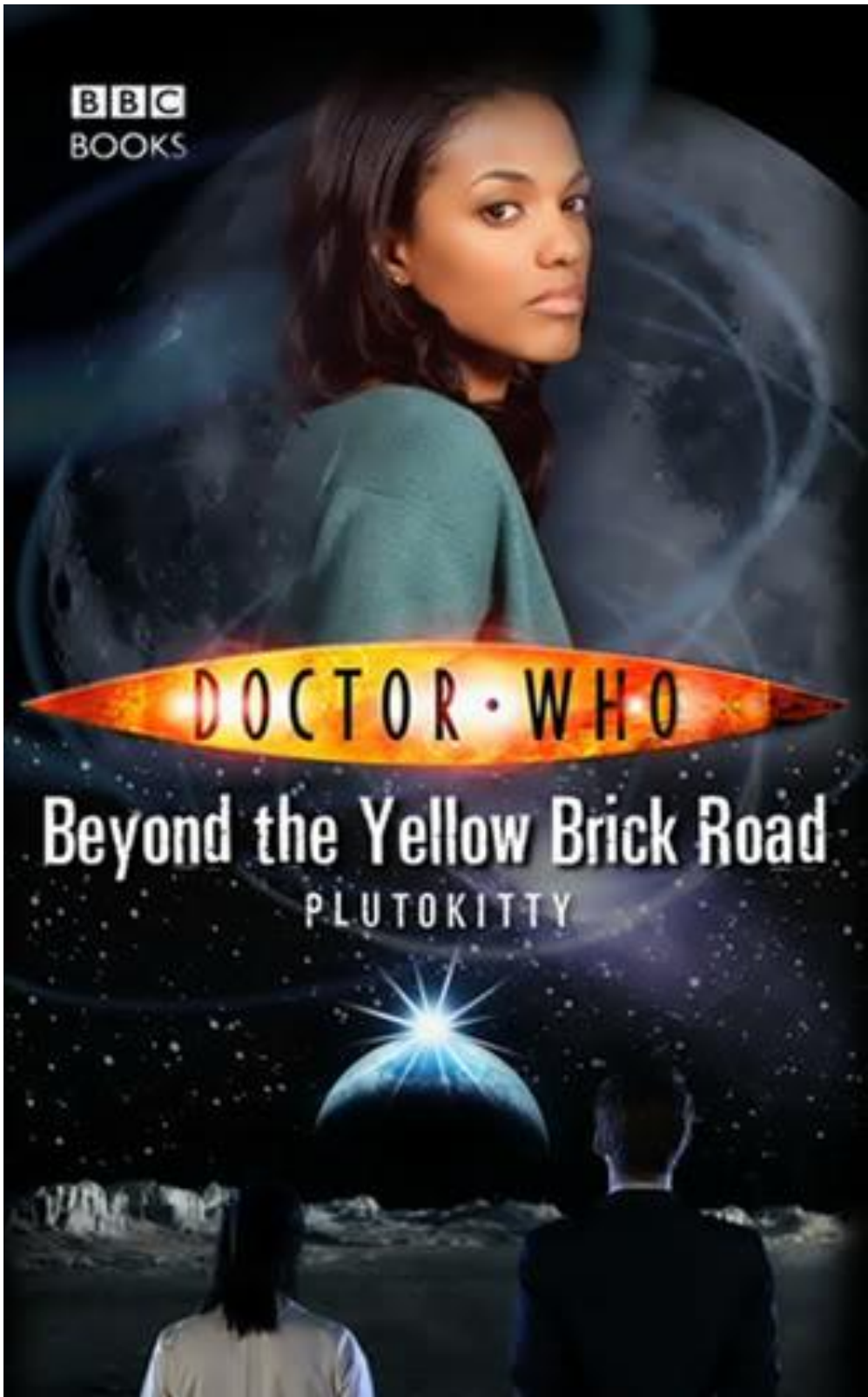


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Beyond the Yellow Brick Road

PLUTOKITTY



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Beyond the Yellow Brick Road

by Pluto

New Who | G | Gen, mystery, references to past Martha/Mickey | 24,000 words

Years after her adventures in the TARDIS, Martha Jones is haunted by the Doctor as she investigates an alien crash site.

Betaed by: darthneko, Tsubaki, Foxysquid

Warnings: None

Spoilers: through End of Time II

Notes: This is a story I've wanted to tell about Martha for some time now, and that I started struggling with since the first time I wrote a private bit of fanfic about Martha for myself. Thank you a thousand times to my cheerleaders, Darthneko, Tsubaki and most especially Foxysquid, without whom this story would never have been completed.

Art by Satavaisa and shan_3414 (srhorton3414@gmail.com)

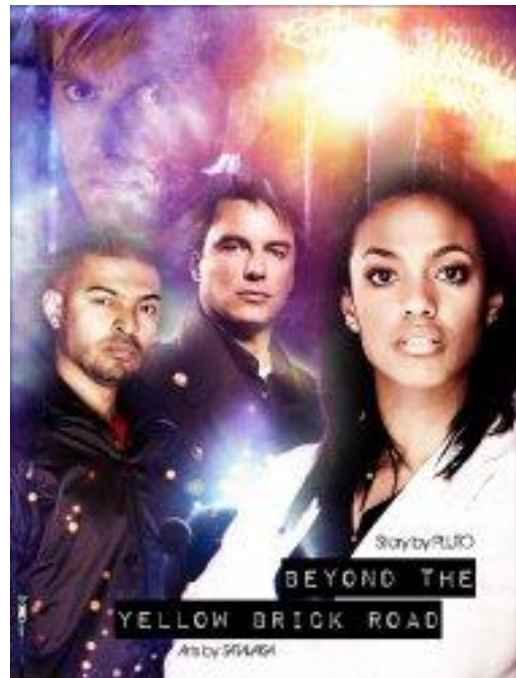
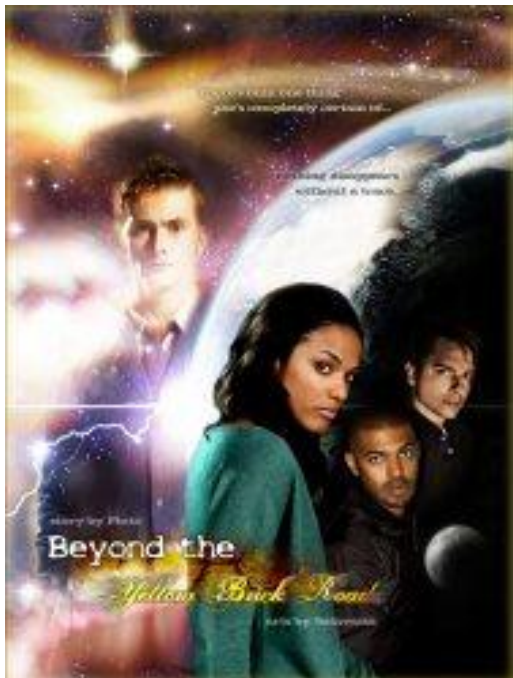


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1.

Martha Jones wakes that morning clutching her throat, certain she has just gasped out her last breath to warn the Doctor. It takes her several minutes to remember where she is (in her own bed, safe and warm), and then several more to remember *when* she is (the Judoon on the moon are fifteen years gone, now).

When she catches her breath she realizes her mobile is ringing. She grabs it off the nightstand and answers: "This is Martha Jones."

It's Tish. Martha listens to her sister without exactly hearing. Her mind is elsewhere: she hasn't thought or dreamed of the Doctor in years and she is surprised to find how much she still misses him.

Martha realizes the silence on the other end of the line has lasted too long. "Um, sorry, what was that?"

She hears Tish sigh. "I said, Mum wanted me to ask after Trent?"

Martha flops back against her pillow. Her mum's been on a mission to get her married off. Martha thinks of all the men who have passed through her life: Tom, sweet, handsome Tom who she couldn't stop comparing to the man she'd known during the Year that Never Was; Mickey, hard edges over soft insides, who made himself the stone-hearted hunter Martha dreaded becoming; Ian, such a dreamer, as far removed from her Other Life as she could possibly get, and still not far enough; Andrew; Omar; Trent...

She remembers to answer Tish. "I'm not seeing him any more," she says, and to herself she thinks: *Martha Jones walked the world alone.*

"But you only went out with him twice! You should give him more of a chance. Elle says he's perfect for you."

"I'm too old for all that nonsense, Tish. I've got bigger priorities."

"You're thirty-nine, not dead," Tish says. It used to be thirty-five, thirty-four, twenty-nine. The years are flying by.

"I'm happy on my own."

Tish sighs again. "If you say so. Anyway, you are coming down for Leo's birthday tonight, aren't you? Everyone's going to be there, Leo and Shonara and the kids of course, mum and dad, me and Oscar."

"It can't be Wednesday already?" Martha says, as if she's forgotten the date, as if she didn't wake up that morning dreaming of pinstripes and plasmavores.

"So you're not coming." Tish's voice flattens. She's angry. Martha hates upsetting her; she loves her family more than anything.

"Tell Leo I'll try," she says. "But there's a chance I won't be able to get away--"

"Work. I know." Tish sighs. "What's happened to you, Martha? Busy saving the world, too busy to say hello to the family."

"You know I'd be there in an instant if I could--"

Tish's laugh isn't entirely pleasant. "You mean if someone was hurt or their house burnt down or some other emergency. If there was something for you to fix. But not for something like a birthday."

Martha winces. "That's not exactly fair, is it? If it's between making sure the Slitheen don't invade the earth and Leo's birthday--"

"You should be choosing Leo's birthday."

Martha blows air through her teeth. "You sound like mum."

"Well," Tish says, and Martha hears her take a deep breath. "Right I should. I'm going to be a mum soon." When Martha is too surprised to say anything right away, Tish goes on: "Oscar and I were going to announce it proper at Leo's supper, but, well, you get to be first to find out. Doctor says a little girl."

"Congratulations!" Martha says when she recovers her voice. "Oh, Tish, I'm so happy for you." And she is happy, thrilled, but at the same time, her guts are twisting inside of her. There's still some part of her that always expected to have a family of her own by now, to have children old enough to be excited by the prospect of cousins.

Tish says, "Well, make sure the Slitheen don't invade anytime 'round January so you can come see her, all right?"

Martha laughs, forced.

After they say their goodbyes, Martha drops her phone to the mattress beside her. She studies the ceiling, thinking of the Doctor, Leo's birthday, Tish's imminent motherhood. Too many things she hasn't worried about in years are suddenly fresh and foremost on her mind, roads not taken, people and possibilities lost to her. And always that niggling question: *did I make the right choice, walking away?*

She makes herself get up. She doesn't have time for regret; she needs to be at the conference center in less than an hour. Martha swallows her feelings, the way she has done for years now, and gets down to business.

Glancing up from her notes as she stands at the podium, Martha glimpses brown hair and a blue-suited shoulder. After her dream that morning, she immediately thinks *Doctor*, her breath catching in her throat.

She tells herself that blue suits and brown hair aren't especially uncommon. Besides, the Doctor she knew is gone: years ago, she and Mickey intercepted the UNIT reports of a new regeneration spotted. And she'd known even before that, hadn't she? Known it in her heart that he was dying when she saw him last, known it like she had been punched in the gut.

She fusses with her notes until she's recomposed herself, and when she looks up, there's no Doctor, just a dozen dozen restless faces, staring up at her.

From travelling the galaxy to defending the Earth to hunting aliens to this, she thinks, scanning the room. Working for herself under the banner of Jones Xenobiological Consulting, Martha's in high demand in the field of xenopathology, though she finds most of this plays out as treating people who've caught alien head colds (and the odd STD--she doesn't ask) from investigating crash-landed artifacts.

Today, she's giving a lecture on protecting oneself from extraterrestrial contaminants while recovering artifacts, best practices and the like. She's all too aware that she's presenting to a herd of bureaucrats who will probably never come within one hundred feet of anything alien unless it is for a photo opportunity. She prefers to work in the field, but if she wanted 24-7 excitement, she tells herself, she should have stuck with Mickey Smith.

As the room settles, Martha gets ready to speak, and then she sees it again: the flash of navy pinstripes behind a group of latecomers looking for seats. She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out, not her lecture and not some exclamation directed at the Doctor. Nothing comes out, and the latecomers all sit down; the navy suit is gone, if it was ever there.

She blinks, shakes her head a little, and tells herself Tish is probably right. She needs a holiday.

Martha clears her throat, straightens up, and smiles. She says, "Welcome, ladies and gentlemen," and goes on.

Later, she's sitting in the hotel restaurant, drinking strong black coffee and reviewing an incident report. Her mobile rings, and she answers it absently.

"Doctor Martha Jones."

"It's Louis Abernathy, Doctor Jones. Did you receive our request for service?"

"Afternoon, Captain. Which one? Got two from UNIT today." Martha frowns at her files. "ET crash in Canada, six man ship, crew all dead?"

"That's the one."

"Got it. Let me have a look..."

Abernathy grunts. "We could really use you on board. It's an odd one."

"Canadians cooperating on the quarantine?"

"Polite as ever, but they're making it clear they aren't happy about it." Abernathy sighs. "Still can't ID the ship or species. We're looking at some of the paper data now, but you know how quickly that goes."

Martha skims the crash report. A preliminary engineering review revealed no mechanical problems with the ship, so the cause of the crash was assumed to be the death of the pilots. "Looks like it was something sudden that killed the crew... Any external signs of disease or distress, as far as you could tell?"

"There was some sort of dried foam around the aliens' mouths. Filthy stuff, yellowish, sort of."

Martha sighs. "Sounds lovely. And without knowing the species, we can't tell if they're supposed to be foaming at the mouth or not."

Abernathy makes a slightly ill sound in the back of his throat. "I hadn't thought of that."

Martha laughs a little. "Believe me, I've seen weirder stuff. Anything else you noticed? Marks on the bodies? Signs of violence, or a parasite?"

"Not particularly, but I'd really like to have you fly out and have a look. I'm stumped, but you know epidemiology isn't my specialty. The team they sent with me is no help. And-- Ah, hold on."

Martha waits, listening to Abernathy fumble his phone. She hears a muted, indistinct conversation, and then Abernathy returns. "We've pulled an ID from paper, matching the genetic profile. 'Padrivole'. Do you know it?"

Something tugs at the back of Martha's mind, but she can't put her finger on it. She does a quick search of her personal database, but doesn't come up with anything. "I don't think so," she says. "Send me what you have?"

"Will do. But will you come? There's a plane waiting at Heathrow."

A flicker of guilt passes through Martha as she remembers Tish's phone call. She'll ring Leo later, wish him a happy birthday then, she tells herself. "Of course."

As she hangs up, she catches a familiar combination of scents: the faintly sweet smell of fabric, the light tang of something she always assumed was alien hair pomade, the warm, dry dust smell of skin. Her heartbeat quickens and she looks up, searching the dim space with her eyes, but she sees nothing. She shakes her head.

Just more tricks of her memory, she thinks. Her mind has latched onto the date and is having a bit of fun with her.

She flags the waiter for her bill, and turns her thoughts towards the job ahead of her.

2.

Martha gets off the plane groggy and a touch disoriented. She dozed off during the last hour of the flight and dreamed of--she can't remember exactly what, but she woke up anxious, her lashes glued together with dried tears. Feeling like the world was falling apart around her and she was trapped, unable to help, losing someone she loved--

"Well, well," a voice says on her right, "If it isn't Mrs. Smith?"

Martha looks over. The fog on her brain lifts and she smiles so widely that her cheeks ache. She opens her arms and she hugs Mickey Smith, kisses his cheek.

"Don't let Angie hear you say that," she counsels, not-quite sternly. "It's so good to see you! What are you doing here?"

He shrugs. "Bit of freelance for UNIT. They wanted a consult on the ship, and backup in case the local coppers got surly." He looks good in his black fatigues, even more solid than last time she saw him.

"You wearing Kevlar?" she says, with a laugh, rapping his back before fully releasing him. "Thought all the aliens they pulled out of this one were dead?"

"Better safe than sorry," he says, cocking an eyebrow at her and smirking. "Remember the Unjiks?"

"Oh god." She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "That was a mess."

Mickey's smirk turns into a real grin. Martha thinks that he should smile like that more. That it's more natural to his face than the scowl he's adopted. It's a thought she had all too often in the days before they went their separate ways.

"Anyway," he says, his mouth returning to its more familiar, more reserved smirk, "I'm your ride."

He keeps two paces between them as he shows her the way to his parked SUV, and he moves, she thinks, more like a big, bad wolf than ever, head ever so slightly forward, swaggering. The hunter. He's grown even closer to the ideal of himself that he forged in the parallel world, hunting Cybermen with Torchwood. She smiles a little at this, a sad smile. There was a little while when she wanted that too, to be the one who had the aliens on the run. Big bad Martha Jones in her black fatigues and combat boots.

A gun in her hands, when the Doctor saw her last.

"No more Doctor," she tells herself. Mickey pauses with his hand halfway to the door of his SUV.

"Sorry, what?"

Something in his expression suggests he's caught at least the last word of what she said, but Martha answers, "Nothing."

Mickey holds the door open for her, eyebrows slightly drawn together.

Martha pulls out her datapad as he slides into the driver's seat. "So have you been on site already? I've been wondering if you think--"

Mickey shakes his head. "Oh no you don't, Mrs. Smith. Haven't seen you for what? Three years? And that's what you've got to say to me?"

"Well, I--"

"No work, not till we get there."

"All right," she says, stuffing the pad back into her satchel. "So... How's--" she almost says "the alien hunting biz," but realizes that's still work talk.

He chuckles at her uncomfortable pause as he clicks his seatbelt and puts his gloved hands on the steering wheel. "Never could stand to see a lady in distress. How's Francine?"

"Good," Martha says, gratefully. "Talking about marrying Reg, even."

Mickey snorts. He starts the car up and they pull away. "And how's your dad taking that?"

"Just fine. They're good friends still. It's nice. He's still got a thing for the blondes, though. Drives mum batty."

"Tish?"

"Tish is... She's going to be a mum." Martha keeps her voice even, betrays none of her confused feelings.

"Is she? Good on her."

"And it's Leo's birthday."

"So why aren't you in London?"

Martha sighs. "I couldn't exactly say no to this job."

Mickey shakes his head again. "Doctor Jones, always working."

"Oh, you're one to talk."

Mickey laughs. "Was never bad as you."

Martha's silent, because he's right, of course. She watches the cars ahead of them for a while, waiting for his next question, but he's silent as he navigates the rush hour traffic. She hesitates, and then says,

"Have you... have you seen the Doctor at all, recently?"

His brows furrow together. "The Doctor? Caught a few reports, snaps from--"

"I mean, seen him, seen him."

"In person? No. He's done with us, isn't he? Said his goodbyes. Changed his face. All that." Mickey shrugs. "We live our own lives now." They're paused at a stoplight and Mickey's fingers toy with the silver keyring dangling from the dash. "It's a good thing. Right?"

She makes herself smile. "Right."

He's silent for too long. His hands are tight on the wheel. The Doctor is a bittersweet subject for him, she knows. Mickey alone, of all of them, never looked at the Doctor with eyes blinded by awe. That was part of why she'd loved him.

"Why? Did you see him, Martha?"

She laughs, humorless. "Just woke up thinking of him. It's been fifteen years since I first met him, you know."

Mickey nods, silent; waiting her out for more information. He knows her too well.

"And--don't think I'm odd."

"Too late for that."

"Shut up," she says, and laughs. "I just, I was giving this talk and I thought I saw him, at the back of the room. And then I was having coffee and. This is weird, but. I smelled him--"

"Smelled him?" Mickey's bark of laughter is tight. "Think you're working too hard, Mrs. Smith." He says it in a joking way, but she senses the tension under his words.

Martha thinks of the last fight they had before they went their separate ways, first in their work, then in everything. It had hardly been a week after he had discovered her silently weeping with grief and disappointment and something like shame after their last meeting with the Doctor.

He takes you all away from me, Mickey had shouted, bitter and angry. He hadn't believed her when she insisted that it wasn't about the Doctor, that the real problem was that she had wandered from her own beliefs, her own dreams and ideals. That if anything, the Doctor had pushed her off course as much as anyone else. Maybe more than anyone else; for the Doctor, Martha Jones had walked the world, had seen things she had never been meant to see, had been changed in ways she had never expected.

She kept thinking she'd found her way back, but sometimes, she still wonders.

Martha pushes that all aside, forces a chuckle. "Never mind. How's--" She searches for a safe subject. "--Angie? You two are still together, aren't you?"

"Yeah." Mickey's hard expression softens, just a little. "She's good. She wanted to come with, but, well. Other business to take care of."

Martha nods. She doesn't ask what other business, and Mickey doesn't volunteer. He drums his thumbs on the steering wheel.

"And you?" he asks.

"Me what?"

"Seeing anyone special, like?"

She shakes her head. "Who's got time?"

Mickey snorts. "All work and no play makes Martha a dull girl."

"Gee, thanks."

"You know, it's funny, that. When you quit on me--"

"It wasn't like that."

"When you retired, then," Mickey revises. "You said part of it was wanting to stay put. Be with your family and all. And look at you now. Restless feet again."

Martha doesn't know what to say. She *has* done this before, hasn't she? Tried to staple her feet to the floor with family and love and marriage and a bid for some kind of normal life. Next thing she's working with UNIT, Tom's in Africa, she's in Germany and New York and China and everywhere in between, and her so-called normalcy is pulling apart at the seams.

"Learnt from the best," she murmurs. She feels Mickey's eyes on her, studying her, but he doesn't comment.

He says, "You know Jack's back?"

"He is?"

"Yeah. Rang me a couple days ago. In Chile, he said. Thinking of going up to the States, maybe. Wanted to know where I was at these days."

Martha nods. Jack's been back on his brief pit stops before. He never stays, not since Torchwood Gamma fell apart.

"Surprised you didn't know. He asked for your number. Said he was going to look you up."

"Probably got distracted by something better looking."

Mickey laughs. "Man does know how to have a good time."

"Yeah, he does, doesn't he?"

Silence falls between them again. Martha has to fight the urge to reach into her bag and pull out work. She catches her bottom lip in her teeth. The sound of the turn signal is too loud.

"You still think about him a lot, then?" Mickey says, suddenly. His tone is very neutral. Martha could pretend he's still talking about Jack, but she knows better.

"No," she says, and then corrects herself, "When his name comes up in reports but--. Hard to avoid him entirely in our line of work. Otherwise, no. I..." She hesitates, decides to be honest. "I try not to. You?"

Mickey shrugs. "Don't think about him at all."

Knowing Mickey as she does, Martha takes his answer as eighty percent true.

"You think Jack still sees him?"

Mickey makes a noncommittal noise, the one that means *don't really care*, and she wants to say *well you brought him up again*, but she doesn't.

For one moment Martha wishes, brief and bright and sharp, that she'd never met the Doctor. But she knows that's not true, she doesn't really want that. She only wishes that he would retreat back to the pleasant, faded memory he'd been before this morning, before her ridiculous dream. She's happy to see Mickey and he's a good friend, has been a good friend to her for ages, and she wants to enjoy his company, not bicker over old, long-dead points of contention.

Dead. Her insides clench. Only he isn't, is he? Like Mickey said--the Doctor's simply moved on, left them behind, become a new man. The only time Martha Jones will see the Doctor she knew again is when her overworked mind decides to play tricks on her. It's only her memory that haunts her.

Mickey's hand lands on her thigh. Comforting, not suggestive.

"All right," he says, "You can talk about work. Go on."

Martha's embarrassed by how relieved she feels. She pulls out her notes, and the conversation flows freely again, the ghost of the Doctor buried by the mundane details of work.

3.

Mickey accompanies Martha into the crash site. From the first bit of gouged earth to the ship itself, the entire site is under a massive quarantine dome that looks like nothing so much as an inflated, translucent trash bag. Everyone is suited up in full hazmat gear, a small army of men hidden behind tinted faceplates.

Once Martha shows her credentials, they're escorted by a pair of UNIT soldiers to four bodies lined up on the ground in front of a crude-looking golden ship. The aliens are humanoid, narrow-faced and eyebrowless, pale-haired and rosy-cheeked. The look of them stirs some dim memory at the back of Martha's mind. She reaches for it, but the memory slips away from her.

Crouching by the leftmost body, Martha turns the alien's head to examine the crusted material by the mouths more closely.

"Nasty business," Mickey remarks. His voice is tinny through the speaker of his hazmat suit.

"Can't have been a fun death," she agrees.

Padrivole, UNIT's records informed Martha, are not supposed to foam at the mouth. Alive, they look and act quite human. From the kit slung at her side Martha takes out a swab and a sealed vial. She swipes the swab through the yellow-green crust, then seals it inside the vial.

She turns to make a comment to Mickey when raised voices draw their attention.

"You're way outta line!"

"I'm out of line? I hardly think you have any authority on that--!"

Spotting the arguing men near the entrance of the Padrivole ship, the first thing Martha notices is that one of them is not wearing a hazmat suit. Then she realizes why: it's Jack Harkness.

"You know what? Forget this," Jack is saying. "I don't know why I even agreed to come here. You guys never change."

For a moment, Martha thinks that Jack will storm right past them, oblivious thanks to his anger and their bulky protective clothing. But he abruptly pauses, blinks, looks at Mickey.

"Mister Smith!"

"Lo again, Jack. Didn't expect to see you till next week." Mickey extends a hand. Jack takes it and hauls him into a brief hug. They slap each other on the back before they step apart, maintaining appropriate manliness, and Martha bites off a giggle.

"You're not working for these idiots, are you?" Jack jerks his thumb back towards the man he was arguing with. The man is muttering into a comm unit while retreating in the opposite direction.

"'Fraid so."

"Oh, Mickey. Thought you had better taste." There's a trace of real disappointment under the joking in Jack's voice, but Mickey shrugs.

"We've all got the same goals, Jack. Keep Earth safe."

"And they pay you."

Mickey shrugs again, unperturbed. "And they pay me. So what? Anyway, maybe you remember the Missus?" He jerks his thumb towards Martha.

Jack turns, his smile fully engaged, arms opening. "Ange--" He stops, mid-step, as he sees past the tinted faceplate. Shakes his head a little, like a stunned dog, and blinks. "I'm sorry. Martha Smith-Jones! I thought you dumped his ass?"

Martha smiles, but cautiously. Things have never been entirely comfortable between herself and Jack since the 456. Not because of Jack; he doesn't hold grudges or resentments, not like that. Martha's the one who's uneasy, knowing she might've done something, if only she'd been in London and not in Cambodia on her (working) honeymoon.

"Ages ago." She rolls her eyes, playing it up. "It's just Jones, now."

"Just Jones. Gotcha." Jack looks her up and down. "Well, Martha Jones. Get over here and give me a hug!"

Martha hesitates, and then, like she's suddenly been released, she flings herself into Jack's arms, hugs him tight. He twirls her around before setting her down, laughing.

"Hard to do that properly with that big ole suit on."

She jabs him in the chest. "You should be wearing one too! You might be immortal, mister, but you could carry something out--"

"Nah, I just go through the Xrad sterilizer that they use for equipment."

"Oh my god! Jack!" Even knowing Jack's immortal, Martha can't help but feel a little horrified. The effects of the Xrad sterilizer on a normal human would be akin to being microwaved.

"It's not that bad." Jack shrugs. "Anyway, it's really good to see you at last."

"It's been a while," she admits.

"Too long." His grin turns knowing; it's his turn to point fingers. "You seem to be avoiding me."

Martha winces. "I've just been so--"

"Don't say busy," Jack says. "I don't believe you. So. Are you gonna break my heart and tell me you're working with UNIT on this, too?"

She nods, if a little sheepishly.

"Recruited you back into their greedy little clutches, have they?"

"Oh, no. Just freelance." She drops her voice, as much as the hazmat speakers let her. "Why? Is there's some problem--?"

"Only that Mr. Harkness and UNIT do not see eye-to-eye on the issue of salvage rights of landed extraterrestrial invaders." A tall figure in a hazmat suit approaches them. Martha recognizes Captain Abernathy's craggy features behind the faceplate. "Ironic, considering the longtime propensities of Torchwood with regards to alien salvage."

"We were wrong back then. I can admit it. I've caught up with the times." Jack's suddenly stiff, his shoulders back and his smile turned joyless. "This ship crash landed, most likely accidentally. We should be trying to make contact with the Padrivole--"

Abernathy shakes his head, clucking his tongue like a schoolmaster. "To crash-land planetside the ship still had to come close enough to violate Earth regulated space as established with the Shadow Proclamation. They were here illegally no matter how you cut it, Mr. Harkness. By various treaties, any property they leave behind is rightly confiscated by Earth authorities."

"We did suspect they were ill, Captain," Martha says. She starts to play peacemaker, falling into the role automatically. "That could have contributed to a deviation off course--"

"If they had time to come five hundred thousand kilometers off course they had time to inform us of the need for a medical emergency landing."

"And would you have even granted--" Jack begins, but Abernathy cuts him off.

"Mister Harkness, as you made quite clear to Lt. Myung a moment ago, you've turned down our offer to help us with this investigation. I must ask you to leave."

"You're the ones who asked me here," Jack says angrily.

"As a courtesy. And I warned Brigadier Magambo that it was a bad idea."

"Yeah, well, you were right. But don't worry. I'm going."

Martha opens her mouth, but Mickey's hand, still on her elbow, squeezes gently. She falls silent. Jack looks at her, at Mickey, and nods stiffly.

"See you guys around, maybe."

"Liam's next Tuesday, right?" Mickey says.

"Right," Jack says. Almost childishly, he adds, "If I'm still around this place by then."

Martha waves, but Jack never looks back, doesn't see her do it. Mickey excuses himself, too, and Martha watches him go with something bordering on regret.

Abernathy sighs with such force that his suit speakers crackle. "I'm sorry, Doctor Jones. That's not how I intended to welcome you on site."

"It's all right," Martha says. "Jack can be a bit--stubborn."

Abernathy shakes his head. He looks around himself, as if trying to remember why he'd come over; spotting the corpses, he claps his hands together. "You know, I tried to tell them not to move the bodies, but they had four of them out here before I could stop them."

"It's all right," Martha says.

Abernathy continues on, still apologetic. "I thought you'd want to see them where they fell, and how they fell. Did you get the images I sent?"

She nods. "Have to agree with your men--looks as if the Padrivole dropped pretty quick." Abernathy visibly relaxes as she gets straight to business. "Whatever killed them did it fast. Can't swear on it till I open them up, but I'd say full systematic failure in under fifteen minutes."

"Could a virus do that?"

"I know of one or two. Not common though, not at all." She hands him the sealed vial. "Is there a lab set up on site?"

"That trailer there, best equipment we could manage in the time frame. Let me know if you find we're missing anything you need. I've got a couple lads coming to move these bodies to the temporary morgue--do you want to go with them?"

"Can you walk me through the scene, first? I just want to make sure there's nothing really simple we've missed. Tassps or Periodrones or the like, stuff that might sneak by the broad scans."

Abernathy chuckles. "Killed by alien beesting? Now that would be a sad fate, wouldn't it? But if there were any such things, they'll be dead. We did a complete Xrad exposure as soon as we determined there were no living sentients left on board."

Martha raises her eyebrows. "That's a bit extreme, isn't it?"

"Six aliens, dead of some unknown disease? We had to be sure, Doctor Jones."

Martha nods. Though she doesn't agree with UNIT's broad-stroke methods, she understands them, and since she left UNIT she has no influence, no mechanism to change them. She wonders if it's good or bad that these days she simply accepts it, that she holds herself to certain standards but no longer expects everyone else to cleave to them. The look on the Doctor's face the last time she saw him creeps into her mind, reflects her own disapproval back at her. Martha winces.

Abernathy gestures towards the ship. "Ready to have a look, then?"

Martha shakes off the heavy feeling of regret, but only just barely, wishing yet again that she'd never dreamed of the Doctor that morning. "Lead the way," she says, managing a smile.

The Padrivole ship's lines have a crude aspect to them, now bulging, now jutting at odd angles. The stairs of the boarding ramp are shallow. Inside, the bulkheads are enameled in bright colors, bold designs. There is something fairytale about the inside of the ship. It makes her feel strange, nostalgic and lost, like she is Alice through the looking glass.

Abernathy leads Martha through the ship so she can scan for anything left by the Xrad sweep. But the place is impeccably clean. They pause in what she guesses is the medical bay. The panels have brightly colored knobs and exaggerated dials.

"Everything's so... cheery," she remarks.

Abernathy chuckles. "Alien aesthetics."

"Were you able to download anything from their databases?"

Abernathy's tinted faceplate bobs. "Partials from the black box and something my men think might be a medical database. They're putting it through the translation algorithms as we speak." He gestures back towards the main corridor. "The two bodies still in the ship are in the cockpit. Pilot and copilot, we think. Shall we?"

Martha nods.

The cockpit is filled with amber light, and it takes her a moment to realize it is because of the windows, made of amber-tinted glass. They give everything an otherworldly glow, like a room illuminated by sunset. Martha finds her breath suddenly taken away. Even the bodies, slumped in their chairs, are turned into golden-haired children napping at their desks by the amber light. One of the aliens has curly hair, and it spills in ringlets over the command console.

There's something familiar, something...

A chill races down Martha's spine, startling her. The space between her shoulder blades goes tight, prickly. She turns, sure that there will be someone there, someone in a hazmat suit, someone with a tinted faceplate concealing dark eyes observing her so critically--

But there's no one, and Martha feels silly for letting her imagination run away with her. She finishes up her work in the cockpit quickly, and then turns to Abernathy.

"All right," she says. "I'm ready. Let's do the autopsy."

Abernathy nods and steps out of the cockpit. Martha moves to follow, but a strange phrase seizes her, stops her just before the exit. "Pink cheeks and blond curls..."

Abernathy pauses and looks at her. "What's that?"

She shakes her head, blinks. "Sorry. I don't know. Guess I'm still a bit jet lagged. Sorry. Lead on."

Abernathy lets Martha take the lead on the autopsy. Though his skills are probably equal to hers, he seems content to play assistant and errand boy. Ever since he learned that she travelled with the Doctor he's often conceded authority to her in this way. She's never been entirely comfortable with it, but no amount of effort on her part will convince him to do otherwise.

"I'm just grateful we can't smell them." Abernathy racks up a number of samples she's taken, and slides them into a stasis cart for transport to the lab. "Rotten through so fast."

Martha shakes her head, looking down at the opened body in front of her. All the organs inside are soft, as if they've been stewed or digested. The few she removed earlier threatened to break apart as she lifted them out. "It's not right, is it?"

Abernathy glances at the display to his right. "Rate of normal decomposition ought to be comparable to our own."

The medical database Abernathy's men retrieved included not only comprehensive information on the aliens' anatomy, but also a number of recent bioscans of the entire Padrivole crew. Martha's been very grateful for it. Otherwise, she'd be doing a lot more conjecture.

She moves one mushy, yellowish organ aside--it's shaped like nothing so much as a cauliflower--and raises her eyebrows. "Oh, now that's definitely not right." The organs behind are almost liquefied, and collapse under the gentle touch of her probe. She samples a little, putting it on a slide and checking it quickly under a microscope.

"I suppose it was too much to hope for something obvious." She raises a hand to rub her eyes, but her faceplate makes that impossible. "Why can't I ever run into giant alien bacteria?"

Abernathy laughs. Martha scoops the whole mess carefully into a sample container.

"Lab's going to be busy all night," she says, handing it off to Abernathy.

They finish work on the first body, then move on to the others. Inside, all of the corpses look the same, all the organs losing integrity. By the fourth body everything inside has been reduced to a nasty, yellow-green slurry, and the outside skin is beginning to soften as well. Martha closes it up in a hurry, feeling bile rising; though she can't really smell it, what her imagination supplies is unpleasant enough.

"Let's get these in stasis," she says. "Or there'll be nothing left to work with tomorrow."

Abernathy helps her roll the bodies into the makeshift stasis storage, a portable unit converted from a UNIT arms storage crate. They shut the last one in and she leans hard against the door.

"You should get some rest while we wait to hear back from the lab," Abernathy tells her. "You know it's near one in the morning back home, don't you?"

"That late?" Martha bites her lip, dismayed. "I never called Leo."

Abernathy gives her a puzzled look.

"My brother," she says. "It's--it was his birthday, yesterday."

She waits for Abernathy to make some remark about her lack of familial duty, but he only smiles kindly. "You'll have to tell him happy birthday for me. Now, why don't I give you a ride to the hotel? We've booked you into one about five minutes away."

"I want to run these over to the lab and start a few cultures, first. I need to make damn sure this isn't something that'll affect humans. But I promise I'll get some rest after."

He studies her, and then nods. "Well, all right. When you're finished, come find me. I'll be in CenComm--want to get out of this damn suit!"

Martha laughs and sees him off, then returns to her work.

Later, she is shutting off the overhead lights when she feels it again, the prickle between her shoulder blades. She scolds herself for being so jumpy, and pulls her cartful of samples towards the door.

Then she hears the voice: "It's raining, Martha. It's raining on the moon."

She turns, sharply, to the empty room.

"That's it," she says to herself, sternly. "After this, holiday. Giant blue drinks with Tish--no. Leo. Mum. Somebody. Massive ones. With little umbrellas. Do you hear that, Doctor, if that's you out there? I'll take a break. Happy?"

There's no answer, of course. There's no real Doctor here. It's all in her head.

She looks around the temporary morgue one last time, searching the corners and shadows for a presence she knows is impossible. Then, with a sigh, she lets herself out and heads for the lab facilities.

4.

In the middle of the night, Martha feels the weight and warmth of someone beside her in the hotel bed. Half-dreaming, she mumbles, "Time 's it?" and smiles groggily at the soft reply.

It's not until the hotel room phone jolts her into full waking that she realizes there is no one there. For a moment she still feels the weight against her back, the warmth, less than human body heat but still there, real as anything.

She gropes for the lamp on the nightstand and turns it on, rolling over quickly as if speed might allow her to catch a glimpse of the ghost that is haunting her. But the covers on the other side of the bed lie flat, undisturbed except by her recent movement.

She shivers.

The hotel phone yammers for her attention again. She answers it with unsteady hands, rubbing at the sudden rise of gooseflesh all over her forearms.

"Hello?" Somehow, she manages to keep her voice even.

"Doctor Jones?" It's Abernathy; he sounds freshly-woken himself. His voice nails her back to reality. The light in the room feels brighter, and everything seems more solid. Martha shakes her head. She's dreamt things before that she thought were real in a half-awake state. It happens to everyone now and then. That's all it is.

"Captain. Good morning--" Her eye catches the time display on the phone. It reads 10:30 p.m., though her body is insisting it's 4:30 a.m. She's only been asleep for two hours. "Or, uh. Night, I guess. Depending."

"Sorry to wake you. The lab's started to come back with results."

Martha sits up. "That's fantastic. Thank you, Captain." She pinches the phone between her ear and shoulder so she has both hands free. Leaning over the side of the bed, she grabs her case and pulls it into her lap.

"Not a problem. You can pull it up in the RLRT remote access interface. Had a quick look--nothing noteworthy yet, in my opinion. It'll hold till morning if you want to get more sleep."

"Thanks. I really appreciate this."

Abernathy chuckles. "You're looking already, aren't you?"

Martha's hand hovers guiltily over the pad. The RLRT login window is waiting for her password, cursor blinking. She keys it in. "Well. In about thirty seconds."

He chuckles again. "The indefatigable Doctor Jones. I'll ring if there's anything new, but otherwise, I'm going to try to get a bit more shut eye. Good night, Doctor."

For a moment, Martha tenses, forgetting that she is the doctor in question. She makes herself relax. "Thanks. Good night."

As Martha hangs up, she suddenly thinks of the time she and the Doctor spent stranded in 1969, sharing a rickety fold-out because they both refused to sleep on the roach-run floor.

She smiles a little to remember how they quarreled over who hogged too much of the mattress or the covers or who elbowed whom in the middle of the night. The Doctor didn't sleep much, but he did sleep. Still, despite the cramped quarters and the grumbling, she had always slept sounder after he slipped in next to her.

Martha touches the smoothed-out space of comforter beside her, half-expecting to feel warmth there, but there's nothing. She feels suddenly cold. She swallows.

"Enough scaring yourself with silly ghost stories, Martha!" she scolds herself.

The sound of her own voice has the same effect Abernathy's did; she feels much calmer, much *saner*. Sliding on the flimsy hotel-provided slippers, Martha stands and makes the bed with deliberate efficiency, until both sides match, flat and tight and tucked-in. Then she makes herself a pot of coffee in the little coffee maker in the bathroom. The smell fills the room and drives off the last of her late-night uneasiness.

She settles down with a cup of coffee and her data pad at the boxy, not-quite comfortable desk.

As Abernathy told her, the results they've received so far are unremarkable. She double-checks everything against the Padrivole database to make sure she's not missing anything. It's all routine. Normal. Frustratingly normal.

But people--aliens--don't just melt on the inside for no reason.

She worries her lip in her teeth and dismisses the report for now, calling up the Padrivole medical database instead. She begins searching through any files even remotely related to what she's seen, and even some not so related. The effects of stellar radiation, weapons, parasites, allergies, poisons. Aging. She reads for as long as she can stand it. She reads until her eyes burn.

Two measly hours of sleep are hardly enough; her regular all-nighters during med school seem like distant, impossible feats. Martha feels herself drifting, and though she fights it, she slips into a light doze, chin propped against the heel of her palm.

In sleep, present blends into the past.

She is no longer at the hotel desk but sitting in a beat-up linoleum-upholstered chair, surrounded by various oddities the Doctor has put together while she's been at work. Timey-wimey detectors and TARDIS signalers and teleport boosters and some things even the Doctor doesn't know the purpose of.

She's eating toast while the Doctor tinkers restlessly behind her, cross-legged on their fold-out bed, his tongue jammed in his cheek. On the telly is the broadcast of the moon landing; this is the fifth time she's seen it, but the first time she's seen it on television.

She is happy, even though she doesn't especially love 1969, even though she wants to get going and she knows the Doctor's restless, even though she has, constantly, in the back of her mind, a little voice that asks over and over when she's going to get back to real life and responsibility. There is something about the moon landing that she just loves. Something about all that potential, all the promise, all the doors that opened with that one moment. She was never one to gaze at the stars for long (too busy looking into her own future), but now she can't stop looking.

"When we get the TARDIS back," she says between bites of toast, "can we go again?"

The Doctor grins at her like she's mad and he loves it. In her dreaming state she knows what he'll say, waits to hear it. *Welllll, probably shouldn't, you know, chance of meeting ourselves and wreaking time-space havoc increasing geometrically or logarithmically or by oh, some type of mathematical-thingy-ly every time we go back... Oh, all right. You've talked me into it, Martha Jones!*

But here her dreams turn away from the path of memory. Instead of launching into a rambling affirmative, the Doctor softens his manic grin to a close-mouthed smile, sentimental and a little sad. He looks at her, and somewhere in reality Martha feels studied, assessed, approved.

"Sleep, Martha," he tells her. "Sleep while you can."

In her dream, Martha smiles back at him, and she puts her head down, next to the plate with her half-eaten toast. Back in the hotel, her supporting arm slips and she rests her cheek on the desk, next to her datapad. She slips into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Martha wakes to a bright light in her face. At first she thinks it's just the moon, but her blinds are closed. She realizes it is her datapad; there's a new data download in progress, and the screen has roused itself at the new activity.

She blinks dazedly down at the display, watching the progress bar quickly fill. The time in one corner of the screen says 3:30 local, which means it's half past eight back home. She rubs at a kink in her neck. She's too old, she thinks, to be falling asleep at her desk like some sleep-deprived student.

The data finishes downloading and she accesses it with a few clumsy touches. A half-dozen more reports from the lab. She begins reading them immediately, but she has to reread the first one three times before she's finally awake enough to understand it.

"Normal, normal," Martha mutters to herself. "Everything's just so bloody normal, isn't it, Doctor?"

She imagines him saying, *Admit it, Martha Jones, you don't like normal any more than I do!* and her mouth quirks a little. If she's going to have overwork-induced imaginary friends, she supposes, she might as well enjoy their company.

She takes a sip from her forgotten cup of coffee, makes a face and pushes it away. It's unpleasantly cold. Yawning, she reviews the second report, the third.

Martha pauses, mid-yawn. Something in the molecular scans catches her eye. She pages back and forth between the third and fourth report. Raising her eyebrows, she grabs her mobile and dials Abernathy.

"Sorry to wake you," she says, at his bleary hello, "But is there someone who could give me a ride down to the lab?"

Abernathy's voice is suddenly alert, clear. "Did you find something?"

"Maybe," she says. "Could be nothing. But I definitely want to have a closer look."

"I can meet you downstairs in ten minutes."

"Oh!" Martha blinks, surprised that Abernathy would deem the mere hint of a lead worth getting out of bed for. "Really, sir. It could be nothing."

"Could be something," Abernathy grunts.

Martha laughs. "Well, I really hope so."

"Ten minutes. In the lobby."

"All right. See you there."

Martha rushes to get herself together, throwing her pad back into her bag, washing up and giving the barest nod to her makeup. She's eager to get to the lab, to get in there and get some answers.

It's not until she's leaving the room that she glances back and sees that the bed covers are slightly rumpled, as if someone was recently sitting or lying on them. Gasping, she tries to stop the door with her foot, but she's too late, and it shuts behind her. She reaches for her room key, stops.

"You're just imagining things," she says to herself, loud and firm. She shakes her head, turns on her heel and walks to the elevators.

5.

The moon looms large above a cluster of trees, not yet faded by the coming of dawn. Glimpsing it as Abernathy drives her back to the site, Martha can't help but feel fond, after her recent dreams. A smile tugs at her lips.

"Penny for them?" Abernathy says.

"Oh! I was just--" Martha laughs a little. She gestures at the windshield. "The moon. I was thinking of all the times we went to the moon landing. The Doctor and I, I mean."

Abernathy perks up at the mention of the Doctor. "You went more than once? Thought that was against the rules, and all."

"It is, a bit. Technically. I think. But he said it'd be all right, as long as we never ran into ourselves. It was a bit tricky the seventh time--"

"Seventh!" Abernathy chuckles. "However did you manage that?"

"We got pretty creative. The fourth time--" Martha stops, hit by *deja vu* again. She blinks.

"The fourth time?"

"I just--there's something I'm forgetting. About the *Padrivole*. And the moon." She holds up a hand, groping for some memory.

Abernathy gives her a curious look.

"A-- A-- A platoon of *Judoon* on the moon!" Martha exclaims, as the memory rushes back: standing amongst the *Judoon*, confronting that little old woman who wasn't. Mrs. Finnegan and her straw.

"Doctor Jones?"

Martha laughs, a short single burst, and shakes her head. "Sorry. I just realized I've heard of the *Padrivole* before. It was the first time... the first time I met the Doctor. There was this *plasmavore*, and she killed their princess, I think. Something like that."

Abernathy nods. "That was the Royal Hope incident, wasn't it? I've read the report--what little there was of it. One of the incidents that got Saxon a leg up, wasn't it? Do you think it has anything to do with this?"

Martha's skin crawls at the mention of Saxon's name. She hopes his ghost isn't about to come haunt her, as well. "No, I can't see how it would. But it is a bit odd..."

"What?"

She hesitates, weighing how honest to be with Abernathy. She's known him for years, but only in a professional capacity. They aren't good friends. But maybe that's a good thing. In a more subdued tone, she says,

"Yesterday morning, I dreamed about that day. Being on the moon. It was the first time I'd thought of the Doctor in years." A little ruefully, she adds, "And now I can't seem to stop."

Abernathy laughs. "He does seem to stick in the minds of the people who've met him."

"I suppose," she says.

"Especially travelling with him as long as you did. How long was it?"

Martha opens her mouth to answer and realizes she doesn't really know. How long *did* she travel with the Doctor? She never did keep proper track, one adventure after another, back and forth in time and across the galaxy. A few months? A year? Years? And then the Year That Never Was... It's odd enough that she's actually older than the age her birth certificate proclaims her to be; it's even odder that she doesn't know how much older, exactly.

"Long enough," she tells Abernathy lightly. "Anyway. If we know the Judoon have associated with the Padrivole, perhaps they'll have some idea of what's going on. Or the Shadow Proclamation. Doesn't UNIT have contacts with both of them now?"

"Tentative contacts. Very, very tentative. Besides, you really think Judoon are authority on anything other than breaking down doors?"

Martha snorts. "You have a point. Still, worth checking, isn't it? Perhaps they could even put us in touch with the Padrivole."

"Now you sound like your friend Harkness. Next you'll want us to return their ship."

"Well, wouldn't it be better to make them allies--?"

Abernathy's mouth tightens and he shakes his head. "It's quite complicated, Doctor Jones. We're still classified as a 'primitive world,' with certain protections."

"I realize that. But if we have a resource like the Shadow Proclamation at hand, why wouldn't we take advantage?"

Abernathy doesn't answer her right away. They've reached the barricade marking the edge of the quarantine zone. Martha and Abernathy flash their IDs at the armed guards.

"I'll talk to the Brigadier," Abernathy says. "It'll be her call."

Martha nods; Magambo is tough, but fair.

Abernathy walks her to the airlock leading to the quarantine area, but he doesn't put on a hazmat suit. "Aren't you coming?" she asks. He seems preoccupied.

He gives her an absent smile. "Shortly."

"Something I've said?" she asks, lightly, as she locks down her helmet.

He raises an eyebrow, and his smile turns a little guilty. He pats her arm. "No no. Just some things I need to handle. Politics. I'll be there shortly, Doctor Jones."

Martha knows when she's being dismissed. She nods, and waves, and heads for the airlock.

There are more results waiting for her when she reaches the lab, and in two of the datasets, she finds the same peculiar molecular decay that caught her eye originally. She orders additional tests, and requisitions reports from the other scientific teams on site: reports on the ship damage, the cockpit logs, metallurgical breakdowns of the ship's makeup.

She's checking on her human-communicability tests when Abernathy finally turns up.

"Good news?" he says, hopefully.

Martha turns, shaking her head. "Nothing concrete so far, but I'm beginning to wonder if this is some sort of illness at all."

"Oh?"

"If there was some biological cause--bacteria, virus, parasite, prion--there should be some sign, some remnant. Even if your sterilization sweep killed them all. But I haven't seen any evidence of that... There's just the typical stuff we'd expect from a Padrivole body. I was starting to wonder if it was something native to the Padrivole that'd gone haywire--like a staph infection, that sort of thing."

"But...?"

"But," Martha grabs her datapad and pulls up the relevant reports, "in this--where we're tracking the continued cellular breakdown--the damage on the molecular scans looked familiar. So I took a closer look. It's incredibly subtle, and slower than I'd expect given the extreme damage to the organs, but it looks almost like the aftereffects of dekker ray exposure."

Abernathy looks at her, all surprise. "Dekker rays. You're thinking weapon?"

Martha nods.

"Weapons fire--" Abernathy's eyes are suddenly too bright; Martha can almost see his thoughts racing forward. Whatever conclusion he reaches a moment later, it makes his brows draw together, the corner of his mouth turn down.

"What?"

"That's a very interesting theory." His tone is carefully neutral. Martha frowns, but she continues on.

"There's also the cockpit logs. Have you seen them?"

Abernathy shakes his head. "Not yet. I hadn't realized they'd finished reconstructing them."

"I had Sergeant Kent send them over as soon as he was done." Martha reaches towards her station display. "I hope you haven't eaten recently."

She doesn't rewatch the footage herself. Once is enough. She watches Abernathy's face and she knows what he's seeing: the Padrivole chattering in the cockpit--gossiping, if they're anything like humans--and making flutterings that she assumes are laughter. Then, suddenly, the two Padrivole claw at their throats before a foamy-yellowish stuff surges out of their mouths. Their faces, drained of color by their distress, seem almost radiant in the golden light of the cockpit.

"Both at the same time," Abernathy murmurs.

"Right. Which makes it seem even less likely that there's some biological culprit at work here." She watches Abernathy read the report in his hand, consider the facts. "I mean, it's just a theory. It could also be exposure to something we haven't seen before. Like a life form that happens to exude Dekker rays, is made of them, maybe--"

Abernathy waves dismissively. He seems distracted. "Well, it's fortunate then that the Xrad sweep seems to work on non-corporeal forms as well as the more solid ones."

Martha shifts, uncomfortable at his easy kill-or-be-killed attitude. It's never nice to be reminded of why she left UNIT, why her allies in this are never truly her allies. She clears her throat, changes the subject before she can get herself into trouble.

"If it is a weapon, it isn't any I've seen before. I've pulled the hull reports and I've asked the ship sweep team to review for any sign of weapons fire. What did the Brigadier say about contacting the Shadow Proclamation? Maybe we could get in touch with them, see if they've got any weapons like this on record--"

Her question rouses Abernathy from some thought. He blinks at her, his brow rumpling. "Brigadier Magambo feels that at this point, involving the Shadow Proclamation would confuse things unnecessarily."

Martha's frown deepens. "What? Even if it was a hostile attack on the Padrivole?"

"If you determine that is the case, we'll take the necessary steps then."

"But--"

He gives her a smile she thinks is meant to be reassuring. If so, he misses his mark. "You hardly appear in need of assistance, Doctor Jones. We're very happy with your progress."

Martha can't help but hear shades of *Don't worry your pretty little head about it* in his tone. She nearly recoils as Abernathy reaches over and pats her hand. She wraps her arms over her chest; he doesn't seem to notice her withdrawal.

"Now, if you won't hold it against me--I've got the less pleasurable aspects of scientific lead to attend to."

Martha puts on a smile. "Paperwork and politics. I remember."

"Reluctantly, I'm sure. Keep me updated, Doctor Jones."

"Of course," she says, pleasantly. But she can't help wondering if it's really paperwork he's off to look after, and what it is that he isn't telling her.

After Abernathy leaves, Martha calls Mickey and asks if he might stop by. When he arrives, Martha steers him to the far end of the lab, away from where the other techs are working. It's possible that UNIT is monitoring everything that goes on over even the hazmat comm systems, but she's not ready to get that paranoid yet.

"You're working in CennComm mostly, right?"

Mickey nods. "Yeah?"

"What're things like over there?"

Mickey shrugs. "Usual, for a situation like this. Urgent but not a mad scramble. What's up?"

"Do you overhear much? Like, do you know why UNIT might be hot to keep this job to themselves?"

Mickey gives her a wry smile. "You wanting me to be your spy, Mrs. Smith?"

Martha attempts nonchalance. "Just curious, is all."

"Suppose it's like they told Jack. They want to keep the Padrivole ship."

She studies his face through the tinted faceplate. "And you haven't heard anything to suggest otherwise? You know, something less pleasant?"

Mickey meets her eyes frankly. "Grave robbing's not exactly a noble reason now, is it? Why?"

"Just getting paranoid in my old age, I suppose." Martha sighs. "Anyway, what I really wanted to ask you about is weapons. Disruptors, specifically."

"Disruptors?"

"I found signs that the Padrivole had been exposed to dekker radiation, or something similar."

"And most disruptors are dekker based."

"Yeah. Except that all the disruptors I've ever seen made a mess of the entire body, or at least the contact site. All the damage on the Padrivole is internal. Have you ever heard of a weapon like that?"

"Melts your insides but not your outsides?"

Martha nods. "Putting it plainly."

Mickey tilts his head, thinking. "More that scramble everything, but yeah, there's a couple I've seen like that."

Martha tries not to get excited. "You remember which ones? What species had them?"

"Yeah, I do. The Melqu and the Ree-IV, if memory serves."

Martha notes the species names on a scrap of paper. "You wouldn't happen to have any specs? Data on the effects, anything like that? Output analyses, recordings...?"

"Can do you one better, Mrs. Smith. Got one of 'em back in London. Took it off the Ree I tangled with 'bout a year ago. The other--well, you'll just have to take my word on it. Got the mission log but nothing else."

"Do you think you could get hold of it? The one you've got in London?"

"UNIT can manage it, yeah? Ange could meet someone at Heathrow, or wherever."

"If she can drop it off at the London UNIT post I can have them run tests there and send them to me. And the mission log--"

"Have it in your inbox soon as I can."

Martha impulsively grabs Mickey's hand and squeezes it. "I'm glad you're on this job," she blurts, surprising him as well as herself with her sudden sentimentality. "It's good to know there's at least one other person I can trust here."

"What, you don't trust the blokes running this place?" Mickey says, with just a hint of sarcasm. He chuckles. "I'll get you that mission log ASAP."

Martha sees Mickey out of the lab trailer. Above, through the semi-translucent plastic of the quarantine bubble, she can see that the sky has begun lightening towards dawn. The moon is a paler blur nearing the horizon.

"Hello, neutral territory," she murmurs at it.

For the first time since she has arrived on site, her appetite for solving the mystery of what happened to the Padrivole dims. She feels restless, strange and uneasy. She suddenly wants to be gone; the bottom of her feet itch with the need to be elsewhere, away from duty and responsibility and politics. The urge is so powerful, so overwhelming, she takes several steps away from the trailer.

Someone touches her shoulder, stopping her mid-stride. She looks over, thinking it must be Mickey, back for some reason. But it's not him. In fact, there's no one around at the moment. The site is eerie and still.

Her suit speakers crackle. Under the garbled noise, she thinks she hears words, distant but distinct, spoken in a familiar voice:

"Cause it all depends on you..."

Martha swallows, feels suddenly cold in her climate-controlled hazmat suit, cold and weary besides. She replies, more to hear the sound of her own voice than anything, convince herself that she's just imagining things.

"Right. I get it. No walking away from this one. Thank you, super-ego. Could you be a little less creepy next time? 'Cause I'm not sure I'm ready to go to the madhouse just yet."

Her forced laughter, she thinks, sounds like she ought to be in the madhouse.

6.

When Martha gets back to work she discovers Mickey's been prompt about getting her the mission logs. She reviews them quickly; they're helpful, but only in that they eliminate the Melqu disruptor from the running. The energy output pattern simply isn't right to create the kind of destabilization Martha is seeing. She doesn't completely manage to stifle the frustration that wells up from somewhere under her diaphragm.

"More dead ends, huh?" One of the other techs, a computer specialist, gives her a sympathetic smile. "My mates an' I always say xenobio's like being an ant an' trying to solve a human medical mystery."

"It is a bit, yeah."

"You need anything?"

"Has the London office sent anything over on the Ree weapon?"

"Sorry, the database connection's a bit laggy, yeah? Satellite's been a bit off, dunno why. We're pulling down the latest update now. I think there's a few datasets coming down the pipe. Give it five. You should see something soon."

"Thanks," Martha says.

Abernathy's voice reaches her from the far end of the lab. "Where's Doctor Jones?"

She turns to wave at him; one of the other techs is pointing her out. Abernathy hurries over without waving back. As he nears, she can see he's troubled.

"Martha," he says, in a low voice. "How long would it take you to put together an assessment on weapons fire as the cause of the alien deaths?"

Martha blinks at him. "I don't know. I'm still waiting on a disruptor analysis from London. But as of right now, it's just a theory. I wouldn't put it more conclusively than that."

"Doesn't have to be conclusive, just report on what you've found."

"Captain, what's going on?"

"Zurich's put this on an accelerated schedule. We need to wrap this up in four hours, if we can."

"Four hours?" Martha stares. "Standard procedure's minimum three days quarantine!"

Abernathy winces visibly. "We're only getting four hours because they want the paperwork to be solid, and then they're coming in."

"That's ridiculous. Captain you can't--" Martha is filled with a sudden anger that's not entirely rational. "This is a class four site. You of all people know without conclusive results, this ought to be a two-week

quarantine, at minimum! Three days is bad enough, but barely twenty-four hours when there's still the possibility that this whole place is one big biohazard--it's unconscionable!"

Abernathy's mouth tightens. "There are no signs of any infectious vector that might affect humans. In fact you said yourself, no signs of *any* biological causes to be found, for that matter. There's been no further incidents like this one, and no sign of any theoretical dekker-radiation lifeform."

"We can't know that if you don't let me do my job properly."

"I'd consider it a proper job if you'll sign off on your current theory and discoveries. Weapons fire is what makes sense, and it's what I will present to the council."

Martha narrows her eyes. "Why are you so eager to call it weapons fire, Captain? You practically jumped at the idea when I first suggested it." When he doesn't answer, she pushes on: "I really think leaping to conclusions is the worst thing we could do in this situation. Do you really want to be responsible if we let something out that knocks out Canada or worse?"

"UNIT's not about to risk unleashing a plague on the North American continent." Abernathy says, impatience edging his tone. "We're going to do a full Xrad burn on site before pickup, then freight the whole thing down to 51."

Martha shakes her head. "We don't know for sure that an Xrad burn's enough."

"Look, Doctor Jones, normally, I'd agree, but--."

"What do you know that I don't, Captain?"

Abernathy shakes his head. He's hardly willing to meet her eye. "Please, Doctor. If you could just sign off on the report."

"And if it's wrong, no problem, 'cause it's on me, a freelancer. That it?"

"Doctor Jones..."

Abernathy looks suddenly old and weary. Martha wonders what burden he's carrying, what he won't tell her. But Martha's pity for him doesn't dissolve her anger at his final decisions.

"I want to talk to the Brigadier."

"Doctor, please. Just do me this favor, don't fight this. Leave it be."

Martha frowns. "I'm your friend, Abernathy, but before that I'm a doctor. And as a doctor, I only want to do the job you hired me to do. Properly."

Abernathy opens his mouth, sighs, and then shuts it. "Fine. Be my guest. Talk to the Brigadier. I'll call ahead and let her know you're coming."

Brigadier Magambo and Martha go back a long way, and though they aren't exactly friends, they share a mutual respect for each other. In Martha's younger days, they even went to the pub together now and then, sharing drinks and stories of their encounters with the Doctor.

Even so, when Martha storms into the Command Center wild eyed, hair pasted to her temples with sweat, Magambo looks a second from having her dragged out by the soldiers around her. Mickey's among the soldiers. He frowns at Martha, asking a question with his eyes, and she looks away from him.

Martha stops directly in front of Magambo, arms crossed over her chest. "Brigadier. With all due respect, you can't move the ship yet. I can't guarantee that there isn't still some possible contaminant or hostile life form present."

Magambo regards her coolly. "You don't need to guarantee it, Doctor Jones. Abernathy is science lead, and he's signed off on unknown alien weapons fire as the cause of death, and consequently, the crash."

"You're both making a mistake."

"Then it's my responsibility to bear."

"Brigadier--"

"Martha Jones." For a moment, Martha swears it's not Magambo who says her name, but the Doctor. She can only stare. The timbre of the voice was wrong, but the intonation, the curling amusement lingering beneath the three short syllables, was too much like the Doctor's.

The spell is broken when Magambo goes on, in her usual measured tones: "You've signed off yourself with less than this before."

Martha somehow manages to recover her wits, hoping Magambo hasn't noticed her brief lapse. "I was certain then. I'm not, now." She takes a deep breath. "Brigadier, in all the years I've worked with you, I've never known you to move a site with less than seventy-two hours review."

Magambo says nothing. Martha remembers Abernathy and his own silence.

"What is it? Is it politics? The Canadians want us to move? The UN has budget shortfalls?"

"That's nothing you should concern yourself with."

"It concerns me when people could be at risk because UNIT decides to pull an out-of-character accelerated schedule on a possible biohazard site!"

Magambo is unmoved by Martha's righteous indignance. "We no longer believe it's a biohazard site."

"Why?"

Magambo shakes her head.

"You have conclusive proof of this?"

Martha watches Magambo's face; the brigadier is like stone, giving nothing away. "We are confident in our belief, yes."

"What don't I know?"

"It doesn't concern you, Doctor."

"Oh, it concerns me all right," Martha says, crossly. "How am I supposed to independently review this incident if you aren't giving me all the information?"

"We are terminating the independent review."

"So I'm fired then, am I?"

The command center has gone deathly quiet around them; on some level, Martha is amused that they, two little women, have intimidated an entire trailer full of armed men into cowed silence. But she doesn't crack a smile, doesn't look away from Magambo's steely gaze. In the end, it's the brigadier who sighs.

"As the captain told you, you have four hours for wrap. Give me evidence, some reason I should hold off on the transport, and I will consider a delay."

"At least twenty-four."

"Four. And no matter what you find, at the end of those four hours, I'm to have a final report from you and you're to get off-site, or I'll have you escorted off."

Martha nods. She's won the battle, but lost the war. "Then I guess I haven't any time to waste."

She turns on her heel, and keeping her chin raised, marches out of the trailer.

Mickey catches up with Martha as she puts her hazmat suit back on. "What was all that about?"

She eyeballs him as he begins to put a suit on as well. "You want to be my lovely assistant?"

"Figure you need someone to watch your back after the show you just put on." He grins.

Her mouth tugs towards a smile. "No, really. Why are you here?"

Mickey shrugs. "Brigadier asked me to assess breakdown points on the ship, so we can get it moved quick when the time comes."

Martha is only slightly disappointed. "You sure she didn't ask you to keep an eye on me and make sure I don't do anything mad?"

Mickey snorts; Martha decides to take that as a no. Mickey says,

"You really think it's something we still haven't found?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know. It just... *feels* all wrong. But I'm a doctor. A scientist. I can't just go on 'feelings,' now, can I?"

He snorts. "Don't know about that. Sometimes you got to trust your gut. 'Least in my job."

"Your job's all about the gut," she says. "By the time you're thinking of getting out of the way--"

"You're toast," Mickey agrees.

When Martha struggles with a clasp on the back of the suit, Mickey reaches over and fixes it for her.

"Thanks," she says, smiling at him. "You know, after this I'm taking a vacation. For a week. Two weeks. Somewhere warm! And I'll eat pears. Loads of 'em. He always hated them, you know."

"Who? Abernathy?"

Martha realizes what she's just said. She can't take it back, so she answers honestly. "The Doctor."

"What, you still smelling him?" Mickey asks, too casually.

Martha lowers her voice. "You haven't mentioned that to anyone, have you, Mickey? Please don't. I don't need more excuses for UNIT to invalidate my opinions."

Mickey's tight grin softens around the edges, turns kind. "I would never, Martha. Hope you'd know that."

She nods at him, gratefully.

"So, pears, huh?" He catches her eye, teases a smile out of her. "Better bottle 'em up and make yourself some Time Lord repellent."

Martha laughs, real and unforced.

"Give me a hand?" Mickey turns his back to her, and she seals up a magnetic seam just behind his left shoulder. She pats his arm to let him know she's done, and they head towards the airlock.

"You should trust your feelings," Mickey tells her, as they walk. "You've got good instincts. Hey, he trusted you, didn't he?"

"Did he?"

Mickey gives her a look. She waves his silent rebuke away with one hand.

"All right. I just feel like--I'm pretty sure Abernathy and Magambo are keeping something from me, but I haven't the first clue what it could be. Abernathy got a bit odd ever since I mentioned the Judoon on the moon."

"You think it could be something to do with them? Maybe there's some secret UNIT/Judoon collaboration, some new weapon?"

The airlock opens with a hiss; she and Mickey step inside.

Martha pauses, her hand hovering over the door controls. "But then why would Abernathy be so eager for me to call it weapons fire and walk away? Wouldn't he rather I find something else, come up with some other theory?"

"Maybe they figure they stop it at just vague 'weapons fire', they can blame whoever else for the attack. Hide the truth with a half-truth."

Martha considers it. "Seems awfully risky to me." She seals the outer door behind them. There's a low beep as the sterilization cycle kicks in. They're bathed first in blue light, then a rinse, and then another bath of green light. "Besides, I really feel like Abernathy started out as clueless as I was. It was something I said. He was a bit odd after he gave me a ride over here, and then when I found the dekker radiation, he really got restless. He figured something out, I know it."

The inner door rolls back after a second beep sounds.

"So you think he and Magambo know what caused this and just aren't telling?"

Martha frowns. "Something like that."

"But if they know, why kick up a fuss? Don't you think they'd be as nervous as you if it was something that'd be dangerous to people?"

"I don't know," Martha says, a little more forcefully than she means to. She gives Mickey an apologetic look. "I don't know, it's just--that feeling again. I'm not convinced whatever they're hiding *is* all that harmless. Abernathy's so nervous he's practically dancing around me. Magambo doesn't stonewall like that for no reason." She spreads her hands. "I don't know, Mickey, am I wrong? Should I just drop it? Sign my name and walk away? That just--it just makes me so angry. Just thinking of it reminds me why I don't work for UNIT any more."

Mickey is silent for a little while. Then he says, "Told you what I thought, didn't I? Trust your gut, Martha. Maybe I agree or don't. It doesn't matter, does it? You know what's right. Sort out what you need to sort out."

Martha smiles at him. "Thank you," she says.

"So what are you gonna do?"

"If I'm right, nothing I say is going to convince Magambo to delay. She's throwing me a bone to distract me. So I'm going to the lab, and I'm going to take those four hours and prove this to myself one way or another."

"In four hours?"

"If UNIT are involved, don't you think I can find out in four hours?"

Mickey grins. "Don't doubt you for a second, Mrs. Smith." He starts to turn away, and then pauses.

"Look, you need help with anything--Don't forget. I'm a free agent too, all right?"

"Thanks, Mickey," she says again. "You're the best."

"And don't forget it," he calls over his shoulder as he walks away.

7.

Martha expects to find the lab a hotbed of activity as everyone rushes to wrap up their results, but instead, the trailer is empty. She does a quick check and finds that all the other techs have closed their jobs, whether or not they've achieved any results. The ones with unfinished tests have simply marked them 'inconclusive.'

It's so far from standard operating procedure that Martha is sure that she's right: UNIT knows exactly what's happened to the Padrivole, and it's something they want to close the book on quickly. She's determined to at least prove they're hiding something, if she can't find out exactly what it is.

Sitting down at her station, she feels a now-familiar tightness between her shoulder blades.

Martha swallows. This time, she resists turning her head. Out of the corner of her eye, she thinks she can almost see someone, standing behind her, to her left.

"You again, is it?" Martha says, because if she doesn't say something, she might just scream. She proceeds with her work, as if she's just talking to a fellow tech. "Don't suppose you're ready to tell me what it is you want? Or have you come to tell me that I've gone completely mad?"

From the depths of her memory her mind dredges up a voice, distant and faded now: *Oh, Martha. Martha Jones.*

"Mister Smith," she finds herself replying, fondly. "Doctor."

The feeling of not being alone is overpowering. Martha swivels her chair, turns to face the empty trailer. There's no one, nothing.

"Of course," she says, "What were you expecting, Martha?"

She goes back to her data; she speaks aloud, she tells herself, just to remind herself that she's alone. Not because she believes someone might be listening.

"I almost wish you were here," she says. "At least you'd be sort of useful. Sort of. Or you might just be *really distracting* and chat up everybody and... well, you'd probably find out what they're all hiding from me that way, wouldn't you? You were always good at that. You are. I think." She pauses, and thinks of all the other faces she's seen in UNIT records for the Doctor. "How much of you changes, when you do that thing, regenerate or whatever?"

She shakes her head. There were so many things he never told her.

"Anyway. I've only got four hours. So if you wouldn't mind--"

And like that, the feeling of not being alone slips away; the shadow at the edge of her vision vanishes. She feels sorry for it, but also relieved. In the cold, logical setting of her work, chit-chatting with an imaginary Doctor seems less bemusing than utterly mad.

"All in your head, Martha," she tells herself. "Told you so."

Three-odd hours later, Martha feels ready to scream or cry. Since she can't do either, she grits her teeth and stares at yet another round of inconclusive results. She can't confirm with absolute certainty that it was dekker radiation exposure at all. And she can't find any hint of UNIT culpability. If it is UNIT technology, it not based on anything she's seen before--not the Ree weapon, not the Melqu one, not anything she can find on record. The standard spectrographic tests all come up inconclusive or negative. The non-standard ones return ambiguous results, but she isn't willing to bend the truth to suit her theory.

Martha feels lost. The clock tells her that she has less than half an hour before UNIT grunts come to escort her off the premises. She buries her head in her hands.

"What would you do, Doctor?" She scrunches her eyes tight. "Laugh? Charm Magambo into listening to you? Rig some sort of motion lock with your sonic screwdriver? Bugger off in your TARDIS?" She laughs a little nervously, like a schoolgirl worried about getting caught being rude.

Martha sits bolt upright when the helmet of her hazmat suit fills with a burst of static. This time there's no voice camouflaged in the formless noise; the words come after, as clear as a comm signal from another suit.

"Welllll."

The Doctor's voice is clear, unmistakable. It seems impossible that it's just in her mind.

"I'm the Doctor. I'm brilliant. As for you--"

Martha's mouth has gone bone dry. She shudders.

"I'd suggest you grab what you need and get out of here."

Her heart hammers in her chest, so fast she feels a little dizzy.

"Oh, come on. You've been thinking of doing it already. I can read you like a book, Martha Jones."

Martha tries to tell herself it's a joke--someone playing tricks on her. Maybe Mickey spilled her little secret. The speaker is on the short range comm, but the lights at the far end of the lab trailer are switched off, the equipment there not anything she's needed to use today. Someone could be hiding there. She squints into the shadows.

She makes a hurried circuit of the trailer just to prove to herself that there's no humans (or Time Lords) hiding behind some equipment, laughing at her from behind the clean room partition.

She finds no one.

Standing in the middle of the lab, she wraps her arms around herself, and shivers.

"Great," she says, "Now I've gone completely mad. And I've only got twenty minutes before I'm marched off. What the hell do I do?"

Grab what you need and get out of here. The Doctor's words echo in her mind.

It's true that she's been considering it ever since she walked into the lab: taking the samples and data offsite, sorting it all out properly, not rushing through to assuage her guilt at being forced to sign a report she doesn't believe in. Her satchel would fit a small portable stasis rack of three or so tissue samples. She has half the data on her datapad already; the rest she could pull, she thinks, with enough time to get off site before the UNIT escort arrives.

If she's caught, she'll never work for UNIT again. She could go to jail for a good long time. She destroyed the Osterhagen defense and got away with it, sure, but she'd had help covering her tracks, even if she was the one to do the dirty work: Jack and Torchwood's then formidable resources and connections, Mickey's talent with cracking into computer systems.

Martha chews her bottom lip.

It takes her another thirty seconds to make up her mind. Then she moves, quickly and decisively. If she stops, if she hesitates, she won't go through with it. She doesn't give herself the chance. She has to do this.

She grabs her datapad and docks it with her workstation, then goes to the tissue sample storage and pulls three untested samples. She slots them in a transport unit and zips it into the bottom of her bag. Just to cover her tracks, she marks the samples as destroyed.

She glances at the clock. Ten minutes left. Martha doesn't know how to-the-minute Magambo's going to be about her deadline, but she doesn't want to push it. Though guilt weighs heavy on her, Martha logs into the report system and closes up her report. She bites her lip as she presses her thumb against the pad and applies her electronic signature. She wants to give them no reason to come after her, for as long as she can.

Hefting the satchel over her shoulder, she leaves the lab without a second glance.

Every step towards the quarantine exit leaves Martha's nerves jangling. Outside of the lab, the crash site is alive with activity. Soldiers break down the temporary workspaces, pack equipment into metal-sided cases. From the morgue tent, men roll out coffin-like stasis boxes that contain the Padrivole corpses. She wonders if they'll be kept, as they should be, or if they'll just be incinerated. Others set up the perimeter of sterile sweep generators; once everyone has exited, they'll blast the entire site with an Xrad sweep before opening up the quarantine bubble.

She can't find Mickey among the numerous hazmat suits, but she suspects that he's one of the soldiers now inspecting the ship, weighing whether to break it down or transport it whole. She wishes she

could say goodbye, wishes she could explain what she's about to do. Martha thinks Mickey would understand. He might even help.

Exiting the quarantine bubble, she hurries to strip off the hazmat suit. Inevitably, her arms tangle in the material and she somehow manages to hook her foot in one of the cooling tubes. Martha keeps calm. She lets out a long, steadying breath, and untangles herself.

To distract herself, Martha counts her steps as she walks past Central Command. She manages to smile at the guards posted outside the door. One of them salutes her, lazily.

The biggest hole in her plan hits her when she sees the rows of parked vehicles just inside the barricade.

She's been catching rides from Abernathy and Mickey the entire time she's been here. If she just walked out, it would be incredibly suspicious. Besides, she can't exactly wave down a taxi out here. The hotel's a half-hour walk.

Martha weighs her very limited options. She could call Jack. Only she doesn't think Jack would come-- or she doesn't think Jack *should* come, not after storming off site in a huff. She doesn't want that kind of attention.

She could try Mickey, but from the look of things, he'll be busy, and it'd be obvious to pull him away.

She doesn't trust Abernathy.

"Great plan, Doctor," she mutters. Even if the Doctor's nothing but her subconscious playing tricks on her, she feels like blaming him. It's better than facing the fact that she's probably ended her career by stealing confidential UNIT data and specimens.

"Only if you get caught."

Scowling, she says, "Right," before she realizes she's not sure if she's answering her imaginary Doctor or herself.

"Definitely completely mad," she says, and

"Thanks,"

and, "You're welcome."

"Doctor Jones?"

Martha manages not to jump. She turns to face Abernathy. Her hand immediately wants to wander to her bag, but she resists. "Captain."

He's frowning at her, clearly puzzled to see her standing, staring at the site exit. She hopes he hasn't heard her conversing with herself.

She puts on her best sheepish expression. "I really blew it with Magambo. She wanted me out of her way as soon as I signed off on the report, so I thought I'd be best off obliging her. Only--." She smiles and shrugs.

Abernathy chuckles. "You need a ride."

Martha doesn't have to pretend to look abashed as she nods. "Back to the hotel, I guess, until I arrange for a flight home."

"We'll sort that out for you, of course."

"Thanks. That would be wonderful." Martha hopes she doesn't sound as panicky as she feels. The truth is, she can't take any flight they give her, not until she sorts out how to get through customs with a box of xenobiological samples in her bag and no authorization or paperwork. She manages to hold her smile in place, regardless.

Abernathy gestures her towards his car, digging through the pockets of his trousers for his keys.

"Look, Doctor Jones, I know this job didn't end quite as you expected, but I want you to know that I am absolutely pleased with the work you did. The brigadier feels the same. Circumstances changed, and we appreciate you signing off despite your reservations."

In the back of Martha's mind, the Doctor's voice whispers, "Not like they gave you much choice, did they?"

She widens her smile, hoping Abernathy can't tell how hard she's clenching her teeth.

"We do hope this doesn't impact your decision to work with UNIT in the future."

It's all Martha can do not to blurt out "Are you apologizing to me?" Abernathy's clearly feeling guilty; somehow his guilt makes her feel slightly better about what she's doing.

"Right," she chirps, so brightly she irritates herself. "Of course not."

Martha climbs into the jeep, a false smile on her face, her bag feeling ten times heavier than it should. As she buckles her seatbelt she glimpses dark, worried brown eyes watching her in the rearview mirror--but looking back, she sees only herself.

"I'm not worried," she tells her reflection. "Not a bit. So don't you start."

When Abernathy slides into the driver's seat, Martha has to pretend she isn't lying to herself.

8.

Martha goes inside the hotel but she doesn't go back to her room--UNIT gave her that room, and her paranoia is running high. She lingers near the entrance, just out of sight, until she sees Abernathy's jeep pull away. For good measure, she counts another minute before she steps back outside.

Ducking around the corner, Martha finds a relatively secluded spot, digs her mobile out of her jacket pocket and dials.

"Harkness."

"Jack? It's Martha."

"If you're calling to convince me to give UNIT a hand, don't bother," Jack says, sounding more cross than Martha's heard him sound in a long time. "I already told Magambo--"

Martha blinks. "She called you? When?"

"This morning. I'm sorry, but I'm not gonna help them patch things up with the Shadow Architect. They made their own mess, they can sleep in it."

"What are you talking about?"

There's a pause. "You're not calling to tell me that I really really have to come improve diplomatic relations between UNIT and the Shadow Proclamation?"

"Um, no."

"Oh." Jack's tone relaxes into the playful one Martha's more familiar with. "So to what do I owe the pleasure, Martha Nightingale?"

"Well, I *was* calling to ask for help, but for myself."

"You in some kind of trouble, young lady?"

"A little."

"By your tone of voice I'd say 'a little' as in 'a lot?'"

"You--" Martha halts mid-word as she feels a light touch brush her sleeve. A moment later, a UNIT car pulls up to the hotel. She flattens herself behind an ornamental plant. When the UNIT car pulls away, she lets out a sigh of relief.

"You're probably right." She manages to keep her voice casual, wary of any unwelcome ears. "Anyway, um, I was sort of hoping I could ask you for a ride."

"Where to?"

"Can I tell you when you pick me up?"

"Oooh, mysterious," Jack says. "I like mysterious."

She rubs absently at her elbow. "Could you make it kind of soon?"

"Twenty minutes?"

Martha can't quite hide her disappointment. "That'll do, I suppose."

Jack laughs. "Oh ho, you suppose. Yes ma'am. Twenty minutes, where you are now?"

"Do you need my coordinates?"

"No, the GPS in your phone works nicely."

Martha makes a mental note to leave her phone behind in the hotel room. "Thanks, Jack."

Hanging up, she leans back against the brick wall behind her, closes her eyes and lets out a long sigh.

She feels the brush against her sleeve again.

Martha keeps her eyes shut. She won't look. She won't look and it'll go away. But the light brush becomes a warmth, a pressure against her: someone close, so close, leaning beside her against the hotel. She thinks if she let her right hand creep to the side, she could touch his coat, feel his fingers move and squeeze hers...

"Doctor," she murmurs. She sounds sad, even to herself. Martha opens her eyes, sees nothing but the white-painted cement hotel wall. But she still feels him there, real as the breeze on her face, the tickle of the potted plant's leaves against her other arm, and strangely, she finds she is comforted by it.

Jack's ship is a tiny affair, won, he claims, from a family of Clomians who just couldn't stay away from a card table. Jack puts Martha in the co-pilot's seat and pours her a drink before grilling her, a courtesy she appreciates.

She stews her investigation down to layman's terms and maps it out for Jack from beginning to end: the strange symptoms, the autopsy, the wildly conflicting results. The sudden stonewall from UNIT.

Still, even though it's Jack, she doesn't tell him everything. Martha can still feel the presence of her imaginary Doctor, but she keeps him to herself.

"So," Jack says, when she's done talking, "Should I say I told you so now or later?"

"You can say it now."

"Well, now I don't feel like it." He grins. "But still, can't say I'm surprised. What are you going to do now?"

"Find out the truth."

He nods. "And then what?"

She blows air through her teeth and sags a little. "Guess I'll sort that out when I find out what the truth is. If UNIT's not covering anything up, I suppose I'll just turn myself in and hope I don't get too much jail time."

"You could go rogue like me. Doctor Jones and Captain Harkness, intergalactic gentlebeings of mystery!"

Martha laughs and shakes her head. "I'll consider it."

"And if UNIT is covering something up?"

Martha shrugs. "I'll sort it when I get there. Anyway, I think we ought to compare notes, 'cause it sounds like you've got more information on this whole thing."

Jack chuckles. "Don't know how much help I'll be. Mostly just told them all to go to hell. Which you saw."

Martha snorts. "Well, sounded like they deserved it. Why did they want your help with the Shadow Proclamation? Last I knew, Magambo and Abernathy were insisting this was none of the Architect's business."

Jack shakes his head. "Guess she made it her business. Apparently the Architect heard about the Padrivole crash and wanted an explanation. They didn't tell me much more than that. Need-to-know, Magambo said."

"How did the Shadow Proclamation even find out?"

Jack shrugs. "Dunno. Maybe the Padrivole black box? Funny thing is, Earth's out of their usual jurisdiction."

"I thought UNIT had a liaison with them now."

"Courtesy more than anything else. And the Shadow Proclamation's not too happy with the liaison right now. I guess UNIT also tried to get in touch with the Doctor, but he's not too happy with them right now, either. Magambo didn't say so, but I'm guessing he told them to sort it out themselves, if he didn't just ignore them completely."

Martha manages not to react to the distant snort of laughter she hears at the mention of the Doctor. "So they called you? Even after the other day?"

"Said they thought I could use my 'connections' to smooth out some ruffled feathers. As a non-Earth party with Earth interests. Magambo was all apologies, of course. Ahh, love-hate relationships. Such good times."

Martha frowns, shaking her head. "'Ruffled feathers.' Sounds worse than that, if they're ready to come crawling back to you. Could that be why they wanted to wrap it all up so quickly? Maybe the Architect's really breathing down their necks."

"And you offered them a way out. A convenient, plausible answer to get the Shadow Proclamation off their backs so they could get on with pillaging the bodies. UNIT shows they don't have that kind of weapons tech, they get off scot-free."

Martha thinks about what Mickey suggested, some sort of UNIT accident, a new weapon that accidentally--or even not so accidentally--caught the Padrivole. "I really hope that's all it is," she says, softly.

"So suspicious," Jack teases her. "When'd you get so paranoid?"

"When I got old," Martha says.

Jack laughs at her. "You aren't old. Not even close."

Martha supposes someone with a hundred-odd years on her has the right to say that. She snorts. "Sorry. I'm all--I don't even know what lately. Maudlin, I suppose. But it's a little mad, you know, blast from the past, all of you all at once, Mickey and you and --" She stops, abruptly, and glances at Jack to see if he's noticed. He has; his eyes are bright, curious.

"And?" he says.

"Nobody important," she says, lamely. "Just--another old friend I haven't seen in a while."

Martha hears the Doctor snort again. She's thankful when Jack just nods and changes the subject.

"So, were you planning to go back to London with that?" Jack indicates her bag with a tilt of his head.

Martha nods. "I have a private facility. Well, not totally private, but usually I'm the only one in there. Not the most state-of-the-art, but I think I can do what I need to there."

"And does UNIT know about it?"

Martha nods again. "But hopefully I'll sort this out and destroy everything before they even catch on that anything's missing."

"They do have an alien governing consortium to deal with. Can I offer an alternative?"

"Of course."

"How about a place that's a little closer to cutting edge, that UNIT doesn't know about?"

Martha raises her eyebrows. "I wouldn't say no, obviously. Where are you thinking?"

Jack grins. "Since we're speaking of old friends, Torchwood Gamma had facility underground in Yellow Knife. Middle of nowhere. Not on any records, so it was probably never shut down. We can be there in fifteen minutes, if you like."

"Oh god, Jack, that would be amazing." Martha feels suddenly awful for keeping so much from Jack, when he's giving her so much. She hasn't seen him in years and he's helped her without batting an eyelash, without pointing out that the first time she's sought him out was to ask for something.

"Look, Jack," she starts to say, but he shakes his head and interrupts.

"It's okay. Really." And looking at his face, Martha can see that it is; all her guilt over all these years is just that, just her own head doing her in.

Martha bites her lip, caught off guard. She doesn't know what to say, so she says, "Thank you." She kisses his cheek.

Jack tosses his empty glass aside and waggles his brows.

"Wait 'til you see the place before you thank me!"

9.

Martha is thoroughly impressed by the late Torchwood Gamma's Yellow Knife science facility. There's technology that she's never seen the likes of before. She can't help but wonder how UNIT or some other similar entity never got wind of it.

"I'm beginning to think Abernathy had a point," she teases Jack. "I know you didn't come by all of this legitimately."

Jack shrugs. "Like I said to him, I've changed."

"Haven't we all?" Martha sobers. She looks for the Doctor out of the corners of her eyes, suddenly wanting him to hear that: *I've changed, really, you'd be proud of me now*. But she hasn't felt him since they came down to the facility. Her brain has decided to give her a brief reprieve in the face of work.

She sets her bag on a low table. Jack indicates a short metal box resembling a filing cabinet. "You can put the samples in there until you're ready to use them. Near perfect stasis. Degradation so low you could keep something in there for a billion years. Seriously, one of my guys ate a container of beef stew that had been in there since 1969. Said it tasted good as the day it was made."

Martha makes a face and Jack laughs. He drops behind a workstation and activates heads-up display.

"My team kept up a pretty comprehensive inventory--let's see..."

Martha watches Jack as he navigates the file tree with a flick of his fingers. What he's said in the last five minutes is more than she's ever heard him say about his old team. Torchwood Gamma met a better end than Torchwood Three, but it was no less hard on Jack. The team ripped itself apart as priorities changed. Jack was forced to retcon most of them as one by one they quit or went rogue. When he finally shut Gamma down six years ago, he told Martha he was giving up Earth for good. She's glad that wasn't true.

"Ah, here we go." Jack surrenders the chair to Martha as a long list of alien tech appears on screen. She quickly sees that Jack wasn't exaggerating. There's an impressive catalogue of the equipment on site, and whoever organized the list tagged it thoroughly. At a glance she can see date of acquisition, location on site, origin, function and even effectiveness. She quickly locates the pieces that might be useful to her and makes note of their locations on the floor.

"This is marvelous."

"Isn't it? This place needs love." Jack does a slow spin, taking in the room. "You know, I'll bet the kitchen still works. Want something to eat? We've got some stuff in the really super deep freeze. Should still be edible. I hope. I'll test first, I promise."

"As long as it isn't stew from 1969." Martha grins. "Thank you so much, Jack. For everything."

He waves her off. "*Mi casa es su casa*. Always."

Martha divides up her first sample and runs it through a number of tests. Most duplicate what she discovered in UNIT's lab--inconclusive or dead-end results--but the Pendraxi imager presents her with a befuddling result.

She runs the imager again, peering into the binocular-like display. "Am I doing this right?" she mutters. She stands up and pushes a stray lock of hair out of her face. "It's almost as if it's solidifying again. But how can that be?" She keys in a series of symbols and runs a third test cycle.

Behind her, the workstation chair creaks as somebody sits. Martha glances up.

"Jack?" she calls, before she recalls that he's gone up to fiddle with the facility's dampener array. She turns and looks at the workstation chair, tries to remember if it was always in that position.

The little hairs on the back of her arms stand up.

"Doctor?" she says, tentatively.

Martha thinks the chair turns, ever so slightly, subtle enough that it could just be her mind playing tricks. She forces a laugh. Finds herself playing along, as if that will make her less mad.

"Thought maybe you'd gone for good. Or that you didn't like this place. Torchwood and all that. Too much to hope for, was it?"

She walks over to the chair, touches the arm, half expecting to contact cool skin. But there's only the plastic arm rest.

"I do miss you," she says to the empty chair. "Even if half the time I wish I never met you." Martha sighs and wraps her arms around herself. "But that isn't true, is it? I mean, I was so mad at you, the last time I saw you. You couldn't even say goodbye properly."

Martha's voice catches. She clears her throat, ruthless against her own weakness.

"But I guess I was just mad at myself. I know I let you down. It was me that wouldn't go with you, wasn't it? Not the other way around." She laughs, humorless. "I've gotten good at walking away from people. Suppose I learned that from you, too. You can't say I'm not a good student, can you?"

The imager beeps, signaling that her third run of the test is done. Martha shakes herself out of her silly little confession. It's getting frighteningly easy to talk to empty air. And to believe that someone is actually listening.

"Well, back to work," she says, a little gruffly, "And I don't need you distracting me, 'cause this is already weird enough. But--" she adds, "if you're quiet, and you just listen... I suppose that's all right."

There's no answer, of course.

"Good."

Martha crosses back over the machine and checks the readout again. It displays the same result as her previous two tests. She sighs. "First everything's melting for no reason, now it's putting itself back together again. This is absolutely mad, Doctor." She opens up the imaging chamber and takes out the sample. She frowns down at it.

"No way it's Dekker radiation unless that stuff's got properties we have no idea about. Which I guess is possible." Martha gets a second sample out of stasis. She takes a deep breath, looking at the sample tube. "I really hope I'm not barking up the wrong tree here. Not anything to waste." She bites her lip and looks at the chair. "What do you think?"

"What do I think about what?"

Martha jumps. Jack emerges from the access hallway, covered in mud. Martha's face gets hot.

"Sorry," she says. "Just, um, thinking out loud." She divides the second sample and takes part of it to the spectroscopic analyzer. The machine comes alive with a soft whir and a burble of alien gibberish. The translator someone's rigged to the outside takes a moment to work.

"Analysis will be set to all unless supplier designates otherwise within the next thirty seconds. Full multispectral analysis will take ten *githgaik*."

Jack catches Martha's confused look. "Uh, yeah, that translator's not perfect. I think that's about twelve minutes and twelve seconds. Having any luck?"

"Actually," she says, smiling, "Yes." She beckons him over to a console with a gesture of her hand.

"Take a look at this. The tissue samples seem to be reconstructing at the subatomic level. Bizarre, isn't it?" Jack nods, brows raised. "My own equipment--and UNIT's--never would've seen this, not at this stage. Who knows if I'd have caught it before I destroyed the samples, or got hauled off to jail. I really owe you, Jack."

He slips an arm around her shoulders and gives her a half-hug. "Getting to spend more time with your beautiful self is reward enough."

"*Jack*," she laughs, but she hugs him back. "Did you fix the dampener array?"

"Um."

"Um?"

"Um, so, do you want the bad news or the bad news?"

She tilts her head. "Uh oh. The bad news, I suppose?"

"Couldn't fix the dampeners. For now I've rigged my ship to cover most of our energy output, but if we're here too long someone's going to notice. I think I could get the part to fix it but that means I'd have to leave you alone and I'm not willing to do that. Not that you can't take care of yourself, of course. But. You know."

"So I need to keep this moving. Got it. What's the other bad news?"

Jack takes a deep breath. "Mickey Smith just called me and asked me if he knew where the hell you were and what the hell you were thinking."

Martha swallows. "What did you tell him?"

"I don't know, and I don't know."

Martha bites her lip. "Thanks. I'll have to apologize to Mickey..."

"He also said he walked off the UNIT job without his final paycheck, and he's blaming you."

"Blaming me?"

"Apparently Magambo wanted him to track you down and he refused, and it was that or walk."

Martha winces. "Okay, not just apologize. Buy him and Ange a house, maybe."

"Also."

"You're not done?"

"They noticed you took the samples already."

Martha stares at Jack. "I thought you said this was bad news."

"It's not?"

"It's horrible news." She sags against a metal gurney. "How did they notice so fast?"

Jack shrugs. "Mickey said they've been doing some crazy hardcore inventorying at the crash site. Way beyond normal. I'd say your theory was right--some major cover-up going on."

"How much time do you think we have?"

"UNIT detection satellites? Hm. Twelve hours. Maybe twenty, tops. They take a while to cover the whole planet."

"Oh god. I really better get to work, then."

Jack grabs the arm of the workstation chair. "Well, the least I can do is get us an ear on UNIT transmissions. Then we'll know if they're on to us." He starts to sit.

Martha gasps, "Don't--" before she catches herself.

He pauses, mid-sit. "What? What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she says. Martha tries to laugh it off, but her stomach is twisting into knots. She just needs to solve this. Then they can take her away to the funny farm or where ever. She has to keep it together that long. She gives Jack a big, brave smile. "Nothing's wrong."

Martha stares into the petrie dish. The effects of whatever's happening to the tissue sample are becoming visible; the yellowish, mucus-like slurry has acquired more texture, more solidarity. She has the Padrivole medical database called up at the workstation, but it's no help. Padrivole do not reconstitute themselves after death.

"Well, they aren't supposed to melt, either," she says, crossly.

She stands at the workstation because she can't bear to sit in the chair. When she gets too near it she can smell him, the way she did in the café two days ago. Two days. It feels like a lifetime. She's so tired--it's been more than twenty-four hours since she slept, now. That's probably not helping with her hallucination problem.

She hears rubber soles on concrete, approaching her.

"Please don't," she whispers.

The footfalls stop.

Jack returns with two soft drink cans in hand and she's desperately grateful for his actual, real presence. "What'd the spectroscopic analysis say?"

Martha makes a frustrated noise and calls up the results on the heads up display. "It's definitely been exposed to some kind of energy, but the analyzer has nothing on file like it. Definitely not dekker--it's not radioactive, not exactly, but there's an energy signature all through the tissue. Faint as anything, but pervasive. It's so odd."

"Could it be from a parallel universe or something?"

"I don't really think so. I mean, look at this--. It still looks like something that could originate in our reality." Jack nods, following along as she pulls up several analyses for him. "I'm running a search in your Torchwood database. Thought it might be better than the one built into the machine." Absently, she rubs at her eyes. A yawn escapes her.

"You're exhausted," Jack says. "Why don't you lie down and I'll wake you if the database comes up with anything?"

"And if UNIT finds us while I'm having a nap? I'm okay." She shakes her head. "I wonder if I can boost the signature somehow. Get a clearer reading and a better idea of what it might be."

Martha can tell that Jack wants to say something, but he only hands her the soft drink. She takes it, pops the top. Turns to explain herself further to Jack. But the words fall away unvoiced.

Across the room, near the exit, is the Doctor, as solid as herself and Jack, grinning, wearing his blue suit and red converse and brown hair. He raises a hand in greeting, his long fingers rippling through a wave.

The can slips out of Martha's grasp, hits the floor and splatters her feet with sticky-sweet drink. She blinks, startled at the sudden wet, and falls a step back; when she looks up again, the Doctor is gone.

"Martha! Are you all right?" Jack touches her elbow. Concern is written all over his face, so extreme it's almost comical. "What just happened?"

Martha shakes her head. She knows she can't keep saying nothing to him. Taking a deep breath, she says in a subdued voice,

"I saw the Doctor."

"Oh yeah? When?" Jack pastes a grin over his worry, but it's still evident in the furrow between his brows. "Nice bowtie he's got these days, huh? What's up with that jacket though?" He's studying her face intently as he holds her upper arms, his expression undermining his cheerful tone.

Martha looks back at Jack. "I saw him just now. Right there." She points. "My Doctor. Pinstripes. Converse. Nice hair. Even though I know it can't be him, can't it?"

"Wait, you saw him in here? Right now?"

"Yeah."

Jack glances over his shoulder. He frowns. "Are you sure?"

When Martha nods again, Jack says, reasonably, "Well, it's not impossible... It's not like our lives are linear to a Time Lord. His past self could pop in and see our future selves. Probably avoids it cause it'd be pretty confusing but--"

"You don't have to humor me, Jack," Martha says. "I know how I sound. Mad."

"Martha, you're just tired."

"No. It's been going on for--I've--." She struggles to find the right words. "It's like I'm being haunted by him lately. Hearing him, feeling him. He's just--. Well, until now it's just been glimpses, voices, a feeling like he's in the room with me."

The line between Jack's brows deepens. "You should really lie down. You're probably exhausted."

"I don't have time."

"You know, we've got a great medical bay."

"I don't have time, Jack. I need to sort out that energy pattern."

"Martha--." Jack stops. He sets his soft drink aside. "You know what, you get on that. I'll get the med scanner."

Martha starts to protest, then waves her own words away. "Fine. Whatever. Just don't get in my way."

"You won't even notice me."

Martha doesn't really believe that, but it's not a fight worth having. She sighs and heads for the ladies' room to clean herself up.

10.

Martha fusses with a small resonator she's set up in a blast test chamber. She's been trying for the last twenty minutes to boost the energy signature she's found in the Padrivole tissue sample, but she isn't having much luck.

She could really, she thinks as she falls far off the mark yet again, really use a manual right about now. She punches in a new configuration with an unreasonable amount of irritation. Jack's right, of course, she needs sleep. And engineering isn't exactly her specialty.

Jack flutters into view, circling her for the fifth time with the handheld scanner, frowning and tutting.

Martha grabs his arm.

"Stop." She smiles tightly, lips closed to hide her clenched teeth. Jack looks at her expectantly.

"We're doing this in reverse, aren't we? I'm the doctor; you're the one who knows machines. Help me set this up and I promise I'll give myself a full checkup when we're done."

Jack gives her the scanner. "Deal."

Once she explains what she's trying to do, Jack says "No problem," spouts off a technical explanation she doesn't entirely understand and gets to work. Martha mentally scolds herself for being so inefficient in the name of pride and stubbornness. She leans down to see what he's doing--the least she can do is learn from this--when her reflection in the blast shield catches her eye.

Only it's not her reflection; it's the Doctor, staring back at her.

Martha taps Jack's shoulder. "He's here again, Jack," she whispers, urgently. "Do you see him?"

Jack pops his head up over the console he's working under and follows her line of sight. As she fears, he shakes his head. He looks troubled. Martha hurries to the booth, but as soon as she opens the door, the Doctor vanishes.

She looks back at Jack, her shoulders sagging.

"When this is over, make sure they lock me up somewhere nice, all right?" she says, trying to make light of it. Jack's mouth sets into a thin line. "I'm joking," she starts to say, but she's distracted by the Padrivole tissue sample.

The sample has not only reconstituted itself, but started to change color. The tissue is faintly orange, slightly glossy. Martha picks up the petrie dish.

"Odd," she mutters. She pulls the medical scanner out of her pocket and runs it over the tissue.

At first she's amused that the modest little medical scanner can pick up energy readings the UNIT machines couldn't--and then she realizes why.

Slightly alarmed, she looks back at Jack through the open door.

"You're not doing anything, are you?" she asks. "I'm getting a much stronger energy reading here!"

Jack pokes his head up over the console, and shows her a handful of wires. "Not me."

Martha sets the sample down. The energy readings drop, but they're still there, if only just barely.

"What?"

She picks up the petrie dish again, and the readings jump. She sets it down, sets the scanner beside it, and peers at the reading. It's low again, barely registering. Curious, she turns the medical scanner on herself. She raises her eyebrows.

"Okay, this is just weird."

"What?" Jack steps into the detonation booth.

Martha looks at him. "Whatever that energy is, it's, well, infected me too. I guess that's no surprise-- I've been handling it a lot. But when I pick up that sample, it's like--it echoes or amplifies." She hands the scanner to Jack. "Watch."

She picks up the sample, puts it down, repeats a few times. He raises his eyebrows.

"That *is* weird. Do you think it has anything to do with you--you know. Seeing the Doctor?"

Her heart leaps at the possibility, but then she realizes she's been seeing the Doctor even before she arrived on the scene of the crash. At the conference, and her dream, the night before. She shakes her head. "That started a day before I got to the site."

"Maybe it's any human. Try me?"

Martha gets no reading from Jack alone, but the energy levels do jump once he picks up the sample. Martha frowns.

"Great. Now I don't know what to think."

Jack shrugs. "At least you aren't melting."

"Yet," she jokes, darkly.

"When you do start, can I have your shoe collection?"

Martha laughs, despite her worries. Jack smiles wryly. He jerks a thumb back towards the room.

"I've got the resonator tweaked to the settings you wanted. We're ready to go if you--"

A high-pitched trill interrupts him from somewhere outside the detonation chamber. Jack dashes over to the UNIT channel monitor. Martha catches up with him in time to hear him muttering under his breath.

"What?" she says, feeling her heart pitter-patter under her breastbone. She hooks her fingers lightly behind his elbow, peering at the display.

"It's UNIT. In about twenty minutes we're going to be straight under their satellite sweep." He hurries to the main command workstation, fingers flying over the controls. "I'm gonna put the place into quiet mode. We better hold off on your test until they're past."

"And what if they still pick us up?"

"They shouldn't find us if we just lie low."

"We could run the test in twenty minutes."

"The sweep's too close. We don't know how much that thing's gonna surge. Or how much my ship can cover up. Don't want to send up a huge red flag for UNIT, do we? If we just wait an hour for the satellite to pass completely out of range, we won't have to worry."

Martha wants to protest, to tell him to run the test anyway, but she doesn't. There's no logic to the part of her that's insisting time is bleeding away too quickly, that if they wait they'll be caught. The part of her that whispers in a voice too much like the Doctor's: *Hurry, Martha Jones, hurry.*

Jack initiates the quiet mode and all around them, the lights go out except for a few weak emergency lighting panels. The steady thrumming of the lab's main power core lowers to a soft hum. All the workstations except the command module dim, fall automatically into sleep mode. Martha looks towards the darkened detonation chamber and bites her lip as her uneasiness intensifies.

Someone speaks behind her:

"Knock, knock."

It's only when Jack startles too that Martha realizes it's a real voice, coming out slightly crackly through the central comm unit, and not her imaginary Doctor. "Anybody home?"

"Mickey Mouse!" Jack rushes over to the comm unit, adjusts the signal to clear it up. "How are ya?"

"Brilliant as usual," Mickey says, "An' waiting for you to let me in."

"Let you in?"

"I'm sitting on your doorstep, Captain Cheesecake. Got a little present for you and the Mrs."

Martha and Jack exchange a look; Martha frowns, and Jack shrugs.

"Better to let him in than leave him out," Jack points out. "If he's standing out there, UNIT's sure to pick him up."

"Yeah," Mickey says, "What he said."

Martha says, "How do I know you're not just here to arrest me and take me back to Magambo?"

There's a pause. "You don't," Mickey says, "But. Well. Trust your gut."

Martha glances at Jack. He raises his eyebrows. She thinks, and then gives him a slight nod.

"I'll be up in a minute," Jack says, breaking away from the console.

Alone in the dark, Martha feels ghosts other than the Doctor's closing in on her. She almost thinks his presence would be a comfort in comparison, but she doesn't feel him. She gets up, zeroes in on the lone glowing display to check on her search. It's still plowing steadily through records. Martha sighs. Her restless feet carry her into the kitchen. The appliances are still working, and she makes herself a cup of coffee just to be doing something.

She makes a cup of tea as well, though she can't for the life of her figure out why, not until she adds the milk and she remembers John Smith with his feet up, flashing his teeth at her as she sets a china cup down. Seeing her but not really. John Smith was the sort of bastard who thought himself progressive for taking her along with him, an inherited servant, giving her a good place at the school. Martha had hated him even while she loved him for the man hidden behind his smug face and his posh accent.

Jack returns, with Mickey just behind him. Mickey hefts a metal case onto one of the worktables. Martha hands Jack the tea to get it out of her hands.

"What, don't I get anything?" Mickey says. Martha sighs and hands him her coffee.

"Hey, I want coffee," Jack protests. Mickey sips from his mug with an exaggerated enjoyment. Jack play-pouts.

Martha smothers a laugh. "If you're quite done," she says. "I think we've got bigger problems than who's got coffee." She points skyward. "We've got what, ten minutes before UNIT sweeps the area and if Mr. Smith can find us, I'm worried--"

"How *did* you find us?" Jack turns to Mickey, who grins.

"Got a rough fix when I called you earlier. Wasn't too hard to get a better location on you after that. Then I just jumped over with that little bit of Indigo we 'borrowed' off UNIT ages ago."

Martha shoots Jack a look. Jack looks bewildered. "My ship should've concealed us."

"From anyone without experience in tracking Naisa ships, yeah, maybe," Mickey says.

Jack groans. "You picked up the Ki particulates? And then blew through the cloaking field. No way. I'm an idiot."

"Yeah, but that's all right."

"Can the UNIT sweep pick up Ki particulates?" Martha asks.

"Maybe. But never fear. Mickey Smith is here." Mickey spins the metal case around, flips the latches. The case opens with a hiss. Mickey slides the case towards Jack, whose eyes widen, and then gleam.

"Mickey Mouse," he blurts, "I could kiss you!"

Mickey laughs. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Neuron fuse," Jack explains to Martha. "I kind of, uh, complained about needing a neuron fuse to Mickey when he called."

"Sure you didn't tell him our coordinates, as well?" Martha teases. Then she sobers. "Eight minutes until the sweep is on us. Don't suppose you can get that installed that quick?"

"Even if they pick up the cloak, it'll take them five-ten minutes to bust through it," Jack says. "I could get the fuse installed in ten. That gives us a bit of wiggle room."

"All right, then, best get to it."

"Yes, ma'am." Jack leers and throws her a mock-salute, exchanging a look with Mickey. "Come on, Mickey Mouse, give me a hand?"

"It's Mr. Smith to you, laughing boy."

Martha can't entirely conceal a smile. She'd forgotten how much fun it was to work with these two, to not work alone. She glances over at the command module absently.

Her heart jumps at the bright letters on the heads-up display: *Match Found*.

"Oh!"

"Oh?" Jack and Mickey say in unison.

"We've got a match on that energy profile." She tries to call up more information, but the mainframe makes a nasty buzz and flashes 'Permission denied' at her. "But most of the record is sealed. By the name, looks like a UNIT file," Martha says. "Why am I surprised?"

"Want me to have a look?" Mickey says.

Martha steps aside and gestures to the workstation. "You are the--" She stops short of saying 'master,' bites her tongue and says "computer genius. Maybe your little theory was right, Mickey. Some sort of secret UNIT weapon?"

He cracks his knuckles in front of the keyboard. "Let's find out," Mickey says.

"I'll get those dampeners," Jack says.

"Perfect. And I'll--" Martha stops. She's left herself with nothing to do.

A yawn takes the opportunity to emerge. Surrendering to it, Martha drops onto the couch pushed up against the back of the room. It's fat and red and overstuffed, upholstered in something that looks like suede but leaves red fuzz all over her clothing. Martha wonders how Jack permitted such a thing into one of his facilities.

She's just about to doze off when the cushion next to her sinks. Her eyes fly open. Out of the corner of her eye she makes out a pale face and a shock of dark hair.

The Doctor's voice drifts to her, like someone calling from far away, words carried on the wind.

"You're close. So close. Not so much more, now. Hang on, Martha."

Martha stands, walks quickly over to a console. The Doctor's presence follows her. Martha bites her lip. "Mickey," she says, "Can you give me a bit of power over here?" He waves at her and nods, and the module comes alive, whirring.

She probably shouldn't be running another machine, but she needs to do something, anything but listen to her own madness talk to her in the Doctor's shape. Still, she's too aware of him, standing just behind her; she finds that she can't help but answer him, speaking softly so Mickey won't hear.

"You know, I used to hear you say that to me, when I was walking the Earth. *Hang on, Martha*. The last few days, especially." Her fingers move over buttons marked in alien languages; a heads up display comes alive. It's a planetary monitoring system. She navigates through views of the Earth without really paying attention. "I kept wondering if it was you, up in the Valiant, reaching out to me, or if I was hallucinating from lack of food." Her mouth crooks. "Never did know. Forgot to ask, in all the excitement after."

She's surprised to feel her cheeks wet. She hurriedly wipes them with her sleeve.

"Anyway...." Her sentence drifts away as she finally registers what she's called up on the screen. Earth's moon floats in front of her, rendered in pale light, various readouts beside it. Martha raises her hand to the projection, brushes her fingers through it. Another ghost.

She turns the projection with a gesture of her hand, smiling as it pirouettes to reveal more of the moon's soft grey surface. Then she squints; there's a strange dark blemish near the equator, unnatural, something about it almost manmade.

With a few keystrokes, she redirects the monitoring program to focus on the blemish. There's a brief spike in the energy readings, and then they zero out entirely.

"Mickey?"

Mickey looks up from his workstation. "Everything all right?"

"Can you give me a hand with something?"

Mickey crosses over. He stands right where she imagines the Doctor to be. Unable to help herself, she guides him over to the other side of her. He gives her a curious look, but she doesn't explain.

"Do you see that?"

Mickey follows her finger to the shadow on the moon's surface. He squints. "Looks almost like a... like a base of some sort."

"Got a reading from it, but just for a second. Then nothing. I was wondering... think you can get anything from it?"

Mickey's fingers fly over the keypad. "Might take a minute," he says, as he works. "You sure you want me to do this instead of work on getting into that UNIT file?"

"Well," Martha says. She doesn't know that this is anything important, but something in her gut is telling her to look more closely. "Give it five minutes. If not, then... you're right, we should focus our time on getting into that file."

Mickey nods. "Seems to be under some kind of cloak. Lucky thing we're working with some heavy hitters here. Haven't seen a system this nice in a long time." Mickey falls silent; Martha catches herself holding her breath, afraid to disturb him. Then his intense expression eases. "Filtering for noise--and!" He grins. "Here we go. No visual--we're still partly jammed--but see what you can see, Mrs. Smith." As data rolls over the screen, Mickey brushes his fingers over the console admiringly. "Wonder if Jack would let me steal this surveillance setup when we're done. This is a beauty."

Martha's attention is riveted to the screen. "Unbelievable," she murmurs. She feels a shoulder push up against hers, automatically assumes it's Mickey, but then he leans against her opposite side.

"What?" Mickey asks. Martha shakes off a chill. She points at a figure on the left side of the display.

"Whatever that structure is, it's leaking energy, loads of it... the same energy signature as my sample. Erratic, but definitely the same. Can we tell if that's human-built, or alien?"

Mickey frowns. "No, sorry. But I'll bet there's more about that in the UNIT file."

Martha looks back at the display. "The energy output seems to be increasing. That can't be good." She directs the module to make a visual representation of the energy spread; it models a slowly expanding golden bubble swelling from one side of the moon towards the Earth.

Mickey frowns. "If that *is* what hit the Padrivole--" Mickey's expression mirrors the horror Martha feels.

"What's on tv?"

Martha turns to see Jack, greasy and grinning. "Dampeners up," he says, "Now nobody's going to find us that we don't want to find us. And I sent my ship on a little global tour, in case they did pick up her cloak." He pauses, taking in their expressions. "...What?"

Martha briefs him on what they've found. Mickey's frown never softens.

"We ought to take that base out."

Martha shakes her head. "And what if it's manned? I'm not ready to do something drastic until we know more." She looks at Jack. "We should run that test, sort out what this energy really is."

"Deadly, that's what, judging by the Padrivole." Mickey scowls. "And getting closer and closer to hitting planet Earth."

Jack studies the display. "We've got time before that stuff gets too close for comfort," he says, at last. "Not a lot. I'd say maybe an hour. Two at most. If you can crack that file, Mickey, while we do that energy analysis, I'll keep the other options at the ready."

Martha nods, though she's not at ease with the thought of destroying a possibly manned base. Mickey opens his mouth, shuts it. Nods. Martha can tell he's as unhappy as she is.

"Think I'm close to breaking my way in--let you know as soon as I do."

"Thanks, Mickey," Martha says. She touches his shoulder, squeezes, and he flashes her a smile before moving off. She turns back to the image of the moon, lets out a long breath. Hovers a hand over the dark blemish. Feels the ghost of the Doctor behind her, waiting, she thinks, for her to finish what she's started.

Martha looks at Jack. "Let's do this."

11.

Jack and Martha seal the resonator and the sample up in the blast chamber. On a whim, Martha leaves the medical scanner in the room as well, rigging a terminal to receive its readings. Jack powers up the system and the facility fills with a low hum that Martha can feel down to her bones.

"Ready?" he asks her.

Martha nods.

"Here we go. Boosting pattern--now."

For a few seconds nothing happens, and then the blast chamber fills with golden light. Martha gasps before she remembers why she's doing this and turns the spectroscopic analyzer on. But she hardly pays attention to the results. She's too busy staring at the sample, which is shifting, changing. The light has reduced and now clings in wisps, like a golden cloud, to the tissue. She can see the specimen solidifying, getting more structured as she watches.

"It's healing," she says, breathless.

"It looks--" Jack says, "There's something familiar about that light--"

Martha calls up the medical scanner data, curious. She blinks.

"Jack, this is saying the tissue's not Padrivole? But I took that specimen myself." She tries reconfiguring the scan. "Now it's saying--"

Her entire body goes numb. "--Time Lord..."

She looks up.

The Doctor is standing inside the blast chamber, whole and alive, glowing with golden light.

Martha smothers a gasp into the palm of her hand.

Then she moves, not thinking, even though some part of her knows better, stands outside herself and watches herself open the door like an idiot, calling his name. Light flares out, catches her, draws her inside. Overwhelms her senses.

Martha hears the door slam behind her. And then

--she is sitting in a beat-up lawn chair in the underbelly of New New York, listening to him remember Gallifrey--

--she is trying desperately to freeze a living sun out of him, terrified because he is terrified--

--she is at the end of time, caught between fear and excitement as she tells him about Yana's fobwatch--

--she is laughing with him on the Valiant--she is dying in the basement but it's not her--she is wearing his coat--she is holding the Osterhagen key--she is looking up at him, looking up at him mourn what she has become--

--She is sprawled on the floor of the blast chamber, looking up at his golden ghost, one hand reached out towards her. Through him she can see the blast chamber walls, the lump of flesh in the petrie dish. It now looks suspiciously like a piece of a human heart. Or a Time Lord heart, perhaps.

She takes his hand--it's surprisingly solid--and he helps her to her feet.

"Doctor?" Martha stares into the face that hurts her with its familiarity. "You're not really the Doctor. You can't be."

He gives her a sad smile, the Doctor's sad smile. "No. More like--an echo."

The golden light rises off of him like steam, curls and lingers, alive.

She gets it, suddenly. She's heard the stories, from Jack, from Sarah Jane, from UNIT records. "This stuff. The light. It's regeneration energy," she says. "From that site we saw on the moon, isn't it? But how?"

He shrugs. "Not exactly regeneration energy. An echo of that, too. Well. In a manner of speaking."

Martha turns her face away, suddenly overwhelmed by the emotions that rush over her. All those things she swore she was past. All the love and the sheer joy and the desire to please him; all the guilt and disappointment and fear.

She's startled by the Doctor's ghostly golden fingers brushing a tear from her cheek. "What's wrong, Martha Jones?"

"Why me?" Martha whispers. "Why did you come haunting me?"

"You dreamed of me. Remembered me. There was already a memory of, well, me, in this energy, but it needed a little help."

"I dreamed about the day I met you."

"Ohh, that was a fun one." The Doctor grins. "You know, I lingered about those two out there, too, but they weren't as receptive." He flashes her his trademark grin. "Suppose I ought to thank you."

She looks away.

She hears the outer door hiss and release behind her. Jack bursts into the blast chamber, Mickey a half step behind.

"Martha--!"

Both of them freeze, staring at the figure in front of her.

"Doctor," Mickey blurts.

"How--Is--Doc," Jack stutters. "Is it really you, Doctor?"

The Doctor shakes his head, an amused smile on his lips. "Mickey Smith. And Captain Jack. No, not really me. Just a footstep in the sand, I'm afraid."

"Funny to see that face again," Jack says. The Doctor smirks.

"Could say the same about you."

"But how?"

"Oh... well." The Doctor shrugs. "Best I can figure is that someone's been trying to mimic the energy from this body's regeneration. Not doing a bad job of it, I suppose. But not a good job either."

Mickey says, "It's UNIT." He seems torn between looking at Martha and the Doctor.

The Doctor arches an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yeah--I. Just got into the files, Martha," he says, looking at her. "UNIT picked up a massive surge of energy from the TARDIS in near-Earth orbit in 2005. I expect that was you, Doc. Didn't want to go, did you?"

The Doctor snorts. "Suppose I am a bit fond of this face," he says. "Or maybe this hair. Or this suit. Or these shoes!"

Mickey shakes his head. "Anyway, UNIT recorded the pattern, and some egghead guessed what the surge was. Been working on their own regeneration ever since. They're calling it Project New Moon."

The Doctor looks caught between admiration and disgust. "Would it be too last-me to say 'you clever little apes?' But it's all wrong, isn't it? I shouldn't exist. Well, not this me, anyway." His expression darkens. "And regeneration is not something humankind will ever master. If this goes on..."

"We saw what happened to the Padrivole," Martha says. "I don't expect it'll be any nicer for humans."

The Doctor nods. "Martha, you have to stop it."

Martha says, "I know. I--" She looks at Jack and Mickey. "Would you mind--I'll only be a minute?"

Mickey starts to protest, but Jack touches his arm and shakes his head. Martha waits for them to leave the booth.

"Before I take care of this. I have to say something to you."

The Doctor looks at her curiously.

"I know at the end--the last time we saw each other." She swallows. "Between that Osterhagen thing and the alien hunting thing and the guns.... I know you weren't too happy with me." He opens his mouth, but she silences him with a shake of her head. "And I just. I really, really wanted to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry I never managed to be who you wanted me to be. I'm sorry I let you down."

His smile slips and his eyes widen. "Martha," he says, "I--. You didn't let me down."

"But--. The way you looked. Like you were so sad. So disappointed."

"Martha Jones," he says, sounding almost bewildered, "If I looked disappointed, or sad, it's because, well, because," his voice softens, grows sad, "because I let all of *you* down. I am so proud of you, Martha. Never apologize. You are brilliant. Absolutely brilliant!"

And though she knows he's not really the Doctor--though she knows he's nothing but a memory, maybe even nothing more than her own memory reflected back at her, Martha weeps.

"And you, Martha Jones, what about you?"

She looks up at him.

"Aren't you proud of all you've done?"

"I--I don't know. Maybe."

"Aren't you happy, Martha Jones?"

"Mostly. Yes." She whispers, as if she's afraid to admit it.

"Then what does it matter what I, or anyone else for that matter, thinks?"

She wipes at her wet face and manages a smile. "Not a bit, I guess."

"Now, I think you've got a job to do."

She nods, unable to speak, and all but runs out of the blast chamber.

Nearly colliding with Jack, he steadies her, walks with her to where Mickey is working.

"Torchwood Gamma had control of a couple of defensive satellites," Jack says, softly. "We could see if they still work? Just wipe the whole place out."

"There's no one left alive at the facility," Mickey offers.

Martha nods. Her voice, when she speaks, is thick. "Do it."

Martha focuses herself on assisting Jack and Mickey with the task at hand, doesn't look back towards the blast chamber and the man inside. It takes them fifteen minutes to bring the systems up; Jack

confirms that the satellites are still live, and deadly. Martha swallows her queasiness and gives him the coordinates of Project New Moon.

"Ready when you are," Jack says.

"Let's get this over with," Martha says.

Jack looks pointedly at the blast chamber, where the echo-Doctor stands, seemingly studying the resonator with great curiosity.

"It's not really him," she says, flatly.

"All right," Jack says. He pulls the control panel towards him. "Launching in five--"

"Wait." Mickey nudges Martha's arm. "Go on. Do it proper. I know you want to. We can wait a couple minutes. But just a couple, got it?"

They exchange a look. Martha nods.

The Doctor looks up at her when she enters the blast chamber, beams. Martha smiles back.

"I want to say goodbye properly this time," she blurts. She extends her hand. He takes it, shakes it. Then he opens his arms; she throws herself forward, into them, and hugs him, breathes in the way he smells, feels his warmth. Aches to think that this is the last time she will do this, and allows herself to feel that way.

"Goodbye, Doctor," she whispers.

"Goodbye, Martha Jones." He holds her out at arms length, looks into her face. "And don't forget. You are brilliant."

She nods, tears running down her face. "You too," she says.

She turns and signals to Jack. He nods; she sees Mickey entering commands. Somewhere above her, she knows, a new crater is made on the moon.

The Doctor raises his hand, waves. And then he is gone, the golden light of his body fading like the last rays of summer sunshine.

12.

"You all right?" Jack says to her, as they lock up the doors to the Torchwood facility once again. Her right arm is linked with Mickey's; he hooks an arm through her left and they walk as three for a little while.

"I think so," she says.

"Need a lift somewhere, now that we're probably all fugitives from international law?"

She laughs at the ridiculousness of that. "What was it you said? Captain Harkness and Doctor Jones, Intergalactic Rogues?"

"And don't forget Mickey Mouse."

"Oi! Mister Smith will do."

Martha looks up. The sky is wide and dark, filled with stars, and the full moon smiles serenely down at her. She'd like to see it again, someday, she thinks. Maybe someday soon, with UNIT not exactly in love with them right now.

"I'd like to see my family, first," she says, softly.

"Don't you think that's the first place the brigadier will look for you?"

She shrugs. "Not if I threaten to reveal what they've been up to to the Shadow Proclamation."

Mickey and Jack both look at her with a renewed respect. "You've learned to play dirty," Jack says, admiringly.

"Learnt from the best," Martha says, winking at them.

Jack laughs. The three of them hold hands as they climb into his ship, and Martha feels content.

