, New Who | PG-13 | gen with a little Nine/Nyssa | 22,000 words

In the aftermath of the Time War, a wounded TARDIS brings a dying Doctor to the one person who might be able to save not only his life, but also his will to live: Nyssa of Traken.

Huge thanks to my beta readers, rivendellrose and st_aurafina, for your honesty, thoroughness, and sometimes unexpected expertise. Also to my cheerleader, Medie, without whom this would probably never have been finished. This is especially remarkable because she doesn't know Five's era at all, but still kept me going with her enthusiasm for a character she'd never met. :-) I would also be remiss if I did not express a debt of gratitude to the story "Orphans" by Carmen Sandiego. When I first hit on the idea of reuniting Nine with Nyssa years ago, I immediately went in search of fanfic. At the time, that story was the only one I found, but it was enough to keep the idea alive in my imagination. I've tried to honor it the best I can by writing what I hope is a very different story. Also, due to the depth and richness the Big Finish audio adventures added to the Doctor and Nyssa's history and relationship, I drew rather heavily on their canon to supplement what we saw on screen. I tried to make the references clear enough that you shouldn't have to have heard the audios to understand them, but familiarity with them might enhance the experience. "Circular Time" and "The Gathering" were the two I drew on the most, although there are small nods to "Winter for the Adept," "Primeval," "Spare Parts" and the Thomas Brewster trilogy as well.

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Part I

The centre of the universe. Tegan told me once that on her world, it's an expression people use to denote someone or something they care about more than anything else, to such a degree that, as far as they're concerned, the universe may as well revolve around that object as a planet does around its sun.

When I was a child, the centre of my universe was my father, Tremas. I began to grow up the day he was ripped from me, and shortly thereafter, my whole world as well. Deprived of that locus, I found myself suddenly cast adrift, a wanderer like the Doctor.

But no...no, that's a false analogy. The Doctor was always a traveller by choice. If his universe had a centre, then it was the TARDIS and the freedom it represented. He needed nothing else, and indeed he shied away from the sort of permanency in which most people find security.

Though I might have travelled in that same TARDIS, I was a very different sort of nomad during those years. Much as I hate to make the comparison, I was more like Mondas, the world that birthed the Cybermen: cast out from its source of light, wandering in the cold and the dark just trying to survive.

I've never failed to appreciate the irony that the end of my journey brought me to the literal centre of the universe. Still, even though I made the choice to remain, it wasn't until many years later that I found a new centre for my universe, in Lasarti and our daughter, Nica.

Now Lasarti was gone and Nica was far, far away at school. As proud as I was of her, still I felt at loose ends. I was restless and lonely and desperate for something--anything--to happen that would chase those feelings away. I craved companionship. Though I had my work and many friends on the station, it didn't matter. I wanted more than they could give.

There's another Earth expression Tegan taught me: "Be careful what you wish for."

You just might get it. And someone you love may be the one to pay the price...

~*~*~*~*~

One thing that hadn't changed since Nyssa had first come to Terminus: the arrival of a hospital ship was still momentous. Right now, the main operating theatre was filled almost to bursting with patients awaiting triage. The difference now was, when they weeded out the most severely ill, it was so that those most in need of treatment were the first to receive it.

Moving smoothly through the hustle of bodies--doctors and nurses herding patients this way and that--Nyssa glanced up, as she always did, at the faces looking down from the gallery. A rueful smile curled her lips. Terminus was far more self-sufficient than it had been when she arrived here but the money they made treating patients (never more than the family could afford) still wasn't enough. Not if they wanted to both maintain their operating costs and have enough left over for her ongoing improvements

to the station. That meant patrons--or investors with foresight and patience enough to see the same long term potential that she did.

Terminus was already a much better investment now than it had been when she arrived, or even before the Corporation Wars; still, she hated the necessity of treating their work as sport for those wealthy, philanthropic individuals they hoped to woo. Things like money and the desire to make more of it had been quite foreign to her Trakenite upbringing.

What her travels with the Doctor hadn't taught her about avarice, though, Terminus had. Few beings in the universe would readily give without expecting something in return. Oh, most species had moments and individuals of such generosity, but it wasn't the norm.

She wondered, sometimes, what her father and the elders would've thought of the changes wrought in her by exposure to that larger universe. Perhaps, like the people she'd met in Traken's ancient past, they would have taken it as confirmation of their choice to have little contact with worlds outside the Union. The idea that exposure to evil made her strive all the more to be a better person would be incomprehensible to them.

Another troop of Vanir entered the theatre, leading those patients who were still hale enough to walk and bearing the others (all with a variety of ailments or injuries) on pallets. One in particular caught her eye, burned almost black from head to toe. Nyssa frowned, wondering why they'd brought a corpse into the operating theater. Then the figure moved, letting out a low moan.

Nyssa gasped and hurried forward. She could tell the being on the pallet was a trakenoid male from the breadth of his shoulders, but considering the severity of the burns, that classification was a kindness at best. There was a gaping hole where his nose ought to have been and his ears were long gone, flesh and cartilage charred away, so she doubted that any other external soft tissue organs could have survived.

Most horrifying of all, what little flesh hadn't been burned away already showed signs of necrosis from severe radiation exposure. "What happened here?" she asked, incredulous. This one couldn't have come from the ship--in this condition, he could never have survived the journey: whatever had happened to him must've happened on Terminus. Which meant he had to be one of the Vanir or one of the technicians or...well, it hardly mattered: he was one of *her* people and he'd been mortally injured on her watch. What that meant for the safety of the station and the effectiveness of her improvements was equally troubling.

She shouted for a burn kit and oxygen before turning back to Yurek. "Who is this man?"

"I've no idea," Yurek confessed as he and Emar moved the pallet into one of the emergency locks. An orderly rushed over with the supplies she'd requested, while Nyssa's eyes flickered over her patient, searching for even one patch of healthy skin they might be able to use for an emergency graft.

"One of the first things I did when I found him was a status check on all my men, checking in with the other commanders as well." Yurek continued. He looked as shaken as she. "All are accounted for: no one's missing."

"No one?" Nyssa echoed, surprised. "Then where did he come from? What happened?"

"Again, I don't know. We found him like this, passed out on the floor in a hallway outside some sort of...well, it looked rather like a large packing crate but that it was blue and had the words 'Police Box' over the door."

Nyssa's head snapped up from where she'd been examining her patient. She suddenly felt dizzy, as if her world--no, her entire universe--had tilted quite suddenly on its axis. "What did you say?" she repeated in a rasping voice barely above a whisper.

Startled, Yurek repeated his description and Nyssa looked back down at her patient with new eyes.

Horried, she reached out one trembling hand to carefully clasp the wasted fingers, whispering, "Doctor?"

Lidless, staring grey eyes seemed to become aware of her for a split second before sliding away, but in that instant she saw more than enough: she saw recognition...and desperation. His mouth struggled to form her name, but with no lips and likely no tongue as well, how could he?

For an instant, hope surged through her--most species would have no chance of surviving so much physical damage, but this was the Doctor and the Doctor was a Time Lord. Almost immediately, though, panic replaced it. The Doctor was clearly dying, so why hadn't he begun to regenerate? Was something holding back the process? Or worse...had he somehow, in the time since she'd last seen him, managed to run through all the rest of his lives?

She had to know if there was any chance of saving him and could think of only one way to find out.

"We need to take him to Lasarti's laboratory," Nyssa ordered briskly, her fear plain in both her eyes and her voice. Both Yurek and Emar looked startled, and understandably not entirely sure what good a dream laboratory would do a dying man. "I believe I can save him, but you must trust me. Quickly, please, there's not much time!"

Both men still looked somewhat bewildered, but the admonition to trust her had done its work; she'd earned their trust time and again over the years by treating every single person who came onto the station, no matter who, as though they personally were of value to her. Baffling as her actions might be, neither Yurek nor Emar had any reason to believe that was likely to change with this one patient. If Nyssa said something in Lasarti's laboratory could save this man's life, she knew they would believe her (or at least believe that she believed it).

Fortunately, the laboratory that had once belonged to her late husband wasn't far. Of course, reaching it was only the first step. The last time she'd used Lasarti's machine, she'd been trying to experience a dream she'd thought was her own. Not until she'd accidentally made mental contact with the Doctor had she realised it had been him reaching out to her telepathically across time and space which had triggered the dream in the first place. This time, she'd had no warning at all. If Yurek hadn't told her where they'd found the Doctor, she might never have even known it was him.

But he'd known her and yet still hadn't reached out for her help. Judging by the despair she'd seen in his eyes, she wasn't entirely sure he even wanted help. If something was blocking his regeneration, he wasn't fighting it. That frightened Nyssa more than anything.

Ultimately Nyssa decided to hook the Doctor up to the dream machine's primary circuit, the one she'd used on herself before, and this time attach herself to the secondary one that Lasarti had used to join her.

She could only hope it would be enough.

The last time Nyssa had been inside the Doctor's mind while he was regenerating, his internal landscape had been a blizzard conjured by the Master to stop the regenerative process. It was reasonable to assume this time wouldn't be the same, but as for what it would be like, well...she didn't know what to expect.

The first wave of heat caught her by surprise. It swept over her like a firestorm, stinging her eyes and thickening the air so that it was a struggle to draw a breath. She barely had time to register the ruined landscape around her before the Doctor heard her gasp and turned.

He stood in the centre of it all, like the eye of the storm--except there was nothing calm about him. The face was a stranger's, but Nyssa knew it was him and not just because of the grey eyes that she'd last seen lidless.

It was almost painful, looking at that face for the first time after having seen the wreck of it. He'd been handsome, this time around. Not so handsome as the Doctor she'd known best, the one she still rather thought of as "her" Doctor, but still, there were hints of a curious, almost delicate beauty in his features. Even without the burns and visible scars, though, that beauty had long fled, leaving hollowed out cheeks beneath high cheekbones and haunting shadows in eyes that, by their laugh lines, had once danced. She could only imagine what he must've looked like when he smiled, because he wasn't smiling now. Nor was there any welcome recognition in his eyes as he looked at her, only suspicion.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, almost an accusation.

"You're on Terminus--" she started, but the Doctor cut her off.

"Yes, yes, I did notice that. Rather difficult to miss one's surroundings when one can't close one's eyes. I mean what are you doing *here*?"

Nyssa didn't answer, taken aback by the bitterness in his words. She'd never heard anything like it from him before. But then, granted, she'd never seen him die quite so horribly before. "I..." For the first time, she looked around her properly. They were standing on a low, broad plain that was charred almost as badly as the Doctor's body outside this dream world. A few stubborn flames even still danced across it. She could see mountains and the ruins of a city on the horizon, both still blazing. Even the sky seemed to

be on fire: what little of it she could see through the thick haze of smoke seemed to the same angry red as the flames. Impossibly, it looked almost familiar. "Why...what is this place?"

The Doctor looked at her again and there was something a little mad and almost hateful in his eyes. "What, don't you recognise it?" he asked snidely.

Suddenly careful, Nyssa answered, "I've only been inside your mind the once before, Doctor. If you recall, that was a snowstorm, not...a firestorm."

He laughed but there was no joy in the sound. "Yes, Nyssa, I remember. Nonetheless...you have been here before. Though I'm hardly surprised you don't recognise it." His face twisting in agony, he turned with deliberation to look out again over the ruined landscape. He then repeated: "Why are you here?"

In all her years on this forsaken place at the centre of the universe, Nyssa had never felt so bewildered or so foolish as she did now. It was as though she were a child again, her naïve faith in the permanency of her world being swept away for the first time. It angered her that the Doctor treated her like that child now, when all those years ago he hadn't. "I came to help you," she answered crossly. "I thought you might be having trouble regenerating."

Another laugh: this one more humourless and bitter than the last. "Then you can save yourself the trouble. I don't intend to regenerate."

Don't intend...but that implied some degree of choice! Could he do that, simply will himself to die before his time? And if so, why *would* he? Nyssa felt suddenly cold. "Doctor, look at me."

He did, and despite the suffocating heat all around them, Nyssa shivered. There was nothing in those eyes, not a shadow of the enthusiasm or curiosity she remembered, only despair.

"Why would you do this?" she asked, surprised at how frantic she sounded. But then, why shouldn't she? Not only was he one of her oldest and dearest friends, but she couldn't imagine the universe without him. "Why would you choose to die when you don't have to?"

"Why should I live?" he asked, in a voice as harsh and jagged as glass.

"Because the universe needs you," she cried out, beginning to feel a bit desperate herself. *I still need you, or at the least...I need to know you're out there.*

"The universe is better off without me!" He waved a hand at the devastated landscape around them. "It's gone, Nyssa. It's all gone, and it was my hand that did it."

There was something she was missing, something that ought to have been obvious, particularly to her, and Nyssa hated herself for it. Still, she couldn't comprehend why the Doctor was taking his failure to save one world so personally. It wasn't the first time, and while he'd always grieved before, it was never like this. Not even when Traken had been destroyed.

At the same time, as if triggered by his words and the self-loathing that fuelled them, the firestorm grew suddenly worse around them. Far away, an explosion unexpectedly rocked the ruined city, almost blinding her in its intensity. The ground quaked beneath them as if it were about to collapse in upon itself. The few standing buildings left amongst the ruins had already begun to do so.

"Get out," he told her, half angry, half pleading. "Just go, leave me."

"Not until you make me understand!" she insisted stubbornly.

The Doctor's face clouded over. No, it was more as if the entirety of the conflagration around them suddenly coalesced into his form, all of that pure, desperate anger directed at her. He grabbed her by both shoulders and shook her, hard. "You stupid girl, there's no time! Get out while you still can!"

While you still can! Nyssa's eyes widened in sudden understanding. It was what the Doctor had told her before--if he died while she was linked to him this way, she would die too. His mind was too powerful not to drag her under in its wake. This Doctor wanted to die...but he wasn't willing to sacrifice her to do it. She was her own best bargaining chip.

"Then you'd best make time, Doctor, because I'm not going anywhere."

Let him be angry at her for saving his life against his will if he wanted: at least he was feeling something. With luck, maybe she'd be able to fan that flame into something that would make him want to live.

It seemed to be working. Oh, the fire roared up higher around them for a moment, even though there was nothing left for it to consume, but then suddenly out of that wall of flame emerged a ghostly figure. The first time she'd seen this strange sight, its misshapen face and almost mummy-like wrappings had been nearly white. The second time, the white had veiled a polychrome of colours. This time was neither. The figure seemed instead to be shaped from the selfsame shadows that lurked in the Doctor's eyes. Still, she would have recognised this stranger anywhere, for it had once saved her life: it was the Watcher.

The Doctor looked at her again, emotions warring in his eyes. Then he let out a wordless cry that encapsulated all of his anger, frustration and despair at once. He ran towards the figure. They merged in another blinding explosion of light and dark, and Nyssa suddenly found herself once again in Lasarti's laboratory, gasping for breath.

Yurek and Emar hurried to her side, worry etched on their faces. "Lady Nyssa, are you all right?" Yurek asked.

Nyssa nodded breathlessly, not yet able to speak. The entire episode must've taken no more than a few seconds, but she knew the strain of it must show. Still, the Doctor had accepted the Watcher. From past experience, that had to mean he'd embraced his future...even if only reluctantly so.

She looked at his charred body on the pallet, the blackened fingers gripped tightly in her own. For an instant, nothing happened, but then the shift began and she drew a deep breath of relief.

At first, it was more or less as she remembered it, only without the Watcher's physical presence: the Doctor's features began to blur, burnt flesh smoothing over and growing whole again. But then, unexpectedly, he convulsed and his body exploded with light, streaming away in all directions like flares. Startled, Nyssa fell back with a gasp, letting his hand drop.

Yurek swore loudly by the ancient gods of his homeworld, seizing her by the shoulders before she could fall. All three of them just stared.

She'd seen it before, this light. It was artron energy, the same energy that powered the TARDIS; the same energy that was carefully woven into each cell of a Time Lord's body on graduation from the Academy, thus giving them the ability *to* regenerate. But she'd never seen so much in one place, certainly not in the Doctor--it was as though this regeneration were attempting to expel the vortex itself from him!

How was that even possible? Artron energy was an extremely limited thing, very difficult to transform or convert to matter, which was why the Time Lords hoarded it so jealously. The little Gallifrey controlled was distributed amongst its people and its technology: every Time Lord and every TARDIS living. The only possible way the Doctor could have so much of it in his own body was if...

No. Oh, no.

As the regeneration finally ended, Nyssa lunged forward, breaking Yurek's grip. She looked down at the man on the pallet in dismay. The man she'd dragged into this new life because she couldn't understand why he would want to end it. *She*, who should have understood better than anyone.

It wasn't just any planet that they'd watched burn. It was Gallifrey.

Part II

The ruins she'd seen, the ones that had seemed familiar though she'd not been able to identify them...that must have been the Citadel.

Nyssa couldn't breathe. Oh, she ought to have been able to--it was the same recycled air she breathed every day but drawing it into her lungs was suddenly painful. Her ribs felt too small, her body as though it were being pressed down upon on all sides. It was a feeling she knew all too well--she'd felt it the first time watching Traken disappear from the viewscreen of the TARDIS. That memory, which had never gone away, never faded, now seemed as vivid and immediate as if it were happening all over again, as if Lasarti's machine had brought it back to life.

"Lady Nyssa?" Emar asked urgently, the concern in his voice drawing her slowly back to the present.

It was like being dragged through razor wire.

"What...what happened?" Yurek asked, just as confused and concerned as his compatriot. "Is he...?"

The Doctor. She had to focus on the Doctor. This was no time to wallow in her own ever-present grief. She needed to be strong for him, as he'd been for her.

"The Doctor will live," she promised, her voice sounding very far away to her own ears. Like an automaton, she crossed to a linen cupboard and found a sheet which she then brought back to drape over the unconscious Time Lord. The act made her feel strangely maternal towards him. "For now, at least, however he might wish otherwise. Take him to my quarters, please. I think it's best I keep an eye on him, just in case."

Emar looked mildly ill, and truthfully she didn't blame him. She was feeling more than a little...unsettled herself. "That was...that was a suicide attempt?" he asked, reading between the lines. She couldn't blame him, either--if one wanted to commit suicide, there were surely easier ways than the heat and radiation burns that the Doctor had suffered.

Nyssa looked at the Doctor again. "No," she answered truthfully. "But I don't think he meant to survive, either."

While Yurek and Emar carried the Doctor to Nyssa's quarters, the same quarters she'd once shared with Lasarti and Nica, Nyssa frantically pondered what her next step ought to be.

In spite of what she knew now, she was determined not to let the Doctor die, certainly not by neglect of the regeneration process. After all, surely if she could find a reason to go on after the death of her world, eventually he would be able to as well. But she was also deeply aware that Terminus might not be equipped for what he needed: she certainly hadn't a zero room, or anything suitable for building a zero cabinet. And the TARDIS, if she'd suffered the same damage as her Time Lord, might not either.

That thought made Nyssa catch her breath all over again. It might not have been by choice, but nonetheless the TARDIS had been her home for many years. She knew they would have to see how bad the damage was, but a part of her dreaded it. There might be nothing left of the ship she remembered. It didn't matter that she'd already moved on and found a new home: the thought of losing another one still hurt.

She could imagine how much more intense that hurt must be for the Doctor.

Her eyes drifted over to him, relieved to find him still apparently unconscious, or at least pretending to be. They would need to talk--likely more than once before she felt safe letting him out of her sight--but not yet. Not with Yurek and Emar still about, two men the Doctor would consider strangers. No...when they were alone, then she'd face him.

She had no reason to fear his anger. A man who'd given up the death he so badly wanted for himself to save her life would never deliberately harm her.

Of course, she couldn't imagine the Doctor--at least not the Doctor she'd known--deliberately harming anyone unless he was forced to. The difficulty would be in remembering that this wasn't the Doctor she'd known.

She'd never had quite so much in common with her Doctor.

When they reached her quarters, Nyssa helped Yurek and Emar lift the Doctor off the pallet and ease him gently onto her own bed. She left the sheet draped over him for some illusion of privacy, even though she'd already seen enough to know that yes, everything had grown back. With his lower body temperature, he shouldn't need much more than that sheet in the constantly regulated atmosphere of the station.

It took some doing, but Yurek and Emar were eventually persuaded to leave her alone with the Doctor. Nyssa understood the reason for their questions--likely they'd never seen someone spontaneously regenerate at the point of death before. There certainly weren't many species that could, possibly not any beside the Time Lords.

Still, it was a relief when they finally departed with stern admonitions to send for them if she needed anything. It always amused her, a little, how easily the younger Vanir forgot she wasn't fragile.

But then, they knew only a fraction of what she had survived and endured in her lifetime.

This man, however...

Nyssa seated herself beside the Doctor on the bed, taking one hand in her own as she studied his still form. It came as something of a shock to realise that he looked a bit like he had when they'd first met on Traken, if you took away the wild curls and sharpened all the lines and angles on that younger incarnation's face. That was what he looked like: a harder version of the man she'd met all those years ago.

Fitting, she supposed, considering that's likely exactly what he was.

Tears stung Nyssa's eyes again, resisting her valiant efforts to hold them at bay. Some would say she'd wept far too little considering the magnitude of the losses in her life. Though she'd tried, whatever release and catharsis tears might provide had never seemed equal to the magnitude of what she mourned. Strange how easily they came when it was not her own loss she grieved.

Still clinging to the Doctor's hand, Nyssa crawled carefully into the bed beside him, on top of the sheets and blankets. Curling herself against his side, Nyssa pressed his hand to her own heart and closed her eyes. Only then did she let the tears fall.

She wound up crying herself to sleep.

~*~*~*~*~*~

When Nyssa awoke some hours later, she found the Doctor watching her with cool, unreadable blue eyes. (Of course blue--it completed the picture of a more rough-hewn version of the man she'd first met.) She became uncomfortably aware that she was lying curled up in bed with a very naked man, only a sheet between them. The fact that it was the Doctor only made things all the more awkward.

"You tricked me," he stated without preamble.

Disquieted even more, Nyssa let go of his hand and calmly climbed out of bed. She didn't look at him. She couldn't. Not yet, not with this new knowledge that she held but couldn't quite process. Instead she crossed the room to the small bureau and began to withdraw some of Lasarti's clothes; things she'd never quite been able to put aside after his death. "Yes, I did."

"I told you to let me die."

"You were in shock, irrational. That's no fit state to make life or death decisions, even about your own life." Nyssa's voice sounded clinical even to her own ears.

"I seem to remember you being a good deal better at doing as you were asked," he snapped.

Her lips turned up in a smile of wry affection, "Next to Tegan, Adric and Thomas, I imagine anyone might seem so." After a pause, she added, "Besides which, I was a good deal younger then and you weren't my patient."

Greeted with nothing but a sullen silence, Nyssa finally found the courage to turn around. She carried the small heap of clothes over to him. "I'm sure you'll find clothing more to your taste later, but these should suffice for the moment." He looked at them dubiously and she surprised herself by adding, "Unless, of course, you'd prefer to wander the halls in a bed sheet."

The Doctor snorted. "Did that last regeneration, thanks. Don't particularly care to repeat the experience." He turned the trousers and shirt over in his hands.

Now there was a story, no doubt. Nevertheless, she refrained from asking: if he wasn't going to volunteer the information, more than likely any attempts to extract it would only be rebuffed.

It didn't address the real problem, either, though she knew she'd been the first to wander off the topic. She turned away politely while he dressed, but when he was done, summoned all the Trakenite discipline of her youth to walk over to the bed and sit beside him.

Neither of them looked at the other. Nyssa took a deep breath and admitted, "You were right. I had been there before, though I didn't recognise it. That was Gallifrey, wasn't it?"

He didn't answer, only shrugged, but that was confirmation enough.

"I'm sorry," she stated in quiet sympathy.

His answer to that was a brusque, "Yeah, well, that's what you get for messing with what you don't understand."

"I don't understand?" Startled, Nyssa let out a short, disbelieving laugh. "Tell me Doctor, how is watching your world burn so very different from watching it consumed by billions of years of entropy in moments? The end result is the same."

The Doctor looked at her. Nyssa wondered if he wasn't seeing *her* for the first time, not just the companion who'd kept him alive against his will. "Nyssa, I...I didn't..." His voice was hoarse. He stared at her helplessly for a moment before she finally gave in and pulled him into her arms.

"You didn't think," Nyssa finished the sentence quietly for him, burying her own face against his neck as the Doctor's arms tightened around her. "I know. Believe me, I know."

She could feel the moment the air in the room changed. In hindsight, Nyssa would wonder if some pheromone had been released. Right now, all she knew was that there was suddenly an electricity between them that had never been there before.

She let go immediately, putting distance between her and the Doctor as if that could ease the sudden pounding in her chest. The way every nerve ending in her body responded to his presence was almost frightening. How could she even consider feeling such a thing for a man who had been, if not a father figure (no one could ever replace Tremas), then certainly a mentor? Oh, perhaps she might have fancied him a little, all those years ago, but this was something entirely different, and entirely adult.

Of course, it didn't help one bit that he was wearing her late husband's clothes. (Not that the alternative would have been preferable.)

Nyssa risked a glance at the Doctor, hoping and yet afraid to see if he had felt it too. His face was once more a locked room, one that she was locked out of: strange how she could feel such exasperation and such relief all at once.

"Would you like a tour of the station?" she asked quickly, as a cover for her actions. "I imagine Terminus has changed quite a bit since you were here last."

The Doctor forced a hollow smile onto his face. "Love one."

Part III

Everything hurt, and breathing in particular.

At first, the Doctor'd thought it must be related to his latest regeneration, a sign that something had gone wrong. Any moment now, he'd collapse on the floor and death would finally, blissfully claim him.

He said nothing to Nyssa, of course. Best to let her believe she'd done all she could, rather than warn her and risk her coming up with some other ingenious way of saving his life. She was just brilliant enough she'd likely succeed, and then where would he be?

It took a while to realise that the agony he felt wasn't dying; it was living. That ache in his chest wasn't his hearts, not in the physical sense. It was the knowledge that his were the last pair of beating Gallifreyan hearts in the universe. What made it hard to breathe wasn't a flaw in his lungs or his respiratory bypass, it was the knowledge that no one else of his species would ever draw breath again.

Maybe that was a touch melodramatic, but then again all things considered...maybe it wasn't. It seemed rather inadequate to describe what he was feeling.

The Doctor felt hobbled by the fact that it was Nyssa who'd saved him. Any stranger or any other companion? He could've thrown his loss in their faces to justify his anger. But Nyssa...how could he ask her to expect less of him than he'd expected of her? She'd survived; of course she would believe he could too.

Simple, yeah? he thought grimly to himself. *Only I'm not so strong as you. Likely never was.*

She was leading him around Terminus now like a tour guide--ever since that strange moment between them in her quarters, Nyssa had retreated behind a screen of Trakenite formality. To tell the truth, he was grateful for it.

She'd have done well on Gallifrey, he thought with no small ache, if she hadn't been so afraid for his life the one time they'd visited. Not that there was a pretentious bone in her body, but she had a genuinely regal grace that would've impressed a High Council too self-absorbed to know the difference. But that was speaking ill of the dead, wasn't it? The Doctor's hearts tightened again--he'd never thought he could miss those uptight old frauds so much.

Nyssa's formality didn't stop her pride in what she'd accomplished coming through, he noticed, forcing his mind back to the present. It was well deserved--the Terminus he remembered had been a hellish place, so impersonal and hopeless it might as well have had inscribed above the docking ports: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." The fact that Nyssa had not only refused to abandon hope, but had reshaped this broken-down timeship at the centre of the universe into a place that lent others hope as well was nothing short of incredible.

He felt humbled to have played even a small role in the change by bringing her here, and ashamed of every single time his fifth incarnation had fretted after she'd gone about how she'd fare in such a heartless place.

But then, those who'd called his fifth persona a crotchety old man trapped in a young man's body weren't far off.

What were once overcrowded holding cells for the dying had been transformed, with time and ingenuity, into proper wards with more than enough beds. The grime of millennia had been stripped from the walls, the entire place cleaned from top to bottom, making it, well...if not warm, at least a lot more welcoming.

Most impressive of all, though, was that the Vanir and other people they passed coming and going from what had once been the "forbidden zone" all wore proper radiation attire instead of that damnable armour--something he couldn't help remarking on.

Nyssa beamed. "Yes, that was one of the first things I budgeted for, once we were able to cut costs by synthesising our own Hydromel. That and proper shielding for the engines."

They'd stopped in a robing room to don their own radiation suits before heading deeper into the heart of Terminus. Of course, with proper shielding in place they probably wouldn't need them, but it was just like Nyssa to be prepared for anything. It wouldn't do, after all, to go to the trouble of keeping him alive only to let him get himself irradiated again and die anyway.

"How proper are we talking?" the Doctor asked. He had a vague memory that the radiation leak from the engines had been instrumental, somehow, in keeping the place running.

"Enough to be safe," Nyssa answered simply. "While still getting the power we need where it ought to go."

Clearly she'd had a lot of practice, over the years, in explaining things for the average layperson. Perhaps later he could gently remind her he wasn't one of them, and get the full technical explanation. Who knew? There might even be something he could do to help further her plans for the station.

He brutally shoved aside the thought that if the TARDIS was dead, it might be the only useful thing left for him *to* do. (And wouldn't that be irony for you? Both of them losing their worlds to wind up ending their days on this...place.)

Nyssa pulled the helmet of the radiation suit over her head, and the Doctor imitated her almost mechanically. Silence fell between them again until they reached the re-shielded engines, where Nyssa pointed out the work that had been done. It was exactly the technical detail he'd wanted, so why did he find it disappointingly impersonal?

But then, what did he expect? In his fifth persona, he'd kept all his companions at something of a distance, sometimes even when they might've needed a more personal touch. He'd certainly no right to

whinge about it if she maintained that distance now. How was she to know his own loss had left him craving the contact of another sentient being, to remind him that the Time War hadn't destroyed everything?

Nyssa looked up at him, her face barely visible behind the clear but small face shield of her own suit. To his surprise, she slipped one delicate hand into his own as if it belonged there. He squeezed her hand gratefully, but said nothing, allowing her to lead him on. She let go only once they had passed through the last danger zone and could remove the helmets.

The Doctor found himself studying his one-time companion. She'd changed, of course: in ways subtle and not so subtle. The years had left their mark, etching her face with spider-thin lines and a few deeper cracks. Every one reminded him not only of Nyssa's own mortality, but that of her entire species. Long gone were the traditional Trakenite curls. In her dress, too, practicality had long ago replaced fashion: she wore a simple, one-piece black jumpsuit under a long white coat.

"How long has it been?" he asked. "For you, I mean. Since I left you here."

Nyssa looked thoughtful for a moment. "Why, it must be nearly fifty years past."

Fifty years! That would certainly explain all she'd accomplished, but still... "You don't look it."

She glanced at him, amused. "In human terms, no, I suppose I don't. But then, by that standard, neither do you look your age."

How old did he look this time around? Oddly, he hadn't really given it much thought. Might even say he dreaded the idea of looking in a mirror and discovering his new face. Considering what had shaped it, he couldn't shake the fear that the monster he'd become must show somehow.

She was right, though: on Traken, eighty was likely considered barely middle age. After all, she'd travelled with him for what, ten years, just the two of them? Fifteen, maybe? And when they'd picked up Tegan again, she'd just assumed it had been the same year for them as it had for her.

Tegan. Oh yes, why didn't he just twist another knife in his own hearts, while he was at it? The Doctor scowled.

They'd reached the bridge by this time, though, which afforded him the perfect opportunity to steer the conversation away from dangerous waters. "I see you got rid of the corpse in the pilot's seat," he remarked dryly.

"Yes." Nyssa's answer came out equally dry. "It rather reinforced the idea of Terminus as a place for the dying. I wanted to create a place of healing instead."

So much for safer waters. Oh, yes, Terminus had most certainly been a place for the dying when they'd first come here. It was one of the reasons he'd dreaded leaving Nyssa behind, only doing so in the end because he respected her too much to deny her the choice. Maybe if she'd still been the child she was when they met, but no, she'd grown up while they traveled together, and not only as a result of Traken's

destruction. (Gallifrey's fate had aged him too. For the first time, he felt not just every century but every minute of his too-long life. He was truly an old man now in a way he'd never been when he'd worn the face of one. There was irony for you.)

Still, it hadn't stopped him from wondering, at first, if he'd done the right thing leaving Nyssa here. Tegan had certainly questioned it. His sixth incarnation really hadn't been the worrying sort, so for a long while those concerns had faded from his mind altogether. If he'd never found himself here, he might never have thought of it again. Now that he was here...he couldn't help but envy her ability to find hope and healing in a place such as this.

He couldn't, that was certain. Such long term commitment to a task had never come easily to his restless soul. The thought of ending his days here wasn't one he liked to contemplate, even though Terminus was far less deserving of its name after fifty years of Nyssa's handling. He liked the possibility that the TARDIS might be dead, leaving him no choice, even less.

"Doctor?" Nyssa asked gently.

He'd got lost in his own thoughts again. Well, that was one thing that hadn't changed with this new body. Forcing a bright, false smile onto his face, the Doctor chirruped, "Sorry 'bout that. So much interesting stuff, I get distracted, me."

It was plain by her face that she knew better than to believe him, but mercifully she didn't comment, only gave him a sad smile. "Come. There's one more thing I think you'll want to see."

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He felt the TARDIS before he turned the corner and saw her. For the first time since he'd watched Arcadia fall, the Doctor felt an irrational spark of hope; if he could feel the TARDIS, it meant she was still alive. And if she was still alive, well, he might still be the last Gallifreyan left alive in the universe, but he wasn't the last thing left of Gallifrey.

She was sitting in the corridor, one door a little ajar from where he'd fallen out. There was no light shining through the opening, but that was hardly unusual--several past console rooms had possessed an inner door as well as an outer one. From the outside at least, there appeared to be only minimal damage.

That hope faded significantly the minute he set foot inside.

The console room told a different story. The Doctor heard Nyssa gasp behind him as they stepped inside, and he wondered humorlessly if it was the damage or just the expanded size of the room that shocked her. He dismissed that thought as uncharitable a pair of heartbeats later: likely it was both. Certainly even the decision to move the library into the console room hadn't made it seem quite as vast as it appeared now, a burnt-out husk.

For that was all that was left, really, in the dim glow of Nyssa's torch. A few burnt pages of what had been priceless volumes littered the floor, but otherwise the library was ashes. A few pieces of furniture were still barely recognisable, but none would ever be usable again. The gothic-cathedral décor he'd put up on a whim after losing Ace was either charred or melted beyond recognition. The enormous metal support struts he'd erected to support the fancy new viewscreen had twisted and warped like trees thrashed in a violent storm. Everywhere he looked, he saw only ruins.

The only thing left standing was the console, though even it showed signs of severe damage. A light in the time rotor still glowed faintly, though. Even had he not sensed the TARDIS' presence through their symbiotic bond, he would've known from that light that she was still clinging to life by a tenuous thread.

He wasn't surprised to see his own dismay at the extent of the destruction mirrored on Nyssa's face in the torchlight. She'd always had a compassionate heart and the TARDIS had once been her only home too. She moved forward as if drawn by invisible strings, deeper into the cavernous ruin of a room.

The Doctor waited almost impatiently for her to make some inane comment, spit out some platitude that would give him an excuse to snap at her. Rassilon, was that what he'd been reduced to in this incarnation? Goading friends into making him angry so he could fulfill this inane need to lash out at someone or something?

Instead, she laid one, gentle, sympathetic hand on the console. Astonishment drove all traces of anger from his mind as the light on the time rotor brightened noticeably in response.

"She likes you," he remarked dumbly. *Oh, fantastic. Make another brilliantly obvious observation while you're at it, why don't you?*

"Of course she does," Nyssa answered softly, meeting his eyes. "I saved your life, didn't I?"

The Doctor gave her a blank look, and Nyssa returned it with an incredulous stare of her own. "Did it never occur to you that the TARDIS might not be so eager to die?"

Incredibly, it hadn't. He'd thought it was coincidence that brought them here, or some strange force of gravity drawing them to the centre of the known universe. The idea that the TARDIS had subverted his own death wish, taking him--as he'd observed before--to the one person in the universe against whom all his excuses would turn to naught...it was audacious.

It went further than that, though. The TARDIS had a sense of the passage and eddies of time more keen than his own, or than any Time Lord's. She had a habit of taking him where he was needed, whether it was where he'd meant to go or not. Hence why he rarely landed anywhere that trouble didn't follow soon after.

He thought about the Watcher, the ghostly figure whose presence in his mind always heralded the end of one life and the beginning of the next. It was a part of him, a symbolic representation of the symbiotic bond with the TARDIS that gave him the power to regenerate. Or at least, he'd always thought it symbolic. If you'd asked him at any point in his first four lives if the Watcher could take physical form

and act independently of him, he'd've sworn it impossible. But it had happened, just once. The one time the Watcher had taken physical form and acted independently of him, it had brought Nyssa to Logopolis.

For centuries the Doctor had wondered, why her? Why snatch Nyssa alone from the jaws of Traken's destruction? After her decision to stay on Terminus, he'd thought maybe that was the answer--that she was needed elsewhere. But what if there were more to it than that? What if the Watcher had saved Nyssa so that she could, in turn, save him?

When he thought about it--really thought about it, not just entertaining a passing fancy--the very idea made him feel physically ill. Oh, his ship was a possessive, protective thing, she was. Would she condemn someone to outlive her entire world just so he might one day have a sympathetic ear? If so, then Nyssa's survival wasn't fate; it was cruelty.

He hated himself a little more for even contemplating the idea. Both Nyssa and the TARDIS deserved better from him.

He moved forward to lay his own hand on the console in apology. "Then we'd best save her, hadn't we?"

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That first day, all they did was to evaluate the extent of the damage. Much to Nyssa's surprise and occasional delight, the TARDIS had managed to preserve some rooms entirely, including the room she'd once shared with Tegan (though the walls had changed).

The Doctor seemed surprised by that one, confessing sheepishly that he'd thought it long gone.

Of course, for every room they found intact, there were a dozen hallways and doorways which now only led to walls. The TARDIS had clearly jettisoned a significant part of herself to survive and to bring the Doctor here safely. Nyssa remembered all too well a time when the ship had been asked to make a similar sacrifice to save them all.

Still, if she'd ever had any doubts that the ship was sentient, the significance of the surviving rooms laid them to rest: every one they found together meant something to the Doctor, or to her.

The wardrobe, for example, was surprisingly pristine. The Doctor disappeared into its riot of colour and fabric with a cheerful desire to find clothing that "looks more like me." For the first time Nyssa caught a glimpse of the man she'd once known in this stranger's enthusiasm. She half expected him to emerge dressed head to toe in purple, or yellow, or possibly armour. Perhaps even all three: she'd seen stranger whims take him.

"So?" The Doctor asked upon emerging once again. He pivoted a little, flashing a manic grin at her that she recognised as patently forced. "What d'you think?"

Nyssa blinked. Then again, perhaps she hadn't seen stranger things. He wore black trousers, black boots, a black turtleneck jumper and a battered old black jacket that appeared to be made from sort of animal

hide. It was the strangest choice of costume the Doctor could've made because it was so...normal: no wonder she hadn't anticipated it.

The look on her face must have resembled his when she'd made her first attempt to dress in a fashion other than that of her native Traken, because he became instantly defensive. "Why, what's wrong with it?"

"It's very...black," she answered honestly.

"So's yours," he pointed out.

Nyssa glanced down at her own attire. She smiled wryly. "Yes, but I had a practical reason for my choice. I've never known you to have one."

He had the grace to look a bit sheepish.

Nyssa studied him for a moment more, something nagging at the back of her mind. Then it came to her. She looked up, meeting his eyes. "On Earth...black is a colour for mourning, is it not?"

The Doctor looked at her, surprised. "In some cultures, yes, it is. You get that from Tegan?"

She shook her head. "Some of the books in the TARDIS library." Books that very likely were destroyed now, she thought, mourning them a little as well.

"I didn't know you read that sort of thing," he admitted.

"One can't read technical manuals all the time," Nyssa answered dryly, but with sympathy in her eyes. She reached for his hand, quietly returning to the subject of his attire. "I wouldn't have thought it, but it suits you."

The Doctor squeezed her hand. "Thanks."

Part IV

He was burning. Burning from the inside out, just as the world had burned around him, exploding in a flash of fire. He could feel his hearts sizzling inside him as the flames licked his face, devoured his hair, consumed his hands, his body. He was boiling alive like a lobster in a pot, he was burning like a witch at the stake, like a thousand other horrific images from the history of Earth: one of many worlds he'd sacrificed his own to save.

Were they worth it? Humans with their history peppered with barbarism--were they any better than the race he'd given his life and his people to destroy?

Not that it mattered. He wouldn't live to see if the universe proved worthy of his sacrifice. Not when he could feel his skin crack and curl like wood on the fire. He was burning to death, just like Gallifrey. He was dying. He was...

On the charred floor of the TARDIS, the Doctor opened his eyes. Time wailed in his ear, crying like a child in pain at the blow he'd delivered. The blackened husk of the TARDIS, too, gave silent voice to her own misery. Behind and beyond them rose the ghostly, nonexistent voices of a billion murdered Gallifreyans, all screaming out in agony and outrage.

He was alive.

Clapping charcoal hands uselessly over ears that had been burned away, the Doctor screamed.

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The Doctor awoke with a strangled gasp, hearts pounding out a drumroll in his chest. As a rule, his people had never required much sleep compared to other species. He blamed the amount of it he'd been doing on his recent regeneration and Nyssa'd said nothing to dispute that diagnosis whether she agreed with it or no.

Beside him, Nyssa stirred, most likely wakened by his movement. She'd scarcely let him out of her sight since he'd arrived, even to the point of insisting he share her bed. It might've been funny if he thought for a moment it was some sly attempt on her part to seduce him. He knew Nyssa too well, though, not to work out her real reason.

Suicide watch. She still didn't trust him to choose to live, even knowing the bond between him and his TARDIS.

He might've resented that if the dream--no, memory--didn't still linger so vividly in his thoughts. The Doctor shivered. The sensation of burning with the TARDIS, with Gallifrey, was still all too easy to relive.

A small hand landed gently on his arm. "Doctor?"

He shivered involuntarily. "Just a bad dream. Didn't mean to wake you."

"As one whose own dreams are rarely peaceful, I should probably thank you," was the answer. Nyssa's hand began to stroke his arm gently. He shivered again, though not for the same reason. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

"No," was his honest answer.

Nyssa said nothing for a long time. When she did speak again, it was with unexpected candour. "I dream I'm in the garden, caring for Melkur. Cassia's alive, Father's alive, and the Keeper is watching over us all as he always did. For a little while, I'm happy. Then all of a sudden, I notice the plants and trees in the garden have begun to wilt and die. The walls of the city start to crumble. I see Cassia age a thousand years before my eyes before collapsing dead at my feet and decaying first to a skeleton, then dust in moments. My whole world dissolves beneath my feet and in the centre of it all stands the Master, wearing my father's face and laughing as I cry." Her voice took on a subtle note of bitterness on this last. Little wonder, considering the scene she described. "I wonder sometimes, what it must've been like in those last moments. Did the Keeper know what was coming? Did any of them even have time to be afraid? I hope not. I hope it was quick and painless."

The Doctor swallowed hard. "I'm sorry."

She met his eyes evenly. "You didn't destroy Traken, Doctor."

"No," he acknowledged reluctantly. "But if I'd been half so concerned with saving it as with Earth--"

--we would still have been too late," she interrupted, her voice quietly resigned. "Believe me, Doctor, I've run every scenario in my mind a thousand billion times over the years, wondering what might have been done differently."

The Doctor's chest tightened. Oh, he knew all about "what ifs"--he'd entertained more than a few himself in the past few days. Most scenarios involved breaking the Laws of Time. Would that feeling or those doubts ever go away?

"When we were up on the bridge," he started, his voice sounding hoarse even to his own ears. "You talked about healing. About making this a place of healing."

Nyssa looked away as if anticipating his question.

"Never mind the Lazars, did *you* find that here?"

Now it was her turn to answer honestly: "No, Doctor. I wish I could promise you otherwise, but some wounds never completely heal. They only...scar over."

It took a moment to realise that the short, keening sound he heard came from him. Afterwards, he was never sure which of them had reached for the other first, but he found himself clinging to Nyssa. He

hated how grateful he was that she understood something no sentient being should ever have to understand.

"How do you stand it?" he asked helplessly. "How do you live, day after day, with this emptiness?"

"I have my work. I have Nica. I had Lasarti for fifteen years. And I have you." Nyssa looked at him. "If you want to know what kept me alive, in those early days when the wounds were still fresh...it was you. Tegan and Adric as well, but mostly you. You kept my mind occupied with new problems, new adventures, and that was what I needed." She dropped her eyes again for a moment before looking back up, her voice quiet with regret. "I'm not sure Adric ever forgave either one of us for that--I took your attention away from him when he was the one you'd promised to mentor."

The Doctor snorted deliberately--not to make light of Adric, for that was another burden of guilt he still carried, but to ease her mind about any share in the blame. "Some mentor. I doubt I knew what I was doing half the time, that incarnation."

Nyssa raised a slim eyebrow and smirked at him. "And this is different from the usual, how?"

He glared at her. "I think someone's spent a bit too much time with Tegan."

Nyssa's expression softened into a wistful smile. It made her entire face look almost as young as when he'd first known her. She laid a hand on his chest, his left heart. Her voice turned quiet and serious again. "The point is...you gave me a reason to live long before Terminus did. Thank you for that."

The Doctor covered her hand with his own. To his surprise, the strange frisson of energy that had earlier passed between them returned stronger this time. More than a spark, it was a steady electric current. It ran directly from her hand to his hearts...and other parts of his anatomy as well.

When they spoke about it in the days and months that followed, neither he nor Nyssa was ever able to remember clearly who made the first move. Truth be told, it hardly mattered, for both of them wanted the same thing.

They were intellectuals, the pair of them, always thinking. But thinking all too often meant remembering and there was one memory neither could easily avoid: standing witness to their world's destruction. One wound was older than the other, but seeing it inflicted on another still ripped open the scar.

However it happened, they met in the middle: the last son of Gallifrey and the last daughter of Traken, seeking solace in each other from a grief too weighty to shoulder alone but too unique to easily share.

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The Doctor could count on one hand the companions he'd had or ever contemplated a romantic or sexual relationship with whilst they travelled with him and Nyssa had never been on that list. At first, she'd been too young, then later, too beholden. It wouldn't have been right to put that sort of pressure on their relationship when she had nowhere else to go if she didn't feel the same.

But that was no longer true. She had a life here, separate and independent of him, and he was the one with no home left but the TARDIS. Tragedy had rendered them equals.

He thought about the family she'd had the last time he saw her, when she'd answered his psychic call during his very difficult fifth regeneration. A stab of guilt pierced him that he hadn't thought to ask--or hadn't wanted to--last night. Then again, from the moment the Doctor arrived, Nyssa had spoken of her husband in the past tense. Whatever else last night might have been, it wasn't likely to add "home wrecker" to his increasingly dubious list of skills and titles.

He was glad of that. In the brief time that the Doctor had known the man Nyssa married, he'd come to respect Lasarti.

Beside him, Nyssa slept peacefully, the voices of the dying for once temporarily stilled. He could feel it through the bond he'd once forged between them, to save his own life in the midst of that nearly unsuccessful regeneration. Nyssa had used that bond to save his life again, this time against his will. Their physical union seemed to have cemented it--one more thing he might regret if she hadn't consented to both just as freely.

Too freely, perhaps. With the echoing absence of the Time Lords in his mind, it would be all too easy to make that link a lifeline. He could reshape his world, even his universe, around her. He hadn't been himself--not this himself, anyway--for very long, but already he knew he was a drowning man. A drowning man didn't easily let go of what kept him afloat, even if it meant pulling it under with him.

The Doctor shuddered. Rather than risk it, he closed his eyes and deliberately severed the link instead.

Nyssa stirred. She rolled over and looked at him with concerned eyes. "Doctor?"

"What happened to them?" he surprised himself by asking. "Lasarti and Nica, I mean."

The shadow in Nyssa's eyes returned at the mention of her family. She smiled sadly. "Lasarti died some five years ago. His species may have been biologically compatible with mine, but they were also far shorter lived."

"I'm sorry," he told her simply.

Nyssa shook her head. "I knew what I was getting into when I married him. As for Nica...well, she grew up and left home, just as I once did." Sadness turned to pride for a moment. "She's studying medicine at the finest school in the empire. She may return when she's finished, but she may also decide to set up her own practice somewhere else. Whatever it is, it will be her choice."

The choice she'd been denied. Allowed that choice, the Doctor couldn't help but think Nyssa would likely have never left Traken. Not permanently, anyway. Her nature was as inclined towards contentment as his was to discontent and restlessness.

Nyssa studied him shrewdly. She'd become far too perceptive where he was concerned of late. "Come here." She climbed smoothly out of the bed and gestured for him to follow her to the window.

That she had a window--that she had made her home far enough from the centre of the station that she could look out on the stars--well, that was a choice he could understand.

They stood there staring out at the universe for a long moment before Nyssa spoke again. "The universe turns on all our choices, Doctor, not only yours, and I've no doubt it will continue to turn in spite of them as well. I chose Terminus. I chose to make love to you last night, as much for my own sake as for yours. The choices I wasn't don't invalidate the ones I was or will be given. I'd appreciate if you didn't try to take them away from me out of some misguided sense of responsibility for my welfare."

His eyes snapped to hers. "Excuse me?"

Nyssa stood on tiptoe to give him a gentle kiss. "I'm saying you don't need to save me, anymore, Doctor. I'm perfectly capable of saving myself."

He swallowed hard and looked at her, an impossibly difficult confession on his lips: "I'm not."

Part V

Saving herself or saving him: was that what she was doing, then?

Truthfully, Nyssa wasn't sure what she'd been thinking, to take the Doctor of all people into her bed. Thought likely hadn't entered into it at all--hers or the Doctor's.

That said, she didn't regret it. It might have been easier, once, to despise the Doctor for the devastation that he'd heralded, but she'd always loved him, this stranger who'd burst into her life bringing destruction in his wake. If that love had taken different forms as the years passed and they both changed, well, that was only natural.

If they needed to be lovers this time around, then she would treasure that as much as she'd treasured every other relationship they'd had. Just like every other time she'd known him, this interlude would end soon enough. When the TARDIS was repaired, he would give in to the impulse to move on and she would have to choose again to join him or stay behind. That restlessness was one facet of the Doctor she couldn't imagine changing, no matter how what face he wore. Only now he was running not from his people, but from their memory. Perhaps he would run from the memory of her and what they shared as well.

If the thought of that inevitability hurt just a little more than it ought...she'd become expert at carrying her wounds well concealed. He need never know how dearly she would miss him when he was gone, for this would probably be the last time he ever returned. She'd no doubt he wouldn't have this time if he, rather than the TARDIS, had chosen their destination.

Nyssa wondered: if he asked, could she say those fateful words again? "I'm not coming with you"? She still had no satisfactory answer to that when she rapped lightly on the TARDIS door.

"Busy!" the Doctor called out grumpily from within. "Go away."

Nyssa smiled, pushing the door open the rest of the way. She marvelled at how much the control room had changed in only a few short days. The white walls she remembered were still absent, but they were echoed in the earthier construction with its smaller roundels and tarnished golden gleam. She'd heard from the Doctor that they were grown, TARDISES, like the coral that spread across the ocean floors of a thousand worlds. It was something entirely different, however, to watch it happen.

The Doctor looked up from where he was sitting at the foot of the console. He was doing...something to the wires draped across both shoulders with a new sonic screwdriver he'd recently constructed. "Oh, it's you."

"You were expecting Yurek?" she asked almost pertly.

The Doctor shrugged. "Could've been. We're a bit of a curiosity for your lot, the TARDIS and me--more than one have poked their head in."

She hadn't known that, but it didn't really surprise her. "And promptly pulled it out again, muttering something about the inside being impossible, I imagine."

His eyes gleamed with mischief that she'd missed. "Well, not every civilisation in the universe can just take the idea of dimensional transcendence in stride. The number of my companions whose first words were 'It's bigger on the inside'..."

"And you love it," she pointed out astutely, smiling. "I rather suspect I was something of a disappointment, in that regard."

The Doctor looked at her again, and the heat in his gaze made her shiver. "You? Never," he vowed quietly.

Nyssa closed the door behind her and joined him on the edge of the grate that had grown up over the TARDIS floor like a net of seaweed. She handed him a laser spanner and he gave a brief grunt of acknowledgment.

They lapsed into a companionable silence, only speaking when the Doctor needed Nyssa's help with the repairs--either her technical knowledge or just a spare hand. It moved her no end how quick the Doctor was to trust her to help him. He was as protective of his ship as the TARDIS was of him: allowing anyone else to touch her, especially a species other than a Time Lord, was not an easy thing to do. If she had that trust, it meant he expected her to treat the TARDIS more like a patient than a machine. The ship was, after all, a living thing.

Her people didn't always quite understand why she cared to spend so much free time with this apparent stranger. It helped a great deal that when the Doctor wasn't tinkering with the TARDIS, he wandered about the station lending a helping hand where needed with repairs, improvements, or anything that suited his rather broad skill set. He probably saved them quite a bit of labour and money.

She never joined him until her own duties were done, of course, but that only made the hours working together all the more precious. Most of the technical work they completed was on the console, but also the other circuits, wires, bits and bobs that made up the ship's systems. The damage to the control room, though, the dead-end corridors and empty rooms all regenerated on their own. It awed her to watch the TARDIS heal around her, just as the Doctor himself had.

Or at least...just as his body had.

The TARDIS was alive, but was she self-aware enough to comprehend and feel the loss the way the Doctor did? Nyssa didn't know, but she rather hoped not.

It was one of many questions she wouldn't ask because she didn't expect an answer. As long as she'd known him, the Doctor had never been one to talk about his past. What little she knew about the man he'd been before she met him, she'd learned from Adric: the lady Time Lord named Romana, the peculiar metal dog named K-9 that the engineer in her rather wished she could have met. Similarly,

whatever companions he'd had after Tegan and Turlough left the TARDIS most likely never knew that Nyssa existed.

It might have been a disquieting thought if she weren't similarly reticent about her own past. No one on Terminus knew where she came from. All who would remember her arrival were long dead.

Some things were simply too painful or too precious to speak of with even the most intimate of friends. She'd told Lasarti, but now he too was gone.

As far as she knew, the Doctor had never had a true life partner. Romana might have come close, from what Adric had told her, had she not chosen to stay behind in another universe. That choice might have spared her from the destruction of Gallifrey, for all Nyssa knew, or even from knowing of it.

Not that it made much difference for the Doctor: Romana was still just as lost to him as Tremas had been to Nyssa once the Master took him over, for all that she'd clung to the hope she might one day banish him and regain her father--

Nyssa's breath caught in her throat. Suddenly dizzy, she fumbled for purchase, gripping the edge of the TARDIS console when her hands found it. Her father. If Gallifrey was gone and all the Time Lords were destroyed...

"Nyssa?" The Doctor looked at her, alarmed. "What's wrong?"

It was hard to speak past the sudden knot in her throat, but she forced the words out. "The Master...my father's body..."

It took a little while, but she saw a terrible compassion dawn in his eyes. It hadn't occurred to either of them that, in a way, his loss was hers as well. All she'd had left of Traken was the shell of her father.

"Dead," he admitted softly. "Like all the rest. But that...particular life ended for him long before the Time War. He was executed."

So, even that hope was dead at last. Nyssa heard a soft sob, only belatedly realising it had come from her own throat.

Setting down the laser spanner he'd been using, the Doctor pulled her into his arms. The dam broke as her face touched his chest and suddenly she was crying, sobbing as she hadn't done in decades for her lost childhood.

"I'm sorry," the Doctor whispered into her hair, his own voice just as agonised. "I'm so, so sorry."

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The worst of it was knowing how easily this all could have been avoided. If he hadn't hesitated all those years ago on Skaro, the Daleks would have been killed in the cradle before they could ever come close to threatening the power of the Time Lords.

But the self-righteous infant he'd been had waited just a moment too long, long enough to fail. He'd saved himself from one act of genocide only to be driven to two all these centuries later. Of course, the actions of his seventh incarnation on Skaro likely hadn't helped matters either: master manipulator, Time Lord, and too short-sighted to see the far-reaching consequences of his own arrogance.

"It wasn't your fault," Nyssa's voice interrupted him quietly.

The Doctor twisted his neck around to look at her where she was lying on his chest. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they'd wound up in bed together again. This time it was his bed aboard the TARDIS, which he used so rarely it was rather a surprise it hadn't been dumped along with the rest of the detritus to get them here.

"What?"

"The Master. Logopolis. Traken. None of it was your fault." She sighed deeply. "The Keeper summoned you because he thought you could save us. And you did, for a little while."

That little while could've been a good deal longer if he'd just thought to clean up his mess, to make sure the Master was gone. "Wasn't really thinking about that," he answered honestly.

"You were feeling guilty about something."

The Doctor sighed. "Doesn't matter. Couldn't change it if I wanted to."

"The laws of time?" she asked.

He shook his head. "That too, but no. The whole War is under a Time Lock. Romana's idea; suppose she knew, if anyone survived, the temptation to change things might prove too great. Even for a Time Lord. Can't be done--or rather, can't be undone. Anyone who tried might survive, but their sanity likely wouldn't."

He felt her shiver. "Would you have tried, if you could?"

Something about her made him strangely honest with himself. "Been thinking about nothing else," he admitted, knowing she would understand the heresy in that statement. "You?"

Nyssa was silent for an unexpectedly long time before slowly answering, "Yes and no. If there was a way I could have Traken back without giving up everything I've gained, everything I've seen and achieved since it was lost..." She ducked her eyes. "Of course, as little as twenty years ago, that question might have been much simpler to answer."

"How's that?"

Nyssa looked at him and answered with just one word: "Nica."

Ah, of course. She'd become a mother, and no mother in her right mind would trade the life of her child for anything. No proper father could, either. Not that he'd ever been a proper father, or a proper grandfather, really, but he'd loved like one.

The Doctor fleetingly considered telling her about his children, about his grandchildren or at least Susan. He decided against it for purely selfish reasons: Nyssa's daughter was a comfort to her, not another name on the list of the dead.

He changed the subject instead. "TARDIS should be fixed in a few days. Been thinking I ought to take her out for a spin. Y'know, just to make sure everything's working properly. What do you say?"

The rueful smile on her face seemed to say she'd been expecting this.

"One trip," he wheedled in his most persuasive voice. "Anywhere you like. Anywhen, even. Fifty years in one place, can you honestly say there's nothing you miss about being out there?"

"Well," Nyssa admitted after a moment. "I would like to see Tegan one last time. To ease her mind a little--I know she worried about me staying here."

The Doctor's face immediately shuttered. Of course--for Nyssa, it had always been more about the people than the places. Really, he ought to have known better than to ask. "Nope. No can do. Where else?"

She sat up, looking at him in surprise. "Why not? You didn't part on such terrible terms, surely."

"Nothing to do with how we parted," he answered shortly. Though truthfully, the way Tegan had left him did still sting more than a little. She was the first to walk away because of the way death followed him, or at least the first to have admitted as much. "Just not going to happen."

Not when the aftermath of her time with him was slowly killing her but she'd rather die than trust him again.

But he would be fooling himself as well to think Nyssa would be satisfied with so incomplete an answer. The look she gave him put to shame the glare he'd once earned by accidentally teleporting her into the middle of a blizzard. "Doctor..."

"She's dying, all right?" the Doctor spat out, the words bitter on his tongue. "Last time I saw her, she had a brain tumour from something she did, something she was exposed to with me. Most likely the Mara."

Nyssa's eyes softened. "I see. And there's nothing can be done about it?"

"Nothing human," was the bitter answer. "And that's all the cure she'd accept. I'd have taken her to the finest hospitals in the universe, in all of history. I'd've brought her here, if it would help. But she wouldn't have it. Said if aliens were what got her into the mess in the first place, last thing she wanted was more aliens poking about in her head trying to cure it. Do you really want to see her like that?"

"Yes." Her voice was as firm as it was compassionate. "More than ever, now. I never had the chance to say goodbye to anyone I loved on Traken, not even my father. Or to Adric. If I'm to lose someone else I love..."

He'd said goodbye to Romana, at the end. And to Ace and Leela, before they were sent off to fight on the front lines. It hadn't helped. Just like Tegan, they'd refused to let him save them from the fates he'd brought upon them.

But if it would help Nyssa...Rassilon help him, he couldn't say no.

"Right." Maybe if the exhaustion and defeat he felt came through in his voice, it'd be easier to convince her to come with him when he left Terminus. It was so bloody selfish it wasn't worthy of him, but he didn't care. Right now it was all he had to live for. "Soon as the TARDIS is fixed, we'll drop in on Tegan."

Part VI

They fell into a routine in the days that followed. Mornings would see them go their separate ways, Nyssa to tend to her usual duties around the station while the Doctor continued tinkering with the TARDIS. When she was done, she'd join him there and offer what help she could. Meals were taken in the Terminus commissary when they remembered to take them at all, and then at night they would retire to her quarters and the comfort of each other's arms.

Some nights they would only sleep. Some, Nyssa would sleep while the Doctor lay awake, due to either his Time Lord physiology, simple insomnia or some combination of both. But almost inevitably on other nights, one or the other of them would awake from a nightmare and need the solace that the physical side of their new relationship provided. It was always insufficient consolation, but both of them knew by now that nothing ever would quite suffice.

As Nyssa herself had said, some wounds were too deep to ever completely heal.

"Lady Nyssa? Nyssa?"

Her assistant, Gilbehr's voice brought her back to the present with a start. "Pardon?"

He pointed hesitantly to the supply form that was on her screen--that had, in fact, been on her screen for some time. It was a catalogue of foodstuffs for the commissary, or at least those such as they were not able to produce themselves in the hydroponic garden she'd built. Shaking her head to clear it, Nyssa apologised: "Forgive me, my mind was elsewhere."

"It's no trouble, Lady," Gilbehr assured her with an indecipherable smile. "I've become rather accustomed to it, since the Doctor arrived." He hesitated a moment before adding cautiously, "We all have."

That sent a jolt of surprise through her, mixed with a hint of shame and followed by a wave of completely irrational irritation. What business was it of anyone's how she chose to spend her free time? It wasn't as though she'd been neglecting any of her duties. Or had she?

The irritation faded as suddenly as it had come when she realised she didn't know, not for certain. Had she really become so wrapped up in the Doctor as that?

"No, Lady," Gilbehr reassured her hastily when she asked. "You've done everything asked of you and more, just as always. Except..." He hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Forgive me, Lady, but you just don't seem to like being here very much anymore."

Nyssa didn't answer, quite frankly stunned into silence. Of course, the most shocking part was that she couldn't deny it: when she tried to find the drive and enthusiasm she'd felt so recently for her work ongoing on the station, it wasn't there.

"I'm sorry." Gilbehr looked sheepish. "I oughtn't to have said anything."

"No," Nyssa corrected him quickly but kindly. "I would never want you to feel you couldn't be entirely honest with me." She paused a moment before adding. "But if you could...give me a moment."

"Yes, of course." Gilbehr ducked his head almost reverently. She wondered when and how she'd given them cause to venerate her so much? It certainly hadn't been intentional.

Nyssa finished her work almost mechanically. If Gilbehr was right, mechanical was how she had been for some time now. That thought still troubled her, particularly because no one had spoken of it to her before.

Was it so wrong, after all, to have grown restless? Certainly it wasn't typical of her. She'd made the choice to remain here, a choice she knew when she made it would likely be irreversible. She was still needed, too--only a fraction of what she'd envisioned had been achieved. It would take the rest of her life, if not longer to complete the rest, but she'd committed to see it through.

On the other hand, she'd been very young when she made that choice, young and burning with righteous indignation and purpose. She might have been practical enough to see something of the road ahead, but never all of it. The simple but relentless tedium of the stars--the same stars, night and day--was something she'd never anticipated. Yes, she'd accepted her fate, both that first day and in the years that followed, but then at the time the choice had seemed irrevocable.

She'd never expected the Doctor to return, and certainly not like this.

Unsurprisingly, when she left her office, Nyssa found her steps turning towards the TARDIS. The Doctor looked up as she opened the door, flashing her an eager smile like nothing she'd seen on this new face. "There you are. Just in time--I was just about to come looking for you."

It could only mean one thing. "Is the TARDIS--?"

He flipped a switch and the time rotor hummed to life, a golden-green light pulsing joyfully along the entire length of the column. "Ready to go."

Strange, but when the day came that the TARDIS was repaired, she'd rather expected it to transform into an empty door or cupboard or some other fixture that would blend in with the station, not the same old police box. "But not the chameleon circuit?" she asked.

The Doctor shrugged. "Block transfer computation never was my strong suit--hence the trip to Logopolis in the first place. Besides..." He patted the console fondly. "I like her the way she is."

Well. She could understand that, Nyssa supposed. It was a constant, after all, and such things were important when you had so few constants left.

The Doctor looked at her. "So. Shall we be off?"

The question unexpectedly caught her off guard. She'd been expecting it, of course, but perhaps not quite so soon. The timing could hardly be worse when she'd only begun to examine her own motives for joining him mere hours ago. "Not just yet. I ought to let Gilbehr or someone know that I'll be leaving."

"What for?" the Doctor scoffed. "Time machine, remember? If it comes to it, I can have you back before they've even had time to notice you've gone."

Nyssa looked at him sceptically. "Just as you promised to return Tegan to Heathrow Airport before she could be missed? Forgive me, Doctor, but unless your piloting skills have improved dramatically in the past few incarnations, I think it's best I leave word just in case." She hesitated a moment before adding quietly. "I owe them that much."

If the Doctor detected the undercurrent of uncertainty in that last statement, he didn't show it, merely shrugged. "Your choice. Though it's worth noting that it's been a while since the TARDIS was out there, in her natural habitat. She might get impatient."

Nyssa gave him a rather impatient glare of her own. "If you're worried I'll change my mind about coming with you, you might just say so, Doctor--save the transparent attempts at emotional manipulation for someone who doesn't know you quite so well. Not to mention someone a good deal younger."

She smiled at the abashed expression that crept onto his face. He probably hadn't even realised himself what he was doing until she'd called him out. "I'll return because I've said I will," Nyssa added more softly. "You ought to know me well enough for that."

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Of course, when he thought about it, he had to appreciate the irony that Gallifrey had never been home until it wasn't there anymore. Or if it was, it was only the sort of home one ran away from.

The Doctor caressed the TARDIS console with one hand, a sad smile on his face. Once not so long ago, she'd been the only home he needed. Or had she? The smile turned rueful as he glanced over at Nyssa on the other side of the console. All things considered, if he'd truly been content with just his TARDIS, why would he have always needed for company?

He'd never been a man who coped easily with solitude. The company of his ship and his books could only compensate so much for the presence of another sentient being in his sphere. He needed someone that he could talk to and run with, not always in that order. Someone to whom he could show all the wonders of the universe, since the TARDIS knew more about time and space than even he did.

Nyssa had travelled with him for nigh on fifteen years. That was longer than nearly all of his other companions--Romana and Ace being the exceptions. What he hadn't known about her then, he'd learned in the few short months since she'd saved him against his will. He knew her inside out, knew what she loved, what she hated. He knew what made her cross, what made her sad, what made her happy, and he wasn't above using that knowledge to do everything in his power to keep her with him.

It ought to have bothered him how easy it was to contemplate abusing her trust like that. Apparently his seventh incarnation wasn't the only one with a manipulative streak.

He couldn't be alone, though. Not now. Not after...

The Doctor shunted the thought aside with brutal force. It didn't matter. She wouldn't leave him alone. She hadn't up 'til now. Nyssa understood. Better than any other being in the universe, she understood. She wouldn't let the emptiness swallow him whole.

He looked over at her again and shivered.

Still...just in case, couldn't hurt to remind her what she'd been missing all these years holed up on Terminus. And because it was Nyssa, he knew to start simple. He'd seen the pleasure she took in simple things.

The TARDIS shuddered to a stop and the Doctor couldn't quite prevent the manic grin that sprang onto his face, even considering his looming dread of visiting Tegan. He rather thought he might skip that part of this particular adventure.

"Here we are, then!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Come on."

The sky outside the newly-simple door of the TARDIS was still dark, although it was the kind of dark that trembled on the edge of brightening. Fantastic, simply fantastic: he'd known the old girl wouldn't let him down. Below and around them gleamed the lights of a city, parts of it dark and sleeping but the rest already awake, if it had slept at all. They were on the roof of a building, several floors high.

Nyssa frowned. "Where are we?"

"Call it a minor detour," the Doctor answered breezily. He stopped her before she could object. "Don't worry, I haven't forgot my promise. There's just something else I thought you might like to see first."

He nodded towards the horizon, which was slowly fading from black to a deep grey. Before long, colour would bleed in and then...well, then they'd see.

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She might have known. Truthfully, she had known--she'd even pointed out to him his inability to return Tegan to Heathrow when she'd wished it. Detours were inevitable on the TARDIS and they were rarely "minor."

If she were being honest with herself, Nyssa knew she ought never to have agreed to come with him. She knew what he was up to. He'd planned something that he thought would make her agree to stay with him. It was both maddening and flattering all at once.

"What is it you want me to see?" she asked, trying very hard not to sound as peevish as she felt. Well, whatever it was, at least this time he hadn't "accidentally" teleported her into the midst of a blizzard without appropriate attire.

The Doctor didn't answer for a long moment. He just stared fixedly at the half-awake city below them until something appeared to catch his eye.

"There!" He pointed towards the horizon, his voice triumphant.

Nyssa's eyes followed the line of his finger more out of instinct than any conscious choice. "Oh!" she exclaimed as the first ray of the sun cleared the horizon, beaming across the rim of the world like a ribbon of fire. From here, they could see a river snaking away in the distance, the light of the rising sun turning it to mercury. The air was heavy and balmy, even at this early hour, particularly compared to the recycled air of Terminus. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine herself back in the grove on Traken, surrounded by its beautiful flora, but she didn't want to close her eyes. There was too much to see.

Nyssa's heart contracted. Whatever irritation she'd felt melted away with the darkness. She couldn't quite suppress the longing in her voice as she asked, "Do you know how long it's been since I've seen a sunrise?"

The Doctor looked at her with hooded eyes. "Fifty years?" he guessed quietly.

She nodded, too moved for the moment to speak. Swallowing hard, she fumbled to find her voice, finally managing, "When I was a child, Father would take me to the outer walls of the city sometimes, just to watch the sun rise. I...I'd forgotten how much I missed being able to do so."

"Told you," he answered mildly.

Nyssa smiled. What a showman the Doctor was, and always had been. But like any skilled magician, he was also the ultimate trickster. "Don't think I'm not grateful, but Tegan--"

"Lives a couple floors down," he interrupted with a smile. "But somehow I doubt she'd appreciate being woken before the sun. Enjoy it: we've plenty of time."

Nyssa swallowed hard and nodded. As if drawn by an invisible thread, she wandered away from the TARDIS towards the edge of the roof. Far away on the horizon, the ribbon of light had begun to swell into a half-circle. It set the sky afire around it with so many colours. She'd forgotten them too, as accustomed as she'd grown to Terminus' unchanging stars.

The Doctor followed, slipping his hand into hers and squeezing it gently.

There were billions of worlds in the universe. She'd seen far fewer than that, but nearly all of those saw a sunrise in the same symbolic light: as a token of new beginnings. And no wonder. Nyssa felt her heart growing lighter right along with the sky above them. She felt younger than she'd done in years, as if all the burdens and doubts she'd been struggling with had been lifted for a moment from her shoulders.

Her thoughts felt free of confusion for probably the first time since the Doctor had returned to Terminus. She might still not know what choice she would make, but Nyssa felt certain now that it

would be the right one. Even if she chose to return and resume the life she'd so recently left behind, it would be a new beginning. For her, for the Doctor...perhaps even for Tegan.

Part VII

Tegan had never much bought into the idea that being close to death made one appreciate life more. Honestly, she'd considered it so much rot for the better part of her life. Travelling with the Doctor, they'd come close to death almost every day, but nine out of ten times it only made her more irritable, not more appreciative.

Even when she'd first been diagnosed with this damnable tumour, she'd hardly taken it as reason to throw herself into heedless risks. On the contrary, she'd only closed herself off more. She was ashamed to admit it but she'd given up. She'd retreated from the world before it could retreat from her.

Not until the Doctor showed up at her birthday party with trouble, as always, on his heels, had anything other than a morose despair gripped her. Only when she'd been told that the thing that was killing her was of alien origin had she'd gotten angry. In the end it was no surprise that the anger brought her back to life.

Well, that and Michael. She'd been a fool to try to shut him out the way she had, and she knew it. Ironic that but for the Doctor, she might never have realised it. She might also already be dead--killed by the very thing meant to cure her.

So yeah, maybe she did appreciate life a little more now, and she hadn't been lying when she told the Doctor it was because of him. Even if she hadn't been telling the whole truth, either.

One thing she did not appreciate, however, was hearing the doorbell at five o'clock in the bloody morning on a Saturday, particularly now she was so easily prone to headaches. "Bloody hell!" Tegan muttered into her pillow, pulling it over her head. When the chime rang again, she popped out of her little nest to glare spitefully through the wall at the door somewhere on the other side.

Michael stirred beside her, sitting up with a yawn. "I'll get it."

Tegan let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks. I owe you one."

"I'll hold you to that," he called over his shoulder as he padded out into the outer room.

Smiling happily, Tegan rearranged her pillow once again in preparation for burying herself in it and going back to sleep. That was the plan, anyway. It only took the space of a heartbeat to realise she wasn't sleepy anymore; her curiosity had got the better of her.

"Rabbits," she muttered darkly under her breath, but nonetheless sat up. She ignored the resultant wave of nausea and felt around with both feet for her slippers while one hand fumbled for her dressing gown. About the time she laid hands on it, Michael's voice called back: "Tegan, someone to see you."

God help her, if it was someone from work--

Muttering under her breath what she'd like to do to them in vivid, imaginative detail, Tegan shuffled out into the main room of the flat. She was still tying the belt of the dressing gown around her waist when she reached the door.

"What sort of person drops in on a body at this hour?" she grumbled. Michael stepped aside to let her see the answer.

It took a moment for it to register. The figure outside her door had changed nearly as much as she herself had, a thing she wouldn't have thought possible. Warm brown hair now hung straight rather than in curls to her shoulders, every here and there lightly streaked with grey. The red velvet pantsuit had been long gone before they'd last seen each other, but now it had been replaced with a simple, functional black one-piece number with pockets to rival a mechanic's coveralls. Even the sweet face and placid smile had wrinkles and lines around them that she'd somehow never imagined, even in moments where she'd wondered about her friend's fate. Only one thing hadn't changed: in the end it was Nyssa's eyes that gave her away.

Tegan's own eyes widened. "Nyssa?" she exclaimed in disbelief. The scowl vanished into a stunned smile as she stared at the last person in the universe she'd ever expected to see again. "My God, Nyssa? Where did you come from? And how--?"

Nyssa laughed, tears filling her eyes. "From Terminus, and it's rather a long story. May I come in?"

"Of course! God, where are my manners?" Tegan exclaimed, flushing a deep red. She threw the door open and pulled Nyssa into a tight hug before ushering her indoors.

"I can't believe it." Tegan couldn't stop staring at her friend, or gripping both her hands tightly. How on Earth--or how in the universe, rather--had she managed to find her way back here? She didn't see the Doctor anywhere. He wasn't exactly in the habit of playing taxi service for an old companions' reunion but he'd never been the sort to stay out of the middle of things either. Surely if he were here, he'd be *here*. Unless, Tegan thought bitterly, he was hiding away from anything resembling real consequences. Just as he always did when he wasn't charging in on his metaphorical white horse to play the hero.

She forced the thought away. It was uncharitable even if it was true, which was why she'd dealt with him the way she had the last time. She'd given him an out that had--at least she hoped--satisfied that ridiculous *noblesse oblige* of his while still leaving her with her pride. "I thought--well, I don't really know what I thought, but finding you outside my door was never on the list."

Michael coughed lightly and she shot him a half-hearted glare. "Right. Michael, this is Nyssa, one of my oldest friends. Nyssa, this is Michael. He's my..." Her voice trailed off into a weak smile. "Well, I guess you'd say we're still sorting that out, somewhat."

They shook hands and Michael gave her a thoughtful look. "An old friend, eh? How old?"

Translation: was she from another planet too? Tegan grinned. "Feels like forever, but likely only about twenty years, give or take." She looked at Nyssa. "How long has it been for you?"

Nyssa hesitated a moment before answering with a rueful smile. "Let's just say a good deal longer and leave it at that, if you don't mind."

"Right." She kept forgetting Nyssa's species was longer-lived than her own. They might look about the same age, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. Truthfully, she'd rather not to know for sure that the friend who'd always been younger than her was now a good bit older so she let it go. "Michael, would you mind putting the coffee on?" Tegan's smile cracked a little. "Nyssa and I have a lot of catching up to do."

Michael didn't look happy at being banished, but he acquiesced with a resigned nod and disappeared into the kitchen. Tegan immediately led Nyssa over to the chesterfield. "Now. Tell me everything."

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"Everything" turned out to be a rather tall order, for both of them. So much had happened since they'd seen each other last. Nyssa dutifully told Tegan all about Terminus and about Lasarti and Nica, from time to time interjecting questions of her own about Michael.

She was grateful that Tegan seemed to have found someone she cared about. From the Doctor's too-brief description of the last time they'd met, she'd almost expected to find her friend a bitter, lonely old woman, neither content to be alone nor willing to accept companionship and dying just for spite. Unless--surely the Doctor hadn't brought her back to before Tegan had learnt of her own illness, had he? Their Doctor would never have considered it, but with this Doctor it was harder to be sure.

But, no. Nyssa had just enough experience of Earth and more than enough of dealing with the sick to distinguish the plethora of medicines and medical paraphernalia that lay scattered about the room. Tegan seemed self-conscious about them at first, but seemed to relax when Nyssa didn't react however she'd expected.

Tegan shook her head in wonder. "Honestly, I'm just glad to know you survived," she said of Terminus. "I wouldn't have lasted a week in that dreadful place."

"There was a time I believed you could survive anything," Nyssa answered, not sure whether to be more surprised by the sadness or the reproach in her voice. "You were indestructible, remember?"

Tegan's face grew serious. She shifted uneasily in her seat and glanced about the room again before answering quietly. "Yeah, I remember." Both defense and defiance crept into her tone. "So he told you, did he? I thought...when I saw you at the door that it must be his doing, but when he didn't appear and aliens didn't invade..." A wry smile twisted her lips. "Did he send you here to change my mind? Take me back to that fancy new hospital of yours and cure me?"

Nyssa shook her head. She supposed she might have taken umbrage at the suggestion she wouldn't come of her own free will, but she knew Tegan too well to assume her friend really meant it. "The Doctor didn't send me at all," she answered simply. "I needed to see you. To say goodbye. And to try to understand."

"Understand what?"

Nyssa looked at her frankly. "It isn't like you to give up so easily."

"Oh, hell," Tegan murmured, looking embarrassed. "It isn't like that. I haven't a death wish or anything. I just--I love my life, Nyssa. The life I built for myself here. I step into the TARDIS, and what guarantee have I got that I'd ever return to it? We could be killed tomorrow by revolutionaries on some world light years away and centuries in the past. Or even if we weren't...it might take years just to find our way back. I'd rather spend the time I have left here with the people I love, than gallivanting about the galaxy after a chance that might turn out to be worthless."

"But it might not, as well," Nyssa pointed out. She tried to ignore the fact that Tegan's words spoke to nearly every one of the doubts she'd had about her own decision when the moment came. Beyond the work that still remained to be done on Terminus, could she really give up precious time with Nica?

"Didn't you think it at least worth the try?"

Tegan sighed. "Maybe. But what about Michael? I couldn't leave him again--I've already wasted far too much time there. And I won't take him along: whether I'd risk my own neck or not, there's not a chance I'd risk his. I love him. And I daresay he loves me, though I can't imagine why." This time her smile was warm and affectionate. "I guess I figured, if the Doctor appearing--with chaos at his heels, as usual--didn't frighten him off, then nothing will. I'd be a right fool to throw that away again."

Nyssa studied Tegan's face for a long moment before finally deciding to be direct. "It's been my experience that matters of life and death are never certain. While I understand not wanting to leave the people you love behind, it seems to me that's exactly what you're choosing."

Tegan's expression grew belligerent for a moment. "Maybe I've just made my peace with it: is that so hard to believe?"

"Yes." There was a dry edge to her voice. "I've never known you to make peace with anything."

Tegan looked away, the embarrassed expression on her face confirmation enough. "You don't beat around the bush these days, do you?"

"Something I picked up from an old friend," Nyssa answered gently. A long silence fell between them, then she spoke again with a little more hesitation. "Tegan...I don't doubt the truth of the reasons you gave me. I just can't imagine they're the whole truth. Can you tell me?"

Tegan let out a short, strangled laugh. "What do you think? What is it that always gets me into trouble?" she answered tiredly. "My own stupid pride that's got a direct line to my mouth, bypassing the brain altogether even when it's working right." She dropped her eyes to her lap, as if ashamed. "I hate the way people look at me, Nyssa. As though I were the infection they're afraid of catching. Or a thing to be pitied or a curiosity. In the Doctor's case, it was like he didn't even see *me* anymore, just the tumour and

whatever caused it." Her expression grew listless. "I was just another problem to be solved, another chance for him to be the hero."

Nyssa ached for her friend. She remembered that moment when the Doctor, so caught up in his own loss, had been so blind as to accuse *her* of not understanding it. It wasn't the same but it was similar enough that she understood why Tegan had found it offensive.

The Doctor had more courage and more compassion than nearly anyone she'd ever known. Still, there were times when, just like any other creature in the universe, he allowed his own fears and desires to rule him. Thinking back on her own time with him, it was easy to imagine that his greatest fear had been the fragility of life around him.

"I don't think the Doctor ever really understood what it meant to be mortal," Nyssa conceded quietly. She thought of the Master, who had feared death so much he'd stolen her father's life. "The Time Lords had spent all their energies to master time rather than allow it to master them like it does every other creature in the universe. Defying death by acquiring the ability to regenerate was as much a part of that as time travel. But most Time Lords shunned the company of 'lesser' races, so they only had to face that fear when they reached the end of their regenerative cycle. The Doctor...he risked facing it every day just by being with us."

"But he didn't face it, that's the problem," Tegan argued. Nyssa knew she was thinking of Adric. "If he couldn't stop it, then he just pretended it never happened."

Nyssa shivered a little. She wondered if the Doctor had ever told Tegan what had happened to Adric in the end. Somehow, she doubted it. Admitting that he'd inadvertently used block transfer computation to create a bubble of space-time where Adric lived wasn't really the Doctor's style. Not when doing so had nearly wiped out all human life on Earth before it had the chance to evolve.

Sometimes she still wished her memory of the eager young boy they'd travelled with hadn't been contaminated by the glimpse of a bitter, power-mad old man living only for revenge. Even if he had redeemed himself in the end by sending Thomas back to them, their friendship had been forever tainted.

If Adric hadn't died as he did, if she hadn't chosen to stay on Terminus, would either one of them have stayed with the Doctor forever? Her home was destroyed and Adric's unreachable: they'd not had a wealth of other choices. Yet somehow she still felt certain that sooner or later, the Doctor would've found a way to leave them behind rather than face the inevitable slow decay that all non-Gallifreyan life succumbed to.

This Doctor, though...he didn't fear death anymore. Not his own, at least. It was a hard thing to fear when the alternative seemed interminably worse.

Tegan looked at her sourly. "That's why he's not here, isn't it? He can't face what's happening to me, so he's hiding away in the TARDIS as if I don't even exist."

"Not...exactly." In sparse, simple language Nyssa told Tegan what had happened: to Gallifrey, to the Time Lords, to the Doctor.

"Hell's teeth," Tegan murmured when the tale was told, her own face pale with sympathy. "I had no idea. Maybe I should..."

She didn't finish the sentence, but she didn't have to. Nyssa could see the indecision in her face. "Don't do it for the Doctor, Tegan. Nor for me. One life, even one as precious as yours, can't make up the loss of a world. I ought to know."

Tegan's shoulder sagged. "Right."

"You need to make the choice for yourself, whatever you choose." Nyssa covered her friend's hand with her own, waiting until Tegan looked up at her to ask, "What do *you* want?"

"I...I'm sick of being the guinea pig. I don't want to be someone's good deed for the day," Tegan answered. She looked pensive for a long moment before adding decisively: "I want to live. But I want it on my own terms, not someone else's."

Part VIII

The TARDIS knew him too well, she did. Knew he handled enforced inactivity about as well as he did solitude. More often than not, she indulged that particular quirk: taking him where there were worlds to save and wrongs to right.

This trip, though, had been for Nyssa's sake. So for Nyssa--and likely Tegan too--they had arrived at their destination precisely as planned. Unless something were to fall out of the sky right on top of them, there would be no invasions to foil whilst they were here.

Consequently, he was fast going out of his head with boredom.

Not that he had anyone to blame besides himself--he'd been the one to decline going down with Nyssa to see Tegan. But he still had no desire to say goodbye to her yet again. The first two times had been more than enough, especially knowing what lay ahead--what lay ahead for all his companions, ultimately. With his own death so recently denied, it made it that much more impossible to face theirs.

"You're a ruddy coward, you are," the Doctor muttered to himself in disgust.

He could face down whole fleets of Daleks, Cybermen, Sontarans, Silurians, Ice Warriors: you name it. For that matter, he'd *destroyed* whole fleets of Daleks. That he'd been driven to it by desperation and would be forever haunted by the consequences didn't change the fact. But he ran away from the people he loved. He ran away or he clung to them like an overturned lifeboat from the RMS Titanic.

A chill of fear stole through him. Maybe he oughtn't to have left them alone together after all. After the way he and Tegan had parted, not just the first time but the second as well, who knew what ideas she might be planting in Nyssa's head? She wouldn't do it deliberately, but she mightn't have to. Tegan telling her story might be enough to remind Nyssa of all the grief and danger that lay ahead if she chose to travel with him again.

Oh, fantastic. Not only was he a manipulative bastard in this incarnation, but it appeared he was also paranoid.

Still, if Nyssa refused to come along--

He'd do what, exactly? Deny her the choice at eighty that he'd respected when she was thirty? Or would he just conveniently fail to arrive at Terminus, as he had with Tegan and Heathrow all those years ago? Not that such a ruse was likely to work--she'd already told him as much in no uncertain terms.

The hard truth was that if she said no, he had no choice but to let her go again. And then what? Where would he go? What would he do? Travel around the universe, saving worlds as he once had?

Right. Like he'd tried to save his own? No. Time deserved a better champion than a broken down old failure like him.

The Doctor heard the key in the lock and turned. Before he even saw Nyssa, he started to speak impatiently. "Well, it's about time! Was beginning to think you'd decided to move in instead of just drop...in..." His voice trailed off and all the blood drained from his face as someone else followed Nyssa into the TARDIS.

Tegan looked almost exactly as he'd seen her last: the same unchanging bright eyes, the same almost imperceptible lines around them and around her mouth. The only real change was that she looked even more ill. Her hair appeared brittle, her skin sallow and delicate. There were worlds and times in the universe where a brain tumour was a simple enough matter to heal, but this was the best she'd accept.

For an instant, he hated Nyssa for bringing her here.

Tegan just gave him a sheepish smile. "Heya, Doc. Long time no see, I guess. You look...different."

"Do I?" he answered distractedly. "Haven't really had a look."

An awkward silence descended between the three of them. The Doctor's emotions were in a turmoil. He was relieved that Tegan was still alive but angry at Nyssa for bringing her aboard when she knew why he hadn't come down to the flat. Grief for what he knew was coming mingled with self-loathing at his own helplessness to prevent it.

Looking uncomfortable, Tegan cleared her throat and stepped farther inside. She looked around the control room. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear it's gotten even bigger in here."

"Since last you knew her? It has." Resentment grew while she explored until it finally bubbled over just enough to elicit a brusque, "What are you doing here?"

Nyssa answered instead. "She's coming with us. To Terminus."

The Doctor let out a disbelieving laugh. "What, just like that? What happened to 'No more aliens,' even if it killed you?"

"Last I checked, it was a woman's prerogative to change her mind," Tegan answered pertly. "Besides, Nyssa has some treatment she wants to try on me, that she swears is foolproof." Before he could protest, she interrupted. "And yeah, I know you said more or less the same thing a few months ago, but...well, let's just say I trust her word that I'll be able to come straight home afterward more than I do yours."

The Doctor wondered sourly for a moment if all his companions had him figured out, or just this lot. It didn't last, though. In spite of himself, he was cheered by the news that Tegan was going to accept help—even if not from him. It didn't lift the weight by a long shot, but bit of the old bounce returned to his step as he moved to the console. "In that case, we'd best be off: time's a wastin'." He looked at them both and grinned. "Mind shutting the door before someone else decides to wander in?"

~*~*~*~*~

It never ceased to amaze Nyssa how easily one person could turn another's life upside down. As a child on Traken, she'd thought she and Tremas would always be the centre of each other's universe. She could never have foreseen the changes that lay ahead: her father's marriage to Cassia or election as Keeper, Cassia's betrayal, Traken's destruction. Nor could she have dreamed that one man would be the cause of all those changes: the Master.

The Doctor had changed her life in other ways. He'd given her somewhere to go when the only home she'd known was destroyed. He'd been her friend, her teacher and her confidant at a time when she needed those qualities most. He'd brought her here, to Terminus, the place where she'd found a new purpose for her life. He'd left her here. Then he'd come back into her life when she least expected it, all unwittingly bringing with him the old grief and uncertainties she'd suffered in her youth. He'd thrown her world once again into chaos, made her question her beliefs and her choices and, more importantly, her priorities.

Then there was Tegan. If the Doctor had brought confusion into her life, it was Tegan who restored Nyssa's clarity. Nyssa knew what she had to do now and with that certainty came the courage to do it.

She didn't regret a moment of her relationship with the Doctor. For a little while, they'd been what the other needed: a place to grieve where each could know the other truly empathised. But if the past few weeks had revealed anything, it was how quickly that comfort could become something else entirely, something poisonous. What she and the Doctor both needed now was to surround themselves with people who reminded them what they had to live for. That was what Tegan had done, why the return trip from Earth to Terminus had been so different.

The Doctor's life had never really suited either of them, for all they'd enjoyed it for a while. Nyssa even dared to believe that the second time Tegan had joined them it was because she wanted to. In the end, though, they'd both chosen a life that was more sedentary but no less meaningful.

In spite of everything, Tegan still glowed with a fearless, unquenchable fire that gave light even when it burned. More importantly, when she knew what she wanted, she didn't hesitate to seize it. If she'd truly wanted to die, nothing Nyssa said could have swayed her otherwise.

Nyssa stood in the gallery now, looking down into the theatre where Tegan underwent the procedure that would hopefully save her life. It seemed to be going well. She knew, though, that in medicine as in life one could never be entirely sure. Even for a place so far in advance of anything Earth had to offer, a brain tumour was a delicate thing. One had to be very careful not to inadvertently damage healthy tissue.

She heard the door to the gallery open and close and turned, expecting the Doctor. Instead, a young woman with short brown hair stepped through. Her face was more familiar to Nyssa than any other.

"Nica?" she exclaimed in surprise, greeting her daughter with a hug. "What brings you home so soon? I thought you had some time left on your term."

Nica shook her head. "Those of us who had the farthest to travel were allowed to take our exams a bit early, if our marks were high enough to qualify." She squeezed her mother's hand. "I arrived yesterday, only to be told you'd swanned off with some stranger in a big blue crate. Where did you get to?"

Nyssa nodded towards the still figure on the pallet in the room below. "To find an old friend," she answered quietly.

Nica followed her to the window and peered down curiously. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Tegan--" Nyssa started to answer. She glanced at her daughter. "Surely I mentioned her in my stories?"

Comprehension dawning, Nica looked again. Idle curiosity turned intent in a heartbeat. "So it was the Doctor you left with, then. I thought it must be, but then Gilbehr didn't describe him anything like you always have."

Nyssa laughed softly. "I imagine if you asked fifty people who had known the Doctor, you would likely get at least forty-five different descriptions of him."

Her daughter looked at her, puzzled. "From what you told me about him, I would imagine he'd be unforgettable."

"He is," Nyssa agreed with a smile. "But he's not always the same man." She briefly explained the concept of regeneration to Nica.

"That's...incredible," Nica exclaimed breathlessly. "Does he know how his species evolved the ability? If it could be duplicated, think of the advances we could make in the treatment of--"

"Nica," Nyssa interrupted, her tone only mildly chastising. Truthfully, she knew her daughter too well to believe Nica would ever lose herself in the science and fail to consider the welfare of her patients.

Nica looked embarrassed. "Is he here still? Could I at least meet him?"

"You may have already," was the wry answer. "Last I knew, he was waiting just outside this room."

"In the black hide jacket?" Nica asked. Her expression turned crestfallen when her mother nodded. "But he looks so *ordinary*."

Nyssa couldn't help but laugh at that. It echoed her own reaction to the Doctor's choice of attire a little too closely. For the first time since she'd known him, if they were to walk down a street together, no one would pay him any mind. No one would stop to stare: to wonder why this peculiar stranger was wearing a twenty-foot scarf in the midst of summer or cricketing gear so far from the pitch. She knew him well enough, though, to know that the plainer attire only concealed an equally extraordinary man. Nica didn't.

Friga's voice filled the gallery, interrupting Nyssa's thoughts before she could voice them. "Lady Nyssa?"

Friga was probably the best surgeon Terminus had, which was why Nyssa had asked her to personally attend to the procedure. As capable as all her staff was, Tegan was too important to her to trust to anyone but the finest. Nyssa moved immediately to the comm unit and pressed one button with her finger to respond. "Yes?"

Friga's eyes met Nyssa's through the glass even as her voice stated, "The tumour is gone: we managed to get it all. If I'm not mistaken, it was caused by an extremely slow-acting neurotoxin, but I'm fairly certain we've managed to neutralise that as well. Barring any further incident, your friend should live to the normal age for her species."

Nyssa closed her eyes in relief. She thanked Friga in a voice barely above a whisper, then turned back to her daughter. "I promised the Doctor I'd notify him immediately when there was any change. Come along--I'll introduce you to him."

Part IX

It was three weeks before Friga would even contemplate the idea of Tegan leaving. Tegan complained the whole time, of course. "It's nothing personal," she'd reassured Nyssa unnecessarily, more than once. "I *like* having the chance to spend time with you and the Doctor. But I've got a life I'm more than ready to get back to, and Michael."

For the first two weeks, when she was not even allowed out of bed except for in instances of absolute necessity, Nyssa, the Doctor and Nica kept up a regular rotation of visits so Tegan wouldn't go too mad with boredom. Once she was finally up and about, Nyssa gave her the same tour of the station and its many improvements that she'd given the Doctor and introduced her to nearly everyone on board.

It amused Nyssa no end how quickly Tegan became a favourite. Her dry humour and brusque manner seemed to fit in amongst the hard-working people of Terminus possibly better than she herself ever had. If she hadn't known better, she might've considered asking her to stay.

Tegan even took up visiting the other patients once her own term of confinement came to an end. She made some laugh, others angry. Almost without exception, though, she left them feeling stronger and more proactive about their fate than they had before.

It was a gift Tegan had possessed as long as Nyssa had known her. One either loved her or hated her, there was no in between. But she left no one unaffected.

The Doctor had loved her once. Watching them interact, Nyssa suspected he still did, though he would never say so. She thought it no chance either that Tegan's recovery coincided with the Doctor's choice to add a spot of colour to his wardrobe. It wasn't much colour, but the dark blue, deep burgundy and forest green jumpers were still a welcome contrast to the stark black of the rest.

Perhaps if her relationship with the Doctor had been less honest than it was, Nyssa might've been jealous, but she'd always known no one could ever truly hold all of him. Besides, it was Tegan, probably her dearest friend in the universe. There was little aside from Nica that she wouldn't be willing to give her if she wanted it.

All Tegan wanted, though, was to go home, and Nyssa could understand that. If she'd still had Lasarti waiting for her, she would have hated equally to be kept away so long.

When the day of departure finally arrived, it seemed that everyone on the station who wasn't working or too ill to move turned out to see the Doctor and Tegan off. Nica had wanted to give them some sort of formal, ceremonial send-off; Nyssa had laughed and suggested that if they even considered such a thing, the Doctor was likely to sneak Tegan out and disappear in the middle of the night. That would give them no chance to say goodbye at all.

Even the spontaneous crowd made him uncomfortable enough. Nyssa could tell by how quickly his temper deteriorated whilst Tegan said goodbye to the new friends she'd made.

"Are you coming or aren't you?" the Doctor grouched. "I haven't got all day, y'know, let alone time enough for you to hug every single person on the station."

"Blow it out your ear, Doc," Tegan answered cheerfully. "You've all the time in the world, and I know it."

Nyssa laughed as her old friend pulled her in for a hug. "God, I'm going to miss you," Tegan informed her wistfully. "That's the downside, I guess, to reuniting with old friends--sooner or later, you've got to say goodbye again. I wish there was some way to keep in touch."

"So do I," Nyssa agreed.

"There is," the Doctor interrupted them, looking at Tegan. "You got a mobile?"

Tegan frowned back at him. "Yeah, of course--"

"Give it here." He gestured impatiently with one hand. Tegan looked puzzled but pulled out something resembling a small "telephone" and gave it to the Doctor. He tinkered with it for a moment, then tossed it to Nyssa. Not expecting the device to come sailing her way, Nyssa fumbled and nearly dropped it. The Doctor didn't appear to notice.

"There you are. Bit of jiggery-pokery and it's better than new, will get service anywhere or anywhen." He turned back to Tegan. "And lucky you, you don't even have to memorise the number."

"That's all well and good, but what am I supposed to do for a phone, then?" Tegan asked, a hint of the old exasperation coming into her voice.

"You can get a new one; Nyssa can't," he pointed out. "Tell your carrier you lost it. They'll replace it, and never need know it's still working out there somewhere."

The two women looked at each other for a moment, then Nyssa smiled. "I think you'd best ring me first, Tegan. I'm not sure I remember how to use one of these." She glanced down at the phone in her hands. "I also seem to recall them being a good deal larger."

"They used to be, twenty years ago," Tegan chuckled. "Nyssa, listen..." She looked uncomfortable, but in true Tegan fashion, persevered nonetheless. "You gave me a leg up, a second chance when I needed one, so it's high time I did the same. You know I had a chance to talk to Nica a little while I was recuperating and--well, do you remember how you once told me that the worst part about losing Traken was knowing after you were gone, there'd be no one left to remember it?" Tegan glanced over to where Nica was waiting with the rest of the station's personnel. "You should tell her. Because you're not the last anymore, not really. She is. And she has a right to know her heritage."

Nyssa nodded, pushing aside a swell of shame. "I always meant to. The time just never seemed right."

"No time like the present," Tegan told her with a pointed look and a wry smile.

Nyssa returned the hug. "You're right. Thank you."

Together, the two of them walked over to where the Doctor waited impatiently by the TARDIS door. "Now, Doctor," Nyssa chided him gently. "Remember, you promised to take her directly home, no convenient 'detours.'"

"You could come along and see to it," he suggested hopefully.

Nyssa smiled, but shook her head. "I've found the centre of my universe, Doctor: I can't be yours. Besides, I think you need someone younger than I. Someone who still has a sense of wonder." She smiled ruefully. "I'm not twenty anymore. I haven't been for a very long time."

His eyes drifted for a moment and she didn't have to follow them to know where they came to rest. Nyssa sighed. "No, Doctor."

"Hmm?" He looked at her with an expression of such innocence that she didn't believe it for a moment.

The look she gave him in return was stern enough to be almost scolding. "Find some other nineteen year old to lure away from her life if you must, but not my daughter."

He had the grace to look sheepish, at least. "Right." A long pause lingered between them, then he asked, "You're sure? I could bring you back, between trips, if it helps."

"I'm sure." She cupped his cheek fondly and shivered when his hand covered her own. "You'll find someone willing to follow you, someone you can show all the wonders and terrors of the universe to. You always do."

"And what if I decide I need you? Not just someone to follow me, but you specifically?"

"Then you'll know exactly where to find me."

His voice was dry but his eyes were warm. "At the centre of the universe?"

Nyssa smiled. "Where else?"

She leaned in, intending to give him a kiss on the cheek just as she had the last time they'd said goodbye here. The Doctor had other ideas. He captured her face in his hands and gave her a kiss that, though infinitely tender, was far from chaste.

"Bloody hell!" Nyssa heard Tegan exclaim in surprise from somewhere behind them. "Now that's one I'd never have seen coming!"

The Doctor held her tightly for a long moment. Then he let go, turned away, and disappeared into the TARDIS without once looking back. Tegan shook her head in amazement and wagged a finger in Nyssa's direction. "Looks like I'll be putting that phone to good use when I get back. This I've got to hear."

Nyssa laughed. She was still laughing when Tegan followed the Doctor into the TARDIS and closed the door behind her.

She sensed more than saw Nica move to fill the empty space at her side. "He'll be back, Mum," she stated in what was surely meant to be reassurance.

Nyssa smiled at her, but nevertheless shook her head. "No, he won't."

"How can you know?"

A bittersweet smile crossed Nyssa's face as the TARDIS dematerialised. "I know the Doctor."

She turned to her daughter and for the first time saw not just herself and Lasarti in Nica's face, but also Tremas. Nica might never have seen Traken, but it was in her blood and Tegan was right: she deserved to know. "Now, why don't we take the rest of the afternoon just for ourselves? There's a story I need to tell you--one I ought to have shared a long time ago..."

FIN