



roll^{on}
yesterday

the afterlight

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Roll On Yesterday

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New Who, Sarah Jane Adventures, Young Wizards | PG | SF/Fantasy // Gen | 21,000 words

While Amy continues trying to convince the Doctor that she'd much rather visit sunnier climes, the Doctor instead insists on bringing her to the Crossings, better known as the Crossings Intercontinual Worldgating Facility. There, they meet Dairine Callahan and Carmela Rodriguez, who need a little help - a friend of theirs comes from the planet Demisiv, which has suddenly and mysteriously gone completely off the grid. They need a ship that can get them there quickly enough to try and do some good.

Meanwhile, on Earth, Luke and Clyde are chasing down a Sontaran when the potato-like alien manages to abscond with Sarah Jane and Rani -- but not so surprised as they are, moments later, when Clyde's new iPhone offers him the Wizard's Oath. This, along with some friendly advice from their new friend Ronan, is enough to get them off the planet and out to the Crossings, the perfect place to start searching for their missing friends.

Is there a connection between Demisiv and Sarah Jane's disappearance? What caused Demisiv to go off the grid? And why does Amy know the Wizard's Oath?

Betaed by: kristin and hhertzof

Warnings: None

Spoilers: Through mid-season 5 of New Who

Notes: Many, many thanks to my two lovely betas! I think, between us, we caught all the typos, and their advice was invaluable in terms of making things flow the way they should. :D

I did my best to have the Young Wizards elements make sense in-context, or otherwise be explained in-text; if anyone's not familiar with the series and is intrigued by what they find here, I highly recommend checking out the series, starting with the first book: *So You Want to Be a Wizard*. Diane Duane's series is possibly my favorite YA fantasy -- and that says a lot, coming from me.

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Chapter 1: In Life's Name and for Life's Sake

"This isn't Cancun."

Amy Pond looked out of the open TARDIS door, leaning around the edge of it, to take in the newest place the Doctor had brought her. "In fact, this isn't remotely Cancun, any more than the *last* place was anything remotely near Rio. Am I to understand, Doctor, that you can't find yourself somewhere both sunny and warm?"

The Doctor just laughed and pushed out past her. "This is better than Cancun, Amy! This is the Crossings! Come, come, there's something I want you to see. And eat! Blue food, there's the best blue food at this one little restaurant just down the corridor, although be careful when you pass by the restrooms -- some of them aren't safe for humans."

The Doctor paused for a moment before turning to look back at Amy.

"Okay, most of them aren't safe for humans, so be very careful, and if you can't read the signs, ask me and I'll translate."

"What do you mean, not safe for humans?" Amy asked, tentatively stepping out of the TARDIS. She began to look around in earnest, her eyes widening when she saw the floating buttresses and sweeping arcs high above them. "What *is* this place?"

"The Crossings! Do try to keep up, Amy, there's a lot to see and not much time to see it in!"

"Yes, but what *are* the Crossings?" Amy glanced down at her present outfit, judging the short skirt and loose blouse more than acceptable for the cool, but not chill, air in which she found herself.

The Doctor just grinned and held out one arm for Amy to take. "The Crossings," he explained, as he led her away from the TARDIS and out into the corridor proper, "better known as the Crossings Intercontinual Worldgating Facility, is the primary world-gating facility for the Sagittarius Arm. Ninety percent of interplanetary commerce in Earth's sector of the galaxy goes through here, hundreds of species from thousands of planets on a daily basis." He waved one hand upward, drawing Amy's attention once again to the stuff up there that *wasn't attached to anything*. "The classic Lilene architecture is quite distinct, and, if I judge right by the rate of regrowth... Hm." The Doctor glanced sideways, stopping to run a finger down a featureless wall. "Yes, I'd say just about three or four months after the incident with the Pullulus. Really, they've come along remarkably fast. Most of this was scorchmarks just two months ago."

Amy frowned as she tried to take all that in. "You've lost me, Doctor," she said. "World-gating? Interplanetary commerce? And what is a Pullulus?"

"I'll explain over tea, Amy," the Doctor said, practically pulling her along as he started walking again. Her hand still on his arm, Amy had to stumble a little to keep up. "But you've got nothing to worry

about. While you're here with me, you're protected. Besides, there are plenty of wizards here in case anything goes wrong."

Amy nodded, although she rolled her eyes again as well. "Of course," she said. "Over tea. And blue food?"

There was a brief moment of silence between them before Amy's voice rose again.

"... *Wizards?*"



Dairine Callahan, wizard, Guarantor-in-Training, and all-around pain in her sister's rear end, sat on a stool in the section of the Crossings cafe reserved for hominids and those with similar biologies. "So what you're saying," she said, stirring her blue soda with her straw, "is that no one's heard anything from Demisiv in a month and a half."

"The entire planet has been closed off, Guarantor," said the young man, an intelligencer and bodyguard on loan from Roshaun's parents as she worked off-planet. His name was Arved, and he'd been following Dairine faithfully for the last month. "Nothing's indicating an attack by the Starsnuffer, and there have been no distress calls, nor any indication that life on the planet is in danger, but no one's *saying* anything, either."

Dairine nodded slowly as she absorbed the information. "What about their wizards off-world?" she asked. "Surely someone's got to be talking to them."

"That's just it, Guarantor ne Callahan," Arved said. "There don't seem to be any Demisiv wizards off-world. The planet went communications-dark right after their last off-world wizard went home. None of them seem to be out on errantry."

"That can't be right," Dairine said. "None of them are off-world? But the Demisiv are in high-demand for their skill with plants."

Arved shook his head. "Not a single one, Guarantor," he confirmed. "Or so the rumours go, but they're rumours that each of my sources here at the Crossings have confirmed. I've never had so many tell me the exact same thing."

Dairine's frown deepened. "This isn't good," she said, severely understating the issue. "This isn't good at all. Arved, I need you to get ahold of the Guarantor back on Wellakh. Let him know that there's an issue, that I'm going to be gone a little longer than planned, and that I'm going to continue to need

your services. I've got a couple of calls to make." Arved nodded and took off to find an available comms console; Dairine, meanwhile, put down her half-finished drink and walked out of the cafe. Behind her toddled her laptop, wizard's Manual, and best friend, Spot.

Outside the cafe Dairine turned right, heading towards the back-stage areas of the Crossings, where luggage handling and other background tasks were performed. "It's back here, isn't it, Spot?" she asked, passing through a door marked, in the Speech, "NO ENTRY. EMPLOYEES ONLY." Just past the door was an alcove, which Dairine ducked into before picking up Spot. "Messaging, please. Bring up Nita and Kit first."

"*Working*," Spot said, his voice still a little tinny. Dairine had tried to fix his vocal processors after his last upgrade, but something in them seemed to be stuck at 'retro' in a way which was starting to seriously annoy her. "*Nita Callahan and Kit Rodriguez are currently out of ambit. Messaging expected to be restored within three standard Terran days.*"

"Dammit," Dairine swore in English before switching into the Speech herself. "*What about our other contacts? Is Ronan available? Or Darryl?*"

Spot's processor whirred for an unneeded moment, a slight bit of authenticity that still makes Dairine smile a little. "*Darryl is flagged for 'contact only in emergency', and Ronan's on errantry back on Earth,*" Spot explained. "*Is there anyone else you'd like me to try?*"

Dairine hesitated, thinking through the friends she had -- there were a few other off-world wizards she could call upon, of course, and other contacts she'd made while on Wellakh. She started to smile, though, slowly at first and then grinning widely, when she realised exactly who she could contact. "*Spot,*" she said. "*Messaging routines, Manual-to-Terrestrial-Internet Downlink. Message begins: 'Need your help at the Crossings. Meet me here, 7PM your time?' Message ends. Sign it 'Dairine', Spot, and send it to rodriguez@gmail.com.*"

The characters flashed on-screen for a brief moment before the window swirled down into the dashboard at the bottom. A few seconds later, a 'Sent!' notification flashed on screen. "*I'll let you know when she replies,*" Spot assured Dairine. "*Perhaps you should go find Arved? He's likely looking for you by now.*"

Dairine nodded, closing Spot's screen and setting him back on the floor. He obediently re-extended his legs and toddled along behind Dairine as she left the alcove and returned to the main concourse of the Crossings. "Let's go find Sker'ret," she said, her frown returning. "If he doesn't know about this yet, he should. And he might have some ideas on getting back onto Demisiv."

At a small table in a different Crossings cafe, the Doctor sat across from Amy Pond and gesticulated wildly with a blue chip he'd dipped in salad cream. "So, you see," he elucidated, "wizards exist on

every planet, in every sentient species, and have since the beginning of time. Except for Time Lords, actually, we've got too much power and not enough sense for it."

"Okay," Amy replied, "but I'm still trying to get past the part where there are *wizards*. Wave a magic wand, say a magic word, and poof?"

"Poof?" The Doctor frowned. "What do you mean, poof? What kind of word is poof?"

"Focus, Doctor. You're seriously telling me that there are wizards not just on Earth, but all around the galaxy?"

"Not just the galaxy," the Doctor reiterated. "All across the universe. Anywhere there's life. Here, have a blue chip." He pushed the plate across the table to Amy, who frowned at them, wrinkling her nose. "They're perfectly all right! Absolutely Earth normal, blue potatoes. They grow that way naturally! It's marvelous, your planet, all these strange and varied foods you export. Did you know that a number of species find chocolate to have aphrodisiac properties?"

"I didn't need to know that. Chocolate's bad enough on humans." Amy tentatively grabbed a chip and nibbled at it, avoiding the salad cream completely. "These aren't half bad," she said, looking at the chip in surprise before taking a larger bite. "Anyway, wizards. And you're *just now* mentioning them to me? We couldn't have used some of them, oh, *any time* we've been *anywhere, ever*?"

The Doctor shrugged. "It hasn't come up," he pointed out. "And anyway, I don't tend to run into wizards very often. I don't know that they much like me, actually."

Amy grabbed another chip, biting it in half before responding. "Aww," she said. "I don't know how anyone could not like you, Doctor." She tapped the touch-screen surface in the middle of the table and scrolled through the options for beverages. "What language is this" she asked as she selected a drink. The Doctor had assured her that he'd set it up to only offer food and drink compatible with her body chemistry, and while she'd gotten used to not trusting his assurances at face value, the blue soda certainly *sounded* innocuous. "I mean, I can read it, but it's like I can still see that it's its own language. That's never happened like that before. The TARDIS just translates it all, doesn't it?"

"Ah, now, see, this is where it gets *really* interesting." The Doctor spread his hand out for a moment on the touch-screen before frowning at it and pulling out his sonic driver. A short burst from the device had the touch-screen doing what he wanted. "This is the Speech," he explained, gesturing at the screen as it displayed a series of the small, shining characters. "It's the language wizards use to cast their spells, because the universe understands it. It's the same way the TARDIS lets you understand other languages; it puts the some of the Speech right inside your head, and if you know the Speech, you can communicate with anything. Kind of. It gets complicated, sometimes. Now, because everything, on some level, understands the Speech, there are a lot of cultures in the universe that use it as something of a lingua franca. The Crossings, especially, since so many wizards do business here, or go through here on errantry."

Amy nodded slowly, tracing the arcs of Speech across the screen as she deciphered the messages displayed. "Yes, all right. But if I've got the Speech in my head, now, then why can't I understand everything? Like, why did the stone angels need to use someone else to communicate with us?"

"Well, I did say it gets complicated, didn't I?" the Doctor pointed out. "If you were a wizard, or someone else perfectly fluent in the Speech, then, yes, you'd be capable of speaking with one of the angels, or any of a hundred billion different species for whom the TARDIS can't translate. Sometimes, though, it just doesn't work." The Doctor wrinkled his nose. "That ended kind of weak, didn't it?"

"Just a bit, Doctor." Amy shrugged and stole another of the blue potato chips. "So what planet do these potatoes come from, anyway? A bit of malt vinegar and they'd taste just like the ones from the chip shop down the road back home."

"Oh," the Doctor said. "They're from Earth."

Amy blinked. "What? No, really, are they from some crazy future Earth, where there are blue potatoes?"

The Doctor shook his head. "No. Actually, we're in 2010 right now, a month or two before I picked you up. Kind of. There are blue potatoes on Earth."

"You're joking." Amy stared at the Doctor for a moment, trying to figure out whether or not he was joking. "You're joking," she repeated. "He wasn't joking. You're not joking. There are *blue potatoes*?"

From behind them, a laughing, slightly accented voice cut in, "You sound like my brother." When they turned to look at the newcomer, who seemed to be human (so far as Amy could tell, and with the Doctor in her life she knew that you never could quite tell), added, "He's the wizard, too. You'd think he'd know something about it. Blue potatoes! End of the world, to hear him say it."

Across the cafe, someone shouted, "Carmela! Over here!" A red-head -- Amy couldn't help but notice that the other girl looked, in fact, rather like she had a few years younger -- was waving, and the girl who'd stopped turned to look.

"That's me," Carmela said. "Carmela Rodriguez. Maybe I'll see you around!"

Amy watched as the girl, Carmela, walked over to meet up with her friend before turning back to the Doctor. "So what else is there to show me in this place?" she asked. "Surely it's not all blue food and floating ceilings."

"I thought I'd take you on a trip down the frictionless floors," the Doctor said, grinning. "And then maybe we can check out this one nice little pub I was in last time... Assuming it's been properly rebuilt."

With a laugh, Amy grabbed the last of the blue chips from the plate before standing up. "Why do I get the feeling that you're part of the reason it had to be rebuilt, Doctor?"

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

"Who were they?" Dairine asked, looking up at Carmela as the older girl sat down. "Friends of yours?"

"Never met them before," Carmela explained, "but the girl was going on about the blue potatoes, just like Kit did that one time."

Dairine took a sip of her blue soda -- her fourth of the day, at this point, and she was going to have to remind herself to cut down next time. They really were far too sickeningly sweet. "That was kinda funny," she said, before holding her hand out over the table's touch-screen. "Order whatever you want, it's going on my account. This is errantry business, after all."

Carmela raised an eyebrow, but nodded before she told the table, with an ease in the Speech that Dairine still envied, exactly what it was she wanted. A few moments later, her meal -- a traditional Wellakhit dish, in fact, which made Dairine's heart quiver just a little to see -- appeared and Carmela dug in. "So what's up, anyway?" she asked after swallowing her first mouthful. "Your email wasn't exactly forthcoming."

"Demisiv's gone off the grid."

Dairine waited a moment for Carmela to stop choking. "*What!?*" Carmela spat out. "What do you mean, off the grid?"

"They're completely cut off." Dairine pulled Spot up on top of the table and tapped the top of his case. A holographic display flared into being above him. "As of three days ago. The last of their off-world wizards got home and they went completely communications dark. Nearby civilisations are reporting lifesigns, but there's nothing going in or coming out by either wizardry or technological means."

"What about Filif?" Carmela asked, pushing her plate aside as she leaned over to look a little more closely at the display. It was showing an array of data on the last known communications, both standard and wizardry-based, none of which was any later than the last wizard's transit home. The last transit had, in fact, gone through the Crossings itself, but hadn't been flagged as abnormal in any way. "What about before the transit?" she asked. "Any drop in communications? Even just less coming in and out?"

Dairine shook her head. "Everything looks normal. It's like they just... stopped, somehow."

"That's not good." Carmela lazily spun the loose, spaghetti-like strands of the Wellakhit grass-based dish onto her fork before taking another mouthful. "Have you talked to Sker'ret yet? Has anyone tried to transit over?"

Nodding, Dairine ran her fingers through the display, altering it and spinning it around to bring up some new data. "Sker' fed me this," she explained. "Diagnostics of the gate system relating to the

Demisiv gate. There's a hard-coded gate to Demisiv, and it's gone... not offline, that's not quite right. Here, this is the error message they've been getting."

"Dormant?" Carmela asked, reading through the message. "That's-- how does a hard-wired tech-gate go *dormant*?"

"That's what I wanted to know," Dairine replied. "So far, no one seems to be able to figure out. Sker' and I tried to put together a transit spell, but it just fizzled. Which is even weirder -- you know wizardry. It always works, *somehow*. This just... didn't."

"Except during the Pullulus thingy." Carmela had another bite of her meal before stealing a gulp of Dairine's soda. "Wizardry didn't always work right then. But it's not anything like that, is it?"

Dairine shook her head, not even bothering to comment on Carmela grabbing her drink, or on her describing the entire Pullulus incident as a 'thingy'. "No. Other wizardry is working fine, it's just this one transit. It's like something is specifically blocking Demisiv."

"And now we need to figure out what," Carmela said. "Not that it's all that hard, really, to figure out who's behind it. Where do we start?"

Grinning, Dairine tapped Spot's case, dismissing the display. "That's what I was hoping to hear," she said. "As for where to start, we need to find a way over to Demisiv. None of the local populations use any kind of stardrive, but surely there's *someone* around here who can get us access to a ship."

"I can ask around." Carmela slurped up the last of her meal before placing the dish onto the dissipator, where it obligingly disappeared. "I've got a few friends who hang out around here, and if that fails I can check the 'boards. We paying credits, chocolate, or Powers?"

"... 'Powers'?"

Carmela waved her hand at Spot. "You know. 'Charge it to the Powers, we're on errantry'? I've got the chocolate if we need it, and can probably get the credits, but if it's errantry it makes things so much easier."

Dairine glanced over at Spot, who, despite a lack of movement, managed to convey a shrug. "Charge it to the Powers," she said. "A planet's off the grid? It's definitely errantry."

The Doctor stood at the TARDIS console, fiddling with the blue boringers as he tried to get the old girl to lift off. "C'mon, girl," he said to her, turning to tap across some keys and then turn the blue faucet to the right. "C'mon, what's wrong now? You'll *like* the edge of the Argonaut Nebula, I promise! It's gorgeous in the eighty-first century!"

Amy, clad now in the slightly warmer ensemble of jeans and a sweater (for the Doctor had told her that the planets in the Argonaut Nebula tended to be a little chillier, being part of an eternal winter

and all that), came back into the main room of the TARDIS. "What's wrong?" she asked. "I thought we'd be halfway there by now. Have you flipped the blue stabilisers?"



The Doctor glared at Amy, very briefly, for using that particular name for the toggles. "She doesn't want to go," he explained. "Something's keeping her here. I'm going to see if I can get any info from the downlink to the Crossings systems."

After their meal, and a trip through the Crossings' shopping concorde, the Doctor and Amy had returned to the TARDIS, only to find themselves stuck. "What could keep the TARDIS from moving?" Amy asked, coming up to the console and tapping a few buttons underneath one of the screens. The Crossings' bulletin board system, which the Doctor had shown her already, came scrolling up the screen. "I mean, it's got to be some kind of outside influence, right?"

"Feels more like she's being..." The Doctor leveled his glare now at the centre console itself. "Temperamental. Something makes her want to stay here. Not that I can figure out what."

Amy 'hmm'd absently as she scrolled through the recent posting. "Sure, Doctor. Have you ever heard of a planet called Demisiv? We've got a wizard here, looking for a lift over."

"A wizard wants a lift? Let me see that." The Doctor squeezed in beside Amy, doing everything but pushing her aside as he came over to look at the screen. "Why would a wizard need a lift *anywhere*, especially from the Crossings? They can get anywhere they'd need to from here! Or write the spell for it, if they couldn't find a tech-gate."

"Doesn't say," Amy explained. "Just that she's on errantry and needs a ship to get to Demisiv. Shall we ping back and take her? What's Demisiv like, anyway?"

"You'll need to dress for warmer weather," the Doctor advised. "Demisiv's more temperate. Forest planet, actually, the inhabitants are sentient trees. I met a tree once. Probably a descendant of the Demisiv, actually, although they'd interbred with humans somewhere way back. Humanoid, at that point, the Demisiv are coniferous right now."

"... So we're going to take a wizard to a planet full of sentient Christmas trees?"

"We're *maybe* going to take a wizard," the Doctor pointed out. "I haven't decided yet. I'd like to meet her first. Did she say where to meet her?"

Amy checked the message, wondering why the Doctor -- who was *still* in her personal space, thank you -- couldn't just read the message for himself. "That same cafe we were in before, actually," she said. "Said she'd be there all evening. How will we know she's a wizard when we see here?"

"Just look for the Manual," the Doctor explained. "You can't miss it." Abruptly, he pulled away from the console and headed to the door. "Well, are you coming or aren't you? She's on errantry!"

Amy shrugged out of the heavy sweater, glad she'd had on a t-shirt underneath. "I'm coming, I'm coming!" she retorted, tossing the sweater aside as she followed behind. "So what *is* errantry exactly, anyway?" Amy asked the Doctor. "It sounds important."

"It's just what they call it when a wizard's out on business," the Doctor explained. "I'm on errantry, and I greet you, et cetera. It's pretty unmistakable."

It wasn't far from the alcove in which they'd placed the TARDIS to the cafe in question, not by way of the frictionless walkways. "What kind of business do wizards go out on? I can't imagine it's trade and sales or anything like that."

The Doctor shrugged, one hand on the walkway's railing to keep him stable. "Saving the universe. Fighting entropy. What else would wizards do?"

Walking into the cafe a few minutes later, Amy still didn't have a very clear image of what they were looking for -- just a woman with a manual, and no idea if the woman was human or from some other species, or what the manual was even *for*. "So do you see her here?" she asked the Doctor. "What's the manual look like?"

"Oh, it can be anything," the Doctor explained. "Probably a book, or a ball of light, or maybe a voice only they can hear."

Amy restrained her urge to thwack the Doctor on the arm. "How am I supposed to see a voice in her head, Doctor? It's not exactly something *most of us are able to see*."

"Humans," the Doctor said, rolling his eyes. "So limited. There she is! I think. Did she say she was human?"

"She didn't, Doctor." Amy stopped, frowning. "... Is that a laptop with legs?"

"Probably her Manual." The Doctor walked over. "*Dai stihó!* I hear you're looking for transport?"

Looking up from her laptop, the woman -- or, rather, girl, Amy corrected herself, scaling down her age a considerable amount when she saw the girl's face -- nodded. "Demisiv seems to be cut off," she explained, not bothering with any petty details like introductions or small talk. "No gates in or out, tech or wizardry, and no communications in-bound or out-bound for some time. I'm looking for a ship that can get me there through the interference."

The Doctor nodded. "I can definitely do that," he explained. "The TARDIS hasn't met the interference she can't fight through! Mostly because she goes through the time vortex, but details. I'm the Doctor. You can call me the Doctor." He held out one hand and grinned broadly. "This is Amy Pond. She travels with me."

The girl nodded slowly before standing and taking his hand. "Dairine Callahan," she said. "Doctor. Doctor of what, exactly?"

"... You're not going to say Doctor who?"

"I'm friends with an ambulatory Christmas tree," Dairine explained. "If you say your name's the Doctor, who am I to expect a human convention?"

Amy laughed. "Oh, I like you already," she asked. "So it's just you, then?"

"Nah, a friend of mine's coming along, too. I pack the wizardry, she packs the firepower." Dairine looked around. "Carmela! We're leaving!"

From a knot of people -- aside from a few humans, mostly of other species -- a head popped up. "Coming!" the girl, a few years older than Dairine if Amy were guessing, called back. She extricated from the knot and came over to the table. "*Dai*," she greeted. "Carmela Rodriguez." There was a beat, just for a moment, as Carmela looked at Amy and the Doctor a little more closely. "Wait," she continued. "I met you earlier, I think. You were talking about the blue potatoes. You our ride?"

"He is," Amy explained, nodding her head in the direction of the Doctor. "I'm just his traveling companion. I'm Amy, and he's the Doctor."

"Doctor of what?"

"Never mind that," the Doctor said. "Come! This way to the TARDIS."

Carmela sidled up to Amy as they left the cafe. "Is he always like this?"

Amy watched the Doctor as he exuberantly explained to Dairine all the benefits of traveling in the TARDIS. "You have no idea."

"It's bigger on the inside," Carmela said, looking around the TARDIS when she stepped in, a few paces behind Amy and the Doctor. "Cool. It's like my brother's hammerspace."

The Doctor looked back from where he stood at the console, smiling as the TARDIS seemed to wake up under his touch. "Hammerspace?" he asked. "I'm afraid to ask, but what's hammerspace?"

"She means his personal claudication," Dairine explained. "It's an anime term. Is that how you've pulled this off?"

The Doctor shook his head. "Time Lord technology. We're -- we *were* -- fond of making things bigger on the inside than what's on the outside. Similar concept, different execution. Have we met before?"

The non-sequitur cause the gathered humans to blink. "Um. I think I'd remember," Dairine said. "You're pretty distinctive. Unless. Wait, you said you're a Time Lord? I was reading about them a while ago, you regenerate, don't you?"

"Regenerate?" Carmela mouthed silently at Amy, who shrugged.

"Yes!" the Doctor replied. "Oh, it must have been an earlier regeneration, yes, of course. Here, I've got some pictures--" One of the screens started cycling through a variety of faces, some older, some younger, that Amy recognised from the hologram she'd seen from the *giant floating eyeball* on the hospital roof. "Any of them ring a bell?"

Dairine stared. "Cycle back one," she said, just as they were moving onto the sixth picture from the fifth. "You have *got* to be kidding me. You saved my bacon from the Satrachi! Like, two years ago?"

"Satrachi, Satrachi..." The Doctor leaned back against the console as he thought about it. "It's been a lot longer than that for me, he's six regenerations ago. Oh! In the Crossings! I spent a few hours in jail because of you."

Amy snorted. "And you probably deserved it for something," she pointed out. "But you two have met before? That's a bit odd, isn't it, that you'd just happen to meet again now?"

The Doctor turned back to the console. "Not really," he said. "Dairine, could you place your Manual up over here, please? Have him feed the TARDIS the coordinates for Demisiv. Galactic standard rotation three point seven two epsilon yak hamburger."

"... You just made that up," Amy insisted, but Dairine laughed.

"I wish," she explained, popping up Spot's screen and tapping on his keyboard. "I still don't know who names these things. Should be coming through now, Doctor."

The Doctor nodded. "Perfect!" he said. "That means we're just about ready to head out. Anyone need anything before we go? Snack? Bathroom break? No? Good. Hold on, ladies! This may be a bumpy ride!"

It was night.

The entity didn't know what night was, nor did it know how it had words, but it knew that it was night. It didn't know what day was, either, but it knew that day was coming, and it knew that this meant it had to finish its work very quickly.

The tree people were tasty, after all, but it had more important things to do.

"You know," a small voice said, from somewhere close to the ground, "it's not a very nice thing you're doing." The entity looked down, as much as could a thing with no face, nor eyes, nor any other organ used for sight. It didn't speak, either, but somehow its intent got through. "Seriously. There are so

many other things you could be doing. You could be out saving the galaxy! Instead you're here and eating my friends."

The entity let out a howl.

"I thought you might say that. Honestly, what I wouldn't give for a wizard right now to ask the meaning of life."

Chapter 2: The Deadliest Game

The day started off quite normally for the odd little family that lived on Bannerman Road. Which is not, one should understand, quite what most families would consider normal; in fact, just like the little family, the day was rather odd indeed.

"Stop! Hey, you, Sontaran! Stop!"

Most families, after all, didn't consider alien invasions a standard before-breakfast activity - especially not on Saturdays. For the Smiths - Sarah Jane and her son (after a fashion), Luke - and their friends Clyde Langer and Rani Chandra, Saturday Morning Alien Invasions (and, truly, any morning of the week, though this particular one was, indeed, on a Saturday) had instead come to be something of a regular occurrence.

"Clyde, I don't think he's going to stop," Luke pointed out, as he ran alongside his best friend. He wasn't out of breath at all, prompting Clyde to roll his eyes.

"Yeah, well, he *definitely* won't if we don't say anything, now will he?" Ahead of them, the Sontaran (which was, truth told, surprisingly quick for a potato in a space-suit) picked up his lead and turned a corner, running out of sight. Luke and Clyde slowed their pace before coming to a stop, Clyde bending over as he caught his breath. "How can something like that run so fast?" he asked between gulping breaths. "Like, its legs are half the length of ours or something!"

Luke shrugged. "I don't know." He leaned against the wall of the alleyway as he waited for Clyde. "Maybe some kind of cybernetics in the suit? That could help his running speed, and if his lungs are adapted properly for this kind of atmosphere, that could explain his stamina."

"It's called a rhetorical question." Clyde rolled his eyes. "C'mon, we don't want to let him get too far ahead."

There was a clatter from up ahead, and some shouting, and finally a victorious, "Aha!" in a familiar voice. "I think we're okay," Luke said, grinning as he kicked off the wall. "Sounds like Rani and Mum stopped him."

By the time they got around the corner, though, something was very wrong, for not Sarah Jane, nor Rani, nor Sontaran were anywhere to be seen. The only trace that they'd been there was a crashed-in wall and the faint tang of ozone in the air, as if from a lightning strike.

Or a teleporter.

"Mr. Smith? We need you!"

The familiar fanfare played out as Luke and Clyde waited for the computer system to reveal itself. "Hello, Luke. Clyde. Is there something I can do for you?"

"We think a Sontaran kidnapped Mum and Rani," Luke explained. "There was no trace of them. Have you detected anything abnormal? Other than the Sontaran itself, I mean. Any trace of a teleportation system? Or anything like that?"

Mr. Smith managed to sound about as imperious as he ever could when he replied, "Of course. There were three distinct teleportation signals from the area of your chase with the Sontaran, all after the two of you fell behind. All indications are that the Sontaran absconded with Sarah Jane and Rani. Are there any other obvious questions I can answer for you today?"

"Yeah," Clyde cut in, angry. "Do you have anything actually useful to say, or are you just going to snark at us?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Clyde," Mr. Smith replied. "I'm not capable of snarking. It's not in my programming."

"C'mon, Luke," Clyde said, turning away from Mr. Smith, grabbing Luke's hand as he did. "This isn't getting us anywhere. Let's see if we can find anything back at the construction site."

Luke looked down as he followed, his eyes caught at where Clyde had hold of his hand. "Um, Clyde?" he asked. "I thought. I mean. You were the one who explained to me that guys aren't meant to hold hands, right?" He had been, in fact, and he'd said it just as Sarah Jane walked past Luke's bedroom door, which had prompted a half-hour diatribe on being accepting of other people's differences, and that just because Clyde wasn't gay himself, that didn't mean that it wasn't all right for other people.

Clyde stopped and looked down himself before shrugging and letting go. "Didn't even realise, mate," he said. "Anyway, 's not important. Let's go, all right?"

It didn't take all that long to get back to the construction site; it was just a few streets over, after all, and very conveniently located all told. Unfortunately, there wasn't much there when they got there. Nothing was changed, not even the position of the rubble from the crashed-in wall, and as thorough an investigation as the two boys could manage on their own turned up nothing. "Maybe we should go back and try Mr. Smith again?" Luke ventured, but even as he said it it was obvious that his heart wasn't in it.

"Nah," Clyde said. "We'll think of something."

His phone rang.

"Are you going to answer that?" Luke asked. "It might be important."

Shrugging, Clyde pulled it out. "That's odd," he said. "There's no caller ID. Just... Huh." The ringing ended, but the phone stayed lit up. "It's some kind of text message. But it's way longer than it should be, text messages can't be this long. 'In Life's name and for Life's sake,'" he quoted, before stopping. "This is. What *is* this? 'In Life's name and for Life's sake,'" he repeated, "'I assert that I will employ the Art which is its gift in Life's service alone, rejecting all other usages. I will guard growth and ease pain. I

will fight to preserve what grows and lives well in its own way; nor will I change any object or creature unless its growth and life, or that of the system of which it is part, are threatened or threaten another."

Nothing happened. "Huh," Clyde said. "I was expecting maybe a flash of light or something. That seems, I dunno."

"Anti-climactic?" Luke suggested.

"Yeah, that." Clyde tapped at his phone again before noticing a new application on his dashboard. "Manual? I don't remember that being here." He opened it up, his finger moving deftly on the touch-screen. "Luke, did you do something to this?"

Luke shook his head. "No, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Someone changed the display. The bite's out of the apple." He turned his iPhone towards Luke to show him. "It's supposed to have a bite out of it. But I haven't hacked it or anything..."

"What're those squiggles on the screen? Some kind of language?" Luke asked.

Clyde looked at the screen again. "What squiggles? Looks like text to me. 'Welcome to Manual Implementation version 479.22. New user?'" Clyde shook the iPhone as if to clear the screen, but it remained where it was. "Strangest game I've ever seen, I can tell you that." He hit 'yes' on the screen and it cleared again.

"Oh, hey, I can read it now," Luke said, leaning over Clyde's shoulder. "That's kind of odd. It's still the same squiggles, though."

The screen of the iPhone had cleared, and then filled again, with the following text:

Thank you for taking the Wizard's Oath. Initial oath-taking serves to initialise this software; a repetition of the Oath is required before full access to Manual functions and wizardry abilities can be processed. Please hit yes if you wish to begin tutorial of Manual functions and wizards' responsibilities.

Tension filled the air around Luke and Clyde, a strange sort of expectation, as if the universe were waiting for the answer. "Hit yes," Luke insisted. "You need to hit yes."

Clyde did.

Tutorial initiated. Welcome to WizPod third generation software, serving you on the iPhone 3GS. New wizards will be pleased to note that this tutorial is available in all terrestrial languages, in case your command of the Speech isn't yet advanced enough to make reading it an alternative. If you wish the tutorial to be in your native language, please say, 'Native language,' now.

Clyde looked sideways at Luke before saying, "Native language."

You've chosen: "Native Language." This tutorial will now proceed in English.

The WizPhone, as it is colloquially called, is a technological implementation of the standard Wizard's Manual functions. All Manual functions, from local, global, system, galactic, and universal real-time information, to spell-storage, to messaging, are all available, and like the previous WizPod implementations, its multi-terabyte drive still holds all your favorite songs, applications, and videos. Its special carbon-carbon battery provides seamless sync-up to the local star, providing aeons of power without any worry about forgetting your charger.

To proceed, click 'Next'.

Clyde obliged. Luke leaned a little closer over his shoulder.

To be a wizard is to accept the responsibility for fighting entropy, the gift of the Lone Power. Entropy is responsible for the introduction of death to the universe, and while it can never truly be stopped, it is the job of a wizard to work to combat its effects, either on a microcosmic level, such as within one's self, family, social circle, or community, or on the macrocosmic scale of one's planet, star system, galaxy, or universe. To be blunt, this can be a dangerous undertaking. Wizards can and do die in the process. That said, the benefits are unimaginable, from being able to speak to plants, rocks, and automobiles, to being able to travel to distant star systems on errantry, to always being able to find where you left your keys.

If you wish to proceed with the taking of the Wizard's Oath, press, 'Next'.

When Clyde hit 'Next' this time, the screen cleared again, but instead of the black-text-on-pale-blue-background he'd had before, the background went jet black, and the oath, in glittering blue letters, seemed to hover above it.

"In Life's name and for Life's sake," Clyde said again:

"I assert that I will employ the Art which is its gift in Life's service alone, rejecting all other usages. I will guard growth and ease pain. I will fight to preserve what grows and lives well in its own way; nor will I change any object or creature unless its growth and life, or that of the system of which it is part, are threatened or threaten another. To these ends, in the practice of my Art, I will ever put aside fear for courage, and death for life, when it is right to do so, looking always toward the Heart of Time, where all our sundered times are one, and all our myriad worlds lie whole, in that which from they proceed -- 'til Universe's end."

Again, an anti-climax. After a few moments, Luke and Clyde looked down at the iPhone, where at the bottom right hand corner, a small button labeled 'Next' blinked helpfully. Clyde tapped it.

Thank you, young wizard, for taking the oath and accepting the responsibility and joy that comes with wizardry. Your Ordeal starts now.

Sitting in the living room of 13 Bannerman Road, Luke and Clyde sat hunched over the iPhone -- the WizPhone. "I still kinda have to think this is a joke," Clyde said. "I mean, seriously? Wizards? It's like something out of Harry Potter."

"It looks real, Clyde." Luke pointed down at the surface of the WizPhone. "I mean, normal phones just don't do that." 'That' being 'unfolding to about twelve times its original size'. Clyde had discovered this particular feature mostly by accident, but it did make for easier display. "D'you think you can contact any other wizards? It did say something about messaging, right?"

For the last hour-and-a-half, the two had been going through the Manual, learning everything they could, focusing especially on anything that might help them find Sarah Jane and Rani. The section on Ordeals had worried Luke, though, talking as it did about the seriously dangerous missions on which new wizards were sent, but Clyde had laughed off the concerns. "Maybe," he said. "I wonder if there's some kind of directory?"

"Directory, please," he directed at the WizPhone. Discovering the voice-controls had been a highlight of the afternoon. "Wizards local to 13 Bannerman Road, Ealing, London."

The display cleared before listing a series of names, addresses, and phone numbers, none of which either Luke or Clyde recognised. "I guess we might as well start with the first one, yeah?" Clyde said, tapping the first listing. A menu popped up, from which Clyde selected the 'Messaging' option. "So what should I say?" he asked Luke. "Hi, I'm a new wizard, I don't know what I'm doing, and our friends have been kidnapped by aliens!?"

"It can't hurt," Luke replied. "I mean, if half the things the Manual's been talking about are real, then it won't be the weirdest thing he's heard."

Clyde frowned, but began typing out the message on the WizPhone's pop-up keyboard. "I suppose," he agreed, "but that doesn't make it sound any less weird to me. And I've *met* aliens." Within moments, the message was speeding through... wherever the Manual sent messages, heading for its recipient. "I wonder what this Ronan guy's like?" Clyde continued. "I mean, I've never heard of him, but the listing had him as being local."

Three sounds occurred nigh-simultaneously: the WizPhone trilled the alert for an incoming message, something gave a strange sort of muffled 'whumph' outside, and someone knocked on the door. "I'll get it," Luke said as Clyde pulled up the message. Luke got up and moved to the door, which he opened on a tall boy, a couple of years older than Luke and Clyde themselves, dressed almost entirely in black.

"Clyde Langer?" he said. "Ronan Nolan. I am on errantry, and I greet you."

Luke stepped back. "Over here," he said. "I'm Luke. Smith. That was fast."

Ronan grinned as he stepped inside, following as Luke led him over to the couch. "I'm a little trigger happy on the transport spells," he explained. "They're a lot safer to use over here than back home. One of the best things about being over here for a course. You must be Clyde oh Powers is that the WizPhone? Darryl will be so jealous, he said they're not out of testing yet!"

"Uh, yeah," Clyde said. "I'm Clyde, and that's a WizPhone. I've had it for about two hours now. Well, the Wiz part, anyway. What's wrong about using transport spells in Ireland?"

"My accent give me away?" Ronan asked, laughing. "Too much overlay. Old wizardries that never cleared away properly. Can be really dangerous to work over top of them. We've started actively cleaning them up, but it's slow going. So you've got friends kidnapped by aliens? Been a while since I've heard about anything like that happening. They weren't carrying any chocolate, were they?"

Luke and Clyde shared a look. "Why would that matter?" Clyde asked. "I mean, do aliens really like chocolate or something?"

Ronan, completely deadpan, replied, "Yeah. They use it for grenfelzing."

"I think I'm going to regret asking this," Clyde said, "but what's grenfelzing?"

"It's like emfozzing, only with chocolate."

Luke looked intrigued, but Clyde just hung his head and sighed. "I was right," he said. "I definitely regret asking. So, what should we do?" Clyde continued. "Is there some special secret wizard network or something, someone we can talk to for help? Wizard cops or something like that?"

"Actually," Ronan said, "I was thinking we'd go 'round the pub. I could do with something to drink, I dunno about you, and it's a safe space to talk."

"... The pub?" Luke asked. "I'm not supposed to go without Mum."

Ronan nodded. "Where is she?" he asked. "We can double-check with her. Let her check me out, reassure her I'm not some loony."

Clyde shrugged. "She would be one of the kidnapped people. A Sontaran took her -- kind of a potato with legs."

"I should introduce you to Filif and Sker'ret at some point," Ronan said, getting up. "Sker's a Rirhait, they look kinda like giant centipedes, and Filif's a Demisiv. They evolved from coniferous trees, and still look like them. Anyway, if your Mum's gone, no one's around to say not to, and it's fine, trust me. I know the barkeep, he's a wizard, too. No need to worry about being in there underage. And someone there might have something to suggest on helping you out."

Luke nodded slowly. "I guess it's okay, then," he said. "Clyde?"

"Yeah, sounds great," Clyde agreed. "C'mon, let's go, then."

The pub, which they got to by bus rather than the transport spell, was mostly empty at so early in the afternoon, even on a Saturday. The barman frowned when Luke and Clyde entered, but upon spying Ronan coming in behind them, his expression softened and he smiled instead. "We've got a back room," Ronan explained as he waved at barman. "Hi, John! We're just going out back. I'll be up to grab some sodas in a mo'!" he called, before turning back to Clyde and Luke. "It's shielded to protect any conversation going on back there. We've got one like it in a pub back home, too, although that one's got a key so they can take the spell on and off as needed. There's probably a couple of people around sharing a pint, there usually are, but they'll be wizards, too."

"Must come in handy," Clyde said, one hand drifting unconsciously to his pocket. His phone -- his *Manual*, and that was still weird -- was a comfort as he felt it through the fabric of his jeans. "How do you know all this? Like, am I supposed to know this?"

Ronan laughed, although it wasn't cruel. "Hey, I've been doing this a few years already," he pointed out. "And I've had some good friends. Half the point of Ordeal is learning the basics. Why else would they throw you into the deep end like that?"

"That's not much comfort," Clyde retorted. "While we're here, I don't suppose we can get something to drink, too? I'm parched."

"John owes me a few," Ronan said, nodding. "Drinks on me, and I'll grab us a plate of chips, too."

"Thanks, mate, you're a life saver."

Luke, who'd been silent this entire discussion so far, smiled. "I think that's rather the point, Clyde. Entropy is death, after all."

"Shut up." But Clyde was grinning when he said it.

Ronan took their drink orders then went over to talk to the barman, so Clyde and Luke assumed he must be John. "What do you think of all this?" Clyde asked Luke. "It still seems so weird. Like, wizards! And aliens! It's like we're living in Lord of the Rings meets Star Wars!"

"Wizardry seems pretty logical, actually," Luke pointed out. "A set of rules that govern the universe and everything within it, with a certain set of rules specifically for altering it. It makes more sense than the Force ever did."

"Don't you be insulting the Force," Clyde said, frowning. "Luke Skywalker could still kick your ass."

There was a thunk as Ronan came back and set their drinks down on the table. "I've got a friend you should meet," he said, laughing at Clyde. "She's really into Star Wars. I think she wanted to be a wizard in the first place because she thought they were like Jedi."

"Well, they are, aren't they?" Clyde pointed out. "An interplanetary force of people with powers beyond the norm who train so that they can protect everyone from the forces of evil in the galaxy?"

Ronan shrugged. "Not really," he explained. "For one thing, it's not interplanetary."

"But I thought you said there were aliens, too."

"Yeah. It's intergalactic. All across the universe. And a few universes over, too."

Luke grinned. "This is so cool," he said. "Clyde, you're a *superhero*."

Clyde preened, grinning back at Luke. "Yeah, but let's just hope it's enough to save Rani and your mum, all right?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Ronan said. He took a gulp of his cola. "I've seen wizards save people from far worse." One of his hands drifted up to his chest for a moment, although Clyde couldn't quite figure out why. "Far, far worse."

"So where should we start?" Luke asked, trying to change the subject. He had the feeling that Ronan would appreciate it. "Is there anyone we should talk to around her?"

"Normally I'd suggest you go talk to Clyde's advisories, but I think you're better just heading straight to the Crossings," Ronan explained. He looked up as John brought the plate of chips over to the table and grinned. "Ta, thanks, John. Pass a message on to Annie for me, next time you talk to her? She should probably talk to one of the seniors over here in London, let 'em know that I've got one of their newbies under my wing?"

"Tell her yourself, kid." John rolled his eyes. "I've got enough to do around here without adding message service to the list."

"Yeah, yeah." Ronan waved him off, grinning. "Anyway, you should go on to the Crossings. Ask around there. It's this giant worldgating facility on Rirhath B. Lots of information goes through there, too, you might be able to hear something about where this Sontaran's heading."

"What's the best way to get there?" Luke asked. "Do we need to hitch a ride on a ship?"

Ronan shook his head and grinned. "Actually," he said, "there are better ways. Time to introduce you to worldgating." He reached sideways into thin air. Luke gasped when his hand disappeared to his wrist. "Hey, it's just a personal claudication," he explained. "You'll learn to do this soon enough, Clyde." Ronan pulled his hand back out of nothing, this time holding what looked like a television remote. "A friend of mine has a subsidized worldgate in her closet, and she gave me a copy of the remote." In her *closet*? Luke mouthed to Clyde, who shrugged. "I can use this to get us right to the Crossings. We'll be there before you know it. Anything you want to grab first? Any tools or anything?"

Luke shook his head; he'd grabbed his backpack on the way out of the house, and it had his emergency Alien Invasion kit he'd put together with his mum. Clyde considered for a moment before agreeing. "Nah," he said. "I think we're good. So, what, do you just point and click?"

Ronan lifted the remote and pointed it at the wall. "Pretty much," he explained, before pushing the 'home' button. A section of the wall disappeared to reveal the expanse of a hallway filled with a myriad of aliens, hominid and otherwise. "Welcome, gentlemen, to the Crossings." He downed the last of his soda, grabbed a last few chips, and then stepped through the gate. Luke and Clyde followed swiftly after.

"This is ridiculous," Clyde moaned, leaning back against the wall of the Crossings. The trio had been up and down the complex already, making liberal use of the walkways and other methods of transport, in an effort to track down anyone familiar with the Sontarans who might know of any who'd been near Earth recently. Either no one knew anything, or no one was talking. "I mean, seriously, we've been at this... four hours so far? I'm starving."

"Blue food," Ronan said, grinning. "It's tradition. You come to the Crossings, you eat blue food."

Luke frowned at that. "Does the colour affect the taste at all?" he asked. "I mean, I've heard it *can*..."

"Nah," Ronan explained. "Or, well, it might. But usually we get something that's not Earth-based, so we don't really know enough to tell. Dairine's really fond of this one blue drink they have, it's kinda like soda? Fizzy. No caffeine, though. Maybe a *very* slight euphoric effect, but it onyl lasts a few minutes."

"Better not try that, Lukey-boy!" Clyde said, laughing. "Who knows how it'll affect *your* weird physiology?"

Ronan blinked. "Weird physiology? Aren't you human?"

Luke nodded slowly before explaining, "More or less. I was built by a species called the Bane. They were trying to build a human archetype. I'm really only a few years old."

"Huh," Ronan said. "I'd never have guessed. Anyway, if you're carbon-based you should be fine. Only people I've ever heard of having problems with this drink are silicon-based, and even then the effects just lasted longer." He led the way down one hallway, avoiding the friction-less walkways for the more traditional ones. "We're not far from our usual cafe," he explained. "Where my friends and I usually eat. One of them, he had this dog, Ponch, who was *really* fond of blue food. He... left us, kind of, a few months ago, so we always get blue food now. For Ponch."

Luke leaned in a little closer to Clyde as they walked. "I don't want to lose you, ever," he said softly, too soft even for Ronan to hear. Clyde blushed, but shook his head.

"I'm not going anywhere," he insisted. "You're stuck with me."

Ronan lead them through a large doorway into a room filled with tables, a bar, and a variety of people, most of whom weren't even close to the hominid norm of two arms, two legs, and a head. "Huh, there's usually a few more humans around here," he said, but he shrugged. "Anyway, not important." Ronan lead LUke and Clyde over to one of the tables. "You order here." Ronan demonstrated on the touch-screen in the middle of the table. A few key-taps later, he added, "There, it's set up for anything safe for humans, so you don't need to worry about what you order. Although pay attention to the descriptions, because some of the stuff that's safe to eat doesn't necessarily taste very good."

Ronan let Luke and Clyde go through the menu first before selecting his own meal, and in a matter of moments there were plates appearing on the table. "Dig in," Ronan said, before suiting actions to words and spooning up some of the very thick blue paste he'd ordered. "I can't get enough of this stuff," he said, at Luke and Clyde's odd looks. Clyde's plate held something that looked a little bit like rotini, except for the way it wriggled every few seconds. Luke's, meanwhile, was a pile of blue leaves topped with some kind of magenta sprinkles. "It's kinda like lentils, but there's something they use to season it that there's just nothign like it on Earth. Which sucks, because it's basically my favorite food ever. Oh, Clyde, you'll want to be careful with the *erg'whei*, they tend to fall off your plate if you're not careful. And don't worry about the wriggling. It's a chemical reaction with the sauce, not any sign that it's alive." Ronan paused. "I had to ask, too, my first time ordering it. But they taste good, kinda like strawberries mixed with pepper. In a good way."

"THis is just too weird," Clyde said, grinning. "We're sitting in a cafe on an alien planet, eating alien food, and this could be my *life* from now on."

"You'll mostly be sticking close to home," Ronan explained, laughing. "Very few of us spend all *that* much time off-world. BUt it could happen, that's for sure. A couple of my friends, one in particular, spend more time off-world now than they do back on Earth."

"That's what I want to do," Clyde continued. "Seriously. All this space to explore? And you need to come with me, Luke." He paused. "If your mum will let you. But she did it, too, didn't she? Traveled with the Doctor? So she doesn't have any room to say anything, right?"

Luke flushed a bit, embarrassed. "I don't know if she'll see it that way," he pointed out. "Adults don't seem to like kids doing the same things they did when they were kids."

"Bah."

As Luke and Clyde tucked into their first alien meal, both were pleasantly surprised at the fact that, yes, they did actually like it. "This is pretty good," Clyde said to Ronan. "How easy is it to get here without going through your friend's closet?"

"A little harder, but still pretty easy," Ronan said. "There's a world-gate facility in the underground in London, so if you can get there, you're fine. It's been down some lately, though, for construction, so you might need to jump over to New York and use the gates at Grand Central."

"And those'll get us here?"

"Or to nearby realities, or, if you've got the power or the knowledge -- in some cases, both -- to pretty much anywhere you care to go, off-world or on. And it's not so bad to beam over to the States from the UK, I've been doing it a lot recently."

The meal was soon finished, the three young men eating like young men, so they turned instead to a discussion of what they could do next to find Sarah Jane and Rani. "I don't like the way no one's talking," Ronan admitted. "I figured, actually, that I could get you guys here and then let you go on your own way, that's what Ordeals are supposed to be like, but... Something's not right here. Whatever's going on, I think I'd like to stick around. If you'll have me."

"Please," Clyde said, his eyes widening. "I mean, not that I don't think we could handle it on our own, but it never hurts to have someone a little more experienced around, right?" Luke nodded in agreement. "And if you need to go... Well, you're listed in the directory, so I can always message you for advice, too, right?"

Ronan nodded, grinning. "You know, a friend of mine once told me that I was 'in the book' -- she's got one of the older versions of the Manual -- and I almost didn't believe it, but I have to admit, I'm starting to get jealous of all you guys with your *physical* Manuals. Makes things like messaging a helluva lot easier."

Clyde laughed. "You'll just have to try and get a WizPhone."

Luke tapped away at the touch-screen, working his way through the menu system and then out of it, into the larger Crossings system. "Hey, there's a posting here about a planet called Demisiv," he said. "Didn't you say you have a friend there?"

Ronan nodded. "Yeah, Filif. He's a good guy. Great wizard. Built us these solid illusion disguise things called *mochterooft*, once."

"It, uh. Says that the planet's cut off," Luke explained. "They were looking for a ship to transport them."

"That's not right." Ronan 'grabbed' the image on the touchscreen and flipped it around so that he was looking at it straight on. "Hey, that's Dairine," he said. "I recognise her username. But why would they need a ship? Demisiv's got a hard-coded gate, and..." Ronan trailed off as he dove further into the system, eventually pulling up the network messaging function and sending a missive. "I just asked Sker' for more details, he's the Stationmaster. If there's something going on with the gates, he should know about it. And maybe he can tell me where Dairine's off to."

"D'you think this has anything to do with the Sontaran who kidnapped Mum and Rani?" Luke asked.

Ronan shrugged. "Usually I'd say no, but you guys met up with me, who knows Dairine and Filif both, so chances are? Whatever's going on, it's connected somehow."

"Oh, great," Clyde said. "My first day as a wizard, and I get caught up in an intergalactic conspiracy."

"You're a wizard now, Clyde," Ronan pointed out. "Generally, we get three intergalactic conspiracies before breakfast. Seven on weekends. And, hey, it could be worse."

"You didn't just say that." Clyde hid his head. "Please tell me you did not just say that."

Luke laid a hand on Clyde's shoulder. "Statistically, the incidence of things getting worse after someone says that is negligibly different from the incidence after someone doesn't say it," he explained. "So don't worry."

An alert came up on the touch-screen, and Ronan frowned. "C'mon," he said. "That was Sker' writing back, he wants us to go meet him at the Stationmaster's kiosk. Maybe we'll be able to get some answers."

Chapter 3: Like Lives Lay Spiraled Downwards

As the TARDIS materialised on the surface of Demisiv, the first thing that Carmela thought was that something had to be very, very wrong. "Doctor?" she asked, watching a series of symbols scroll across one of the screens around the centre console. "Is this accurate? The atmosphere readouts."

The Doctor and Dairine both crowded around to take a look at the screen. "I've never had a problem with them before," he said. "Why? Is there something wrong?"

"Demisiv's a planet of trees," Dairine pointed out, not terribly kindly. "When's the last time you saw a planet with that much wildlife have *that* much CO and CO2 in the atmosphere?"

"Hm." The Doctor twisted some knobs on the console, but the display stayed the same. "It seems to be working. Do you have any information on the standards for this planet at this time of year?"

"I can do you one better." Dairine snapped her fingers at Spot, who stood up on his little extensible legs and toddled over, popping up his screen. "I need the atmosphere specs for Demisiv going back... two weeks? We'll start with that. O2, CO2, and CO levels highlighted, please. And feed it over to the TARDIS, too, for the Doctor's records."

"One moment," Spot said. A play of colour went across the surface of his screen before resolving into a string of numbers in the Speech. "Breathable oxygen levels have been dropping steadily over the past three days as carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and other impurities have increased heavily. Atmospheric conditions indicate a large quantity of smoke has been entering the atmosphere, although not yet at levels to cloud over the entire planet. Surface temperature is currently three degrees below average. No source for the smoke is indicated, as there are no surface hot spots to indicate fire or any kind of planetary magma ejection."

"Thanks," Dairine said before reaching down to scritch at Spot's keyboard. "Okay, so clearly there's something going on. Doctor, do you have any gasmasks, anything like that? It won't be safe to go out without some kind of protection."

The Doctor grinned. "I can do you one better than that," he said, smirking as he echoed back Dairine's earlier words. "Personal forcefield emitters. Not enough to take more than a hit or two, but they'll filter out any air impurities, too. They should already be set to twentieth century Earth standard atmosphere." He pulled open a compartment on the wall of the TARDIS and passed around the emitters. "Just put it around your wrist and hit the big red button."

Everyone obliged, and in moments there were shimmering fields surrounding each of them. "Doctor, why haven't you brought these out before?" Amy asked. "They could have come in handy, you know. With all of the people who've tried to *shoot us*."

The Doctor waved it off. "It's more fun my way!" he said gleefully. "And anyway, I'd forgotten I had them. You lose a lot over the centuries!"

With everyone ready, the Doctor opened the TARDIS door and leaned out. "The coast is clear," he said. "Do you have any idea where we are?"

Dairine shrugged and looked to Carmela. "You're the one who's been here, not me," she pointed out. "Which way to Filif?"

"Their species migrates," Carmela pointed out. "Chances are, they're not where I last saw them. But I recognise those mountains over there, that range; there's a lake up there that Filif showed me, his forest tends to stay fairly close to it."

"Define close," Amy asked. "I mean, is this 'ten minute walk' kinda close, or are we talking longer than that?"

Carmela laughed. "Last time I was here, it took us about a day and a half to get there. And that was when they were *close*. We're starting to hit fall now, and they tend to come down out of the mountains more for it."

"Great," Amy said, groaning. "Just what we need. A several day hunt for a moving forest."

There was, out of the forest around them, a rustle of branches, followed by a high, sweet voice in the Speech calling, "Carmela! Dairine! You came!"

"Or we could luck out," Carmela pointed out, "and Filif could find us first." With a bright grin, Carmela turned to the approaching Demisiv. "Filif, my favorite Christmas tree! How's it going?"

"I'm so glad you made it!" Filif said, his branches shivering with worry. "Something absolutely terrible has happened. Did you get my message?"

Dairine shook her head. "No one's been getting anything out of Demisiv for a few days now," she explained. "Looks like it's just around the time this smoke started?"

"Yes," Filif explained. "The smoke is... It's not the Kindler of Wildfires. He's not shown himself. But I think it's one of his followers, one of the demipowers."

Amy stepped forward. "I'm sorry, the Kindler of Wildfires? I think we need some introductions here."

"Oh, *dai stihó*, Cousin!" Filif greeted. "You can call me Filif. I understand it's much easier for humans than my full name. Are you both also wizards come with Dairine and Carmela to help us?"

"Nah," Amy explained. "I'm Amy Pond. He's the Doctor. We're just transport."

"But we'll do what we can to help," the Doctor added. "The Kindler of Wildfires, he's your version of the Lone Power?"

Filif nodded. "Yes, and whoever it is who is attacking us seems to be connected with fire himself, in some way, but it's not actually burning the planet."

"But then where's the smoke coming from?" Dairine asked. "If he's not burning the trees?"

Filif's branches began to shiver much harder as he tried to reign in his emotions. "Oh, it's terrible, Dairine!" he said. "The beast, he's eating us! The smoke is coming from our home-forests!"

"So what've you got for us, bugboy?" Ronan said, grinning in at Sker'ret where he sat in the Stationmaster's rig of a harness. "Any news on Demisiv?"

"Still nothing in or out, Ronan," Sker'ret explained. "There does seem to have been one abnormal transit heading in that direction from here in the Crossings, but it's not one of ours and we definitely can't duplicate it."

"That must be your friend Dairine," Luke said. "If she found a way there."

Sker'ret agreed. "She did message me to say she was travelling with someone she'd met called the Doctor," he explained. "Although she didn't say how they were going to manage to get through."

Luke and Clyde looked at each other, eyes wide. "Did you say the Doctor?" Luke asked. "Because my Mum knows him. Use to travel with him. He has this machine called a TARDIS, it stands for-

"Time and Relative Dimensions in Space," Ronan cut in. "You didn't say your mother is friends with a Time Lord!"

"It didn't come up," Clyde pointed out. "But now that we've got that sorted. Could a Time Lord in a TARDIS cut through the interference?"

Sker'ret pulled up some schematics, turning a screen their way. "The artron energy that powers a TARDIS might be able to get through, yes. Or the way it cuts in and out of the time vortex... But I think if we were to power one of our tech-based gates with artron energy, we might be able to get through ourselves." He hesitated. "At least, I could send you through. I really can't afford to leave the Crossings right now..."

Ronan reached over and placed a hand comfortingly on one of Sker'rets forelegs. "It's okay, Sker," he said. "We understand. We'll save Filif."

"How long will you need?" Clyde asked. "To outfit the gate, I mean."

"We'll need to find a suitable source of artron energy first," Sker'ret said. "It's not something that's terribly easy to come by. Usually you can only get it from a TARDIS, and there's supposedly only one of those left around anymore. There are a few planets with access, but none of them are in the local group, so it will take a while to get in contact with them, much less get access to the artron energy they have."

Luke grinned at Clyde, who flushed a bit. "I may have a way to solve that problem," he said. He closed his eyes in concentration and sparking blue energy began to crackle around his hand. "I touched the TARDIS once, when it was phasing. Got myself charged. I don't have a whole lot of it left, though."

Sker'ret nodded enthusiastically. "That will work! Yes, that will work nicely. Come, Clyde, I will get you wired into the gate. Ronan, if you go to the shopping concourse, any of the stores will give you what you need, if you want to outfit yourself a little better."

Ronan looked down at Luke, who shrugged. "I'm good for whatever," he said. "At this point I think I'm pretty much just along for the ride."

Sker'ret and Clyde were already on their way off down the hallway, so Ronan just laughed and shrugged. "We should get you something to defend yourself with, at least," he said. "You never know what you're going to run into out on errantry."

"Okay," Luke agreed. "But one thing, all right? No guns."

"Not even a dissociator? It looks like an egg-beater crossed with a curling iron."

"No guns."

Ronan nodded. "Okay, fine. What about a nice sword? I bet I can find you one of those."

Luke grinned. "A sword will do just fine," he agreed. "Um. Could you teach me how to use it?"

It was only through long experience with some of his friends that Ronan managed to restrain the urge to slap his palm directly to his forehead.

"Okay," the Doctor said. They were back in the TARDIS, and everyone had removed their personal forcefield emitters so that they could *eat* something. "We need a plan. Filif, you said that you don't know who this entity is that is... eating your friends?"

Filif shook his head. "I'm not even sure it *has* a name," he explained. "Certainly it doesn't seem to communicate. Nothing we've tried has worked."

The Doctor nodded. "Suggestions, anyone?"

"I'm always fond of dissociation," Carmela offered, holding up her trusty friend. "It even worked that one time on the Lone Power."

The Doctor frowned. "I'm not terribly fond of guns," he said. "Next suggestion."

"Well, what does it *look* like?" Amy asked. "Like, is it big, small, thin, wide, what?"

"It looks like it's made of shadow, but it's not just a shadow," Filif tried to explain. "I mean, a shadow will be on a surface, right? It's where the light doesn't hit because it's blocked by an object, or a

person, but this isn't against a surface, it's not like it's being cast by anything. It's just a shadow, standing in mid-air."

"Could it be some kind of phased entity?" Dairine asked. "I mean, if it's not quite entirely on this plane, that could explain the weird skintone."

"Maybe," the Doctor replied. "It's hard to say at this point without further tests. Which we can't do unless we go to meet it. So! I have the perfect idea."

"He's going to say road trip," Amy muttered to Carmela, who laughed. "He's going to suggest we go *talk* to this giant tree-eating shadow, and I'm going to agree to go with him."

"Let's go on a road trip!" the Doctor exclaimed, grinning, eminently pleased with himself. Amy groaned, and Carmela just laughed harder.

"It could be worse," Carmela pointed out to Amy. "You could have suggested it yourself."

"Another month with the Doctor," Amy said, "and I probably will. Just once I'd like to run *from* the danger."

Dairine shook her head as she walked over. "No, you wouldn't," she said. "I think you like this."

"Well, sure, mayhem, running, pain, people shooting at us, more running, giant shadow monster. What's not to like?"

"It's why we do what we do," Dairine continued, grinning a little more broadly. "Wizards, I mean. We're the kind of people whose first instinct is to run towards the danger. You'd have made a good wizard yourself, I think. You've got the right instincts. You're a bit old at this point, though. Same as Carmela."

"I beg your pardon!"

Dairine just laughed. "Most wizards are offered the oath by the time they're fourteen," she explained. "Not that you're old, just... too old to be a wizard. I found my manual when I was eleven."

Amy's eyes widened. "That's... awfully young to be saving the world."

"We know what we're getting ourselves into," Dairine insisted. "If we weren't the right people for it, we wouldn't be offered the oath in the first place."

"I remember finding a book once, when I was a kid," Amy said, laughing a bit herself. "I think it was right before I met the Doctor for the first time? It was called, 'So You Want to Be a Wizard'. Had this great yonking oath on the first page and everything. Nothing ever came of it, though, and I don't think I've seen it since I met the Doctor."

Carmela and Dairine had gone still, and further away, where the Doctor and Filif were conversing about the terrain between their current location and where the shadow beast was, the conversation stilled as well. "What did you say it was called?" Dairine asked. "The book you found."

"So You Want to Be a Wizard!" Amy laughed again. "I can't believe I ever thought it might be real. Although I suppose it's not so strange to believe in wizards after all, is it?"

"Do you remember the oath?" the Doctor asked, his voice strangely urgent. "Any of it. Any words of it at all."

Amy shrugged. "I think it started... It's been *ages*, I'm surprised I remember any of it at all. But it started:

"In Life's name and for Life's sake", she quoted,

*"I assert that I will employ the Art which is its gift in Life's service alone,
rejecting all other usages. I will guard growth and ease pain.
I will fight to preserve what grows and lives well in its own way;
nor will I change any object or creature unless its growth and life,
or that of the system of which it is part, are threatened or threaten another.
To these ends, in the practice of my Art, I will ever put aside fear for courage,
and death for life,
when it is right to do so, looking always toward the Heart of Time,
where all our sundered times are one,
and all our myriad worlds lie whole,
in that which from they proceed --
'til Universe's end."*

There was a pause, a heavily pregnant pause, as she finished, which finally Amy broke with, "I can't believe I remember all of that. It's been fourteen years now."

It was Dairine who finally spoke again. "Amy," she said, a little hesitantly, an unfamiliar mode for her. "That's the wizard's oath. The one we taken... It starts our Ordeal."

"But I've never been through any ordeal," Amy insisted. "Not anymore than what I'm going through now." But Dairine was snapping for Spot again, and as he obligingly toddled over and jumped up into her arms, Dairine was snapping out:

"Directory, wizards on ordeal, surname Pond."

"Searching," Spot informed them. "One entry found. Pond, Amy, native Scotland, citizen England, resident TARDIS. Current ordeal length fourteen standard Earth years. Would you like the length in Julian dating?"

The Doctor came over and stood in front of Amy, whose eyes were wide with fear, and shock, and a hundred different emotions. "That won't be necessary, Spot, but thank you," he told the little

computer. "Amy, listen to me. Listen to me. This doesn't change anything. You're still who you always thought you were. You just know a little more about yourself, that's all."

"That's all?" Amy insisted. "That's *all*? Doctor, I'm a *wizard*!" Her eyes still wide, she started to smile, and swiftly it turned into a grin. "I'm a wizard!" she repeated. "This is so cool! I can't wait to -- how do you do spells, anyway? Doctor, you said it has to do with the Speech?"

Dairine nodded. "Yeah," she said. "I can show you something in a minute, something simple, but the first thing is: where's your Manual? The book you found."

"I don't know," Amy insisted. "I haven't seen it since the crack first appeared in my bedroom when I was seven."

Over Amy's shoulder, Carmela shot a look at Dairine and mouthed, Seven? Dairine shrugged subtly in return. "Well, Manuals don't just disappear," she insisted. "We'll find it for you somewhere. What's odd is that nothing's ever come your way, though. I mean, you're still listed as being on ordeal, so you're not an abstainee."

"What's an abstainee?" Carmela asked. "I don't think any of you guys have mentioned those before."

"The Lone Power didn't get involved in their ordeal," Filif explained. "I believe you met Mamvish? She's an abstainee. The Lone Power apparently said that it had a headache."

"And since her language of discourse is the Speech, that's exactly what happened," Dairine continued. "Whether or not that's the *whole* truth is something Mamvish isn't saying. Anyway, that's just one kind of abstainee. Another kind just appear to not have ordeals. But that's not important, because as we've established, you're still on ordeal, and so not an abstainee."

"I've never heard of an ordeal going on this long, though," Filif continued. "Fourteen years on *any* planet is more than you'd normally hear, no matter how long their year. The longest I've heard of personally is several Earth months."

Dairine nodded. "Darryl. And he's a special case." She grinned at Amy. "Which means I guess we need to figure out what kind of special case *you* are, Miss Pond."

Amy grinned back. "Any kind you want me to be, Miss Callahan. Now, come on. This isn't fixing the problem of the giant shadow creature eating the poor defenceless tree people! Doctor! Any ideas?"

"Well, I thought I might try to sonic it," he explained. "If it's out of phase, that might bring it *in* to phase, which might mean we'll be able to talk to it and ask it why it's eating the Demisiv. Other than that... Well, Carmela does have that lovely dissociator."

"I thought you didn't like guns," Carmela said, even as she flipped the safety on the dissociator.

"I don't," the Doctor said. "But I like giant tree-eating shadow creatures even less."

"We need to try to find a peaceful solution first, though, right?" Amy asked. "The oath, yeah? I will guard growth and ease pain, and all that?"

"Whatever this is, it's harming the Demisiv system, and almost irreparably," Dairine pointed out. "We can do what we need to, whatever it takes to get the job done."

Filif, from over in the corner, spoke up. "I would like to stop this thing without sap-shed if possible," he insisted, "but... Dairine is right. If we need to, we can do what has to be done. We can take decisive action."

"All right, then," Amy said, grinning. "Let's get decisive. Doctor? Filif? Lead the way."

"Okay," Ronan said, standing opposite Luke in an empty storage room. Each held a sword, Ronan in one hand, Luke in two. "It's going to take them a little while to get Clyde tied into the worldgate, so we've got a bit of time for me to show you the basics. We'll go slow at first, all right? And take it from there."

Luke nodded, so Ronan started out with a slow swing, back-handed, up across Luke's body -- and with a clang, Luke parried and twisted, shocking Ronan's hand and sending his sword flying across the room. "Uh," Luke said, looking in shock down at his hands. "Oops?"

Ronan looked across the room where his sword had become embedded, halfway down the blade, into the wall. He looked back at Luke, and then back at the blade. "Oops?" he repeated, staring. "Oops!" Laughter started to bubble up out of his chest. "Oops, he says! Oops!" Ronan leaned back against the wall, still laughing. "I- I don't think you need any training," he insisted. "Where did you learn to *do* that?"

"Uh," Luke said. "One of the people the Bane scanned to make up... well, me? Someone must have known how to use a sword. It's the only thing that makes any sense. I've certainly never picked one up before."

Ronan managed to still his laughter as he walked over to his sword, although a chuckle managed to escape still now and then. "Well," he said, before leaning down to whisper a few words in the Speech to the wall so that it would let his sword slide out more easily. "I don't think we need to take it very slow, then. Let's go a bit faster, see what you can do."

In the room, the clangs and clashes of swords striking each other began to resound, faster and faster, as Luke and Ronan found out exactly what Luke could do.

"This is most interesting!" Sker'ret said, looking at Clyde's WizPhone where it sat, in its spread-out form, on the work-desk. "And this is a new implementation on Earth?"

"Ronan said a friend of his said it's not even supposed to be out yet," Clyde explained. "Don't know how I got it. Maybe it's just out of beta?"

Sk'er'et nodded. "Most interesting indeed! All right, Clyde Langer. Let's get you tied into this gate, all right? The wiring shouldn't hurt, we do have a set-up for organic, even living, batteries, so it's just a matter of attaching a few electrodes. The tricky part is going to be isolating the artron energy, so we're going to need to use a spell for that. HAVe you worked out your name yet?"

"My name?" Clyde asked. "It's Clyde. We've gone over that."

"No!" Sk'er'et said, laughing a bit. "Your name in the Speech! I guess no one explained it to you, then."

Clyde shook his head. "How's that different?" he asked. One of Sk'er'et's assistants came over and began affixing a series of electrodes to his forearms. "I mean, from my normal name?"

"A wizard uses their name in every spell they do," Sk'er'et explained. "It's... I guess you haven't even had much chance to look at spells, yet, even, have you? A spell is basically telling the universe what you want to happen, in the most precise terms possible. To do that, you need to include your name in the Speech, which is a precise description of *you*. You can't leave anything out, and if you get something wrong, it can change you, make you what you said in your name instead of what you were."

Clyde gulped. "So I shouldn't get this wrong, then," he said. "I don't suppose you'd help me out?"

Sk'er'et nodded. "I can," he said. "And your Manual should have something on it, too. There's a questionnaire you can fill out."

"A questionnaire," Clyde said, nonplussed. "To figure out my name."

"Well, yes," Sk'er'et confirmed. "How else are you going to know all the questions you need to answer?"

Clyde shook his head, laughing softly, and a little self-deprecatingly. "My life," he said. "I swear, I thought it couldn't get any weirder, with the aliens and the invasions and the *talking robot dogs*, but no, I had to become a wizard. Okay, Sk'er'et! Hit me. What's the first question?"

Sk'er'et pulled his own little bundle of Manual, a shining ball of glyphs, out of thin air and twisted it a little. "Well, first off, we'll start with your birthday..."

The questions went on for some time as more and more electrodes were brought out, until finally Clyde felt like a well-interrogated porcupine. "There can't be much more to ask me," he insisted.

"Just a few more!" Sk'er'et promised. "Okay, this next bit is about views of sexuality on Earth, so we've just got a few things to plug in here. There's a short-form acronym already for in the Speech, there is for every planet. And then we connect that over here with *your* views, and unless they're really odd there's probably an acronym for that, too, and then with your own sexual orientation. Earth is a binary gender system, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Clyde agreed, before pausing. "Uh, mostly." There were a few kids he knew, a few years older, who he thought would disagree with him. "But biologically, yeah. More or less. XY chromosomes, and all that."

"All right," Sker'ret said. "And then we need to go into questions here about you personally. Do you have a sexual orientation by which you identify?"

Clyde swallowed. "Uh, kinda," he admitted. "I'm still figuring it out some. But I think I like guys."

"So that makes you... Aha! Here we go." Sker'ret filled in the appropriate word in the Speech. "That's with a change arc, then? You're still in the process of figuring it out?" Clyde nodded, and Sker'ret twisted a few more things. "All right! I'll send this over to your Manual so you have something to work from, too, but make sure you check through it and double-check the details as you grow older. These things change, after all."

"... Thanks," Clyde said. "Is this done now? The electrodes and stuff, I mean."

"Oh, yes!" Sker'ret walked over to a console. "We'll just have to get the spell laid out first, and then we can proceed with the artron energy extraction. It will be just a few minutes now!" Sker'ret began to pull threads of the Speech, long glittering strings of letters, out of his Manual, and started laying them out on the floor. "You see, your name goes here, and this part here describes the kind of energy we need to get out of you, and that will allow us to charge those batteries over there, which connect to the worldgate. I'll need you to read through with me, if that's all right? It's pretty complex for a first spell, but it should be okay."

Clyde nodded enthusiastically, although he was careful not to dislodge any of the electrodes. "Yeah, I think I'm good," he said. "I mean, I can read it, even though it's a little odd."

"Odd how?" Sker'ret asked.

"Well, it's like I already know it," he explained. "Like it's already in my head."

Sker'ret frowned. "Hmm," he said. "It's possible, especially if you've had an encounter with a Time Lord, as you say. Their language of discourse is the Speech, after all, and it's part of their TARDISEs, too. You may have picked it up that way."

"This is so cool." Clyde's grin just widened. "All right, bugman, let's start this thing up!"

It was strange, Clyde noticed, how, when they were speaking, the words of the spell glowing stronger and stronger as they went, the universe seemed to lean in and listen. Like it was waiting for what was about to happen. Finally, with an odd tingle and a sparking blue around his fists, the spell finished and reality crashed back down around them. "Is it always like that?" Clyde asked, gasping a bit.

"Usually," Sker'ret said. "But sometimes it's better."

On the surface of Demisiv, in a dark part of the forest, a shadow stood tall and strong, taller even than the trees around it. At its feet, its lone companion snorted as it nosed around the roots of a tree for something to eat.

"This would be easier," he pointed out, "if you'd stop eating all of the people around here. I could ask *them* if there were any truffles around."

The shadow just kept walking forward, every now and then reaching down to the ground to pick up a tree before dropping it again. It moaned, soft and low, as it moved, a long sound that seemed to hold an aeon's worth of fear in it, fear and pain and anger. The tiny little creature that trotted along beside it nodded in sympathy. "They'll come and stop you," he said. "And they'll set you free.

"Maybe I'll even give them a little hint."

Chapter 4: 'Til Universe's End

There was a crackling sound coming out of the air around them, something completely at odds with the normal sounds of the forest. The Doctor's eyes grew wide. "Artron energy!" he exclaimed. "Everyone down!"

The gathered people, wizards and non-wizards alike, dove aside and to the ground, taking cover behind the nearby trees as the crackling sound became a sparking blue energy, until finally it resolved into a ground-shaking 'whumph' that dropped three people to the forest floor. "*Ronan*?" Dairine exclaimed, getting back to her feet. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for these guys' friends," he said, grinning. "Found out you guys were in trouble, too, so I thought I'd bring them along for the ride. The shorter one's a new wizard, just started his ordeal, and the other's his friend."

"Friends?" the Doctor asked. "What friends? Is Sarah all right, Luke?"

Luke looked at the Doctor, curious. "How do you know my Mum?" he asked. "Or, wait. You regenerated, Doctor!"

"I did!" the Doctor agreed. "Brand new body, brand new TARDIS, brand new companion! But how did you get here?"

"I took them through the Crossings," Ronan explained. "I figured it was easier than letting a new wizard try to get there on his own." The Doctor's eyes immediately locked on Luke, who shook his head and grinned before pointing to Clyde. "And then we used Clyde's reserve of artron energy to cut through the interference around Demisiv. So, here we are. What's up?"

Filif and Dairine took Ronan aside to explain the current situation. Amy, meanwhile, grinned at Clyde. "So you're new, too?" she asked. "Apparently I've been a wizard for the last fourteen years and didn't know about it. I blame him." She pointed to the Doctor. "He showed up right after I took the oath, and I guess I've been on ordeal ever since. What about you?"

"Found the Manual on my iPhone this morning," Clyde responded, grinning. "Was a bit of a surprise, especially since a Sontaran had just kidnapped our friend Rani and Luke's mum. Not that first time we've dealt with those potato heads, either."

"A Sontaran?" the Doctor asked. "Why did you come here, then? Sontar's on the other side of the galaxy."

Luke shrugged. "Ronan had a hunch," he explained. "We met him right after the kidnapping, and he came out to the Crossings with us and found Dairine's post still on the Crossings bulletin board system, so it made sense that maybe thigns are connected. He said it works that way for wizards."

"Not just wizards," the Doctor said. "He's right, though. That's definitely too much of a coincidence, especially with me already here. He has Sarah, too? That's not good."

"But we can find them, right?" Amy asked. "I mean, it shouldn't be that hard. We'll solve the problem with the giant shadow creature thingy and then find your other friends, yeah? And you can all tell me more about what it means to be a wizard, because let me tell you, I am *well* confused with all this."

The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, but stopped when the others came back over to rejoin them. "Filif thinks we're getting close," Dairine said. "Shouldn't be too far now. Are we ready for this? I mean, we don't even know what's going to happen when we get there. We're going in pretty under-prepared."

"We'll be fine!" the Doctor insisted. "Now, come along, we don't have all day."

With such a large group, it was hard to get through with any stealth, especially with the faint frisson of the forcefields being worn by half of them. Ronan had taught a simple shield spell to Clyde, as well, who was using it to protect himself and Luke, although it meant that Luke and Clyde had to stay very close together. "I think I see something up ahead," Carmela said. "It's definitely tall, it's definitely dark... If it were handsome, it'd be the perfect man." She grinned over at Ronan. "Something you'd know something about, Irish."

"Yeah, yeah," Ronan said, grinning back. "Not that you'll ever find out."

"I think we should approach from different sides," the Doctor suggested. "Dairine, why don't you take Ronan and the boys that way? I'll take Filif, Carmela, and Amy this way. You'll be able to tell when I use my screwdriver, because... well, *something* should happen, anyway."

"That just fills me with confidence," Dairine snarked, but she gathered the others close. "Come on, I bet we'll get in position first."

As they trudged off through the forest into their flanking position, the Doctor turned to his remaining companions. "Well, then," he said, "shall we?"

It was dark, and damp, and Sarah Jane Smith had had rather more than enough. "Rani, when I say go, push against the door as hard as you can." With a twist, her sonic lipstick was extended and pointed at the door. "Go!"

Unfortunately, instead of popping open like it should, the door glowed softly as the sonics from the lipstick were bounced back, extremely magnified. "Turn it off!" Rani tried to shout through the cacophony. "Turn it off!" With a twist, Sarah Jane did so, leaving them still trapped in the little cell on the Sontaran ship. "Well, that didn't work," Rani complained, flopping down onto the floor. "Now what?"

"Now we try something else," Sarah said, walking over and pulling at a panel beside the door. "Sontaran cells are supposed to be impossible to escape, but they've never tried to lock up Sarah Jane Smith!"

The Doctor held up one hand, halting the people behind him. "This is it," he said softly. "I'm going to hit it with the screwdriver. If it works, it should phase back in." He held up his screwdriver and pointed it at the giant shadowy creature standing in the clearing ahead of them; with a flick of a switch, the Doctor started cycling through various sound frequencies in an attempt to find one that would phase the creature back into full reality -- assuming it was phased out to begin with.

Of course, the fact that it's a *sonic* screwdriver meant that it wasn't exactly *quiet*. The giant shadow creature turned towards them and started walking, moaning louder and louder as the screwdriver grew higher pitched. "It's working!" the Doctor exclaimed. "At least, I think it's working!"

"Watch out, Doctor!" Amy ran over and tackled him to the ground, narrowly avoiding a swing from the giant shadow creature's fist. Unfortunately, the impact sent the sonic screwdriver flying across the clearing.

"Oh, now you've done it, Amy!" the Doctor said. "What are we going to do now?"

"I'm a wizard!" Amy retorted as Carmela and Filif set up a defensive line. "I'll think of something!"

"But you haven't cast a spell in your life! You don't even have a Manual!"

Amy grinned. "Ah, but who needs the Manual when you've got the TARDIS dropping the Speech into your head?" The forest went silent around them as Amy stepped forward. "This is an intervention type quad-delta-flyer-magnus!" she called out, her voice in the Speech resonant. "Requesting that the *giant honking big shadow thing* in front of me be named! And I name it Bob!"

Everything -- Filif's branches, the few remaining sounds of the forest, the whine of Carmela's dissociator as it powered up -- went silent. And then everything went white.

"Well, that was less than useless." From somewhere near her feet (or so Amy thought, given that everything was currently *blindingly white*) came a small voice in the Speech. "Although, you couldn't have chosen something a little more dignified than Bob?"

"I like Bob," she said. "Where is everyone? Who are you?"

There was a smile in the voice when it replied, "The traditional first question, actually, is, 'What is the meaning of life?' I'll let this one slide, though, since it's not like you've had a chance to study the Manual. I'm the Transcendent Pig. You can call me Chao. As for everyone else, they're still exactly where they were. So are you, really. It's just that time has stopped."

Amy frowned. "What do you mean, time has stopped? It's still passing. I'm standing here talking to you."

"Yes," the Pig explained. "Except that *here* is in the space between seconds. Time's not passing right now, you're just experiencing this as if it is. Human perception's not built for non-temporality."

"Which leads the question of *how* time stopped?"

The Pig chuffed. "You did it, of course. You named Bob. He's not supposed to exist, at least not anymore, and since he's from the previous universe, he didn't have a name in the Speech. You giving him a name in English gives him something to anchor him to this reality, though, which means that he's now name-able in the Speech, which means that he can be affected by wizardry."

Amy nodded slowly. "The previous universe?' she asked. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the One created this universe, of course," the Pig explained. "You'll be able to read all about that, and the struggle and fall of the Lone Power, when you get your Manual back. But the One came from *somewhere*. He, and all the Powers, and a number of other entities all came from the old universe, the one that existed before this one, where stars were shaped like doughnuts and the void was emerald green. It might even still exist, somewhere and somewhen. Still, the One decided he was tired of the way the old universe worked, and the way it was so harsh and dangerous to the new, young life that was trying to form, so he tore it to pieces and Spoke it back together with the help of his brothers and sister. Thus, this universe. This multiverse, really, all the echoes up and down from Timeheart. Really, our sheaf is one fo the more interesting I've visited."

Amy decided to let that last comment slide for the moment. "So because this thing was from the old universe, he's suddenly causing problems in this one? Where did he even come from? How did he get here?"

The Pig's smile was widening; it took a moment for Amy to realise that could see that, and the Pig itself, as the whiteness started to fade. "That's... not your fault, exactly, but you're definitely connected," he said. "I mean, honestly, you never know what's going to fall through the cracks. Find your Manual, Amy, and you may find all the answers you need."

The whiteness faded away completely, back to the second after Amy had spoken the name Bob. "What's the meaning of life?" Filif asked, before anyone could say anything else. Carmela and the Doctor looked down at Amy's feet, and Amy followed suit.

"Please," the Pig said. "Give me some credit." And it walked off. "See ya, Bob."

The shadow creature seemed smaller, somehow, than it had before. Amy turned to it and smiled softly. "Hi, Bob," she said. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in talking about why you've been eating all these nice tree people?"

A long, slow moan came from Bob, but this time instead of just carrying on, it began to resolve into something like an actual voice. "*Help... Me...*" Bob groaned. "*Free... me...*"

"Doctor?" Amy asked. "Any idea what he's talking about?"

The Doctor shook his head. "I'd have to see what's actually trapping him in the first place," he said, his eyes wide as he took in Bob's appearance. "This is incredible! Do you understand what we have here, Amy?"

"A shadow creature from the old universe who I just named Bob?"

"A shado- yes. Yes, exactly. How did you know that?"

Amy shrugged. "I had a conversation with a Pig in the space between seconds."

Filif ruffled his branches. "Did you ask him the meaning of life?"

"I didn't know to," Amy explained, "but he said he'd let it slide this time."

Bob moaned again, and Amy walked over to him. "You poor thing," she said. "Can you tell me what's trapping you?"

"Shadow," came the moan. "Shadows... all... around..."

A strange idea occurred to Amy. "Doctor," she said, turning. "You said that the crack in time would erase anything that came in contact with it -- but that's anything from *our* universe. The Pig said something about something falling through the cracks -- could that explain how Bob got here in the first place?"

"The crack?" Carmela asked.

"I'll explain later. Doctor?"

The Doctor was slow to respond. He walked over, first to pick up his sonic screwdriver before pointing it at Bob and taking some readings. "It... might, actually," he admitted. "And actually, that might give us a way to -- shadow! And light! Bob's not used to being covered in shadow because he's usually surrounded by artron energy! Which is why his presence here wasn't blocking it. He needs it to survive. Amy, go touch him, please."

"What?"

"Just a hand on his arm, or anywhere he's exposed. Please!"

Amy obliged, and for a moment there was a shining white-blue crackle around her hand that faded into a golden-white shine on Bob's shadow-skin for the briefest moment -- and for that brief moment, Bob's moans grew softer. "That's it," Amy said. "The artron energy! Doctor, is there any way to get more?"

"We're the two best sources around right now," the Doctor explained. "So not really. It also makes sense that he'd come here, too -- that he'd devour the Demisiv. There's a rift on this planet, same as the one in Cardiff, kind of. It releases minute amounts of artron energy into the atmosphere, which must come down with the rain, which the Demisiv would absorb through the soil. Not enough for anything but a brief lessening of whatever his symptoms are," the Doctor continued, "and a horrible, horrible reason for anyone to eat another sentient being, but it makes *sense*! And we can fix it! By--"

"By sending him back through the crack!" Amy finished. "Which will erase him from *this* time stream, which will reverse all the damage he's done here, which will- but how do we get him through? And, for that matter, where do we find it?"

"It shouldn't be too hard." The Doctor pointed to Bob. "He came through it, after all. It has to be around here somewhere."

"Yes, but somewhere doesn't help us much when there's a whole planet to search. Assuming he even came out on this planet in the first place, Doctor."

Carmela cleared her throat. "So, this crack," she asked. "Does it look anything like that?" She pointed across the clearing where, not far from Bob, the crack had opened.

"Everyone, stay back!" the Doctor called out. "Look, Amy! He already knows what has to be done. He's walking towards the crack."

Bob was, in fact, shuffling forward, the shadows of his surface blurring and fading away as the crack's light shone on him. "Thank... you..." he moaned, and though he had no proper face to speak of, still he seemed to smile as he stepped forward, into the crack, and then faded away. "Thank... you..." With a hiss, the crack closed, and the world shifted, reality changing beneath their feet: the tang of smoke in the air faded away; the skies cleared above them; and the memory of the day doubled, oddly, as if it had happened two different ways.

"Doctor?" Amy asked, looking around the clearing. "What just happened? Why do I remember the old timeline *and* the new timeline?"

"It must be the artron energy," the Doctor theorised. "In the atmosphere, in the planet itself, somehow it's not allowing the original timeline to be completely erased."

"Does that mean-" Filif said, his voice cutting out with panic. "My people, are they still lost?"

The Doctor held up his sonic screwdriver and took some scans of the area. "No, it looks like everything's back to normal," he said. "If you'd care to check your Manual, Filif, I'm certain there's some kind of precis available that will go into further detail. I can't see the Powers letting this one slide by unmentioned."

Filif nodded in the Demisiv fashion, an upward rustle of branches. "You're right," he said. "The Manual is already updating with today's events. Both versions. Maybe it's the Powers who are letting us remember?"

"Wouldn't be the first time they did something weird like that," Carmela pointed out, grinning.

Amy frowned. "I think, Doctor, that you're going to have to explain this all to me. But first- oh, what *now*?"

For this time, a ship was landing in the clearing. "That's a Sontaran ship," Filif supplied. "And it looks like it's opening."

"What are the Sontarans doing here *now*?" the Doctor asked. "Unless -- of course! If someone knew Bob was here, they'd want to feed him with any source of artron they can get, which means kidnapping time-travellers! Which means--"

"Which means, Doctor, that they decided to kidnap me, hired the Sontarans to do it, and brought Rani along for the ride. That is you, isn't it, Doctor? I don't recognise the new face."

The Doctor's grin widened. "Sarah Jane Smith! Of course you managed to rescue yourself. You've just missed us sending a poor wounded creature home and rescuing all the people he ate in the process."

"I'm almost afraid to ask," Sarah admitted. "But I'll have to have you tell it all to me later."

"MUM!" From across the clearing where he'd been waiting with the other team for the all-clear, Luke ran out of the cover of the trees and latched himself onto Sarah Jane. The rest of the group wasn't far behind, although they managed to walk a little more "You're all right!"

Sarah nodded. "I am, Luke, but what are you doing here? Doctor, did you- And what are you doing with a *sword*?"

"Not my fault! Clyde's a wizard now. They came on their own to look for you." The Doctor paused. "And the sword's not my fault, either, I have no idea where he found it."

Her eyes widening, Sarah asked, "A wizard? You're going to have to explain that one to me, Clyde. But that doesn't explain what you're doing here?"

Clyde looked over from where he was showing Rani the new features on his iPhone. "Can it wait until we get home and have lunch?" Clyde asked. "We haven't eaten since the Crossings, and we've gone through so many different time zones I'm not even sure what time it is back home right now. *And* we rescued, like, an entire planet of tree people.""

"You'll get used to that," Dairine said, laughing, as she and Ronan came up to join them. "It's nothing to go through eight different worlds in a day sometimes, especially when you're new to your power. I actually kinda miss it."

"Because you're home *so often* now," Carmela pointed out, laughing. "But I agree with Clyde. I think it's time we all *vamos*, yes?"

"Don't have to tell me twice," Clyde said, grinning at Luke and Rani. "What do we need to do?" he asked. "Me and my WizPhone stand at the ready!"

"Well, we've got a Sontaran ship, with a Sontaran tied up inside." Sarah Jane waved vaguely in its direction. "While I'd much rather the Doctor give us a lift home, I'd rather not leave him just to wake up and leave. Is there anyone around who can take him to the proper authorities?"

Dairine raised her hand. "I'm going to stick around for a bit and help Filif, make sure the new timeline's settling in seamlessly. I can run him over to the Shadow Proclamation when I'm done. I'm sure they'll know what to do with him."

The Doctor nodded. "Yes, that seems to be the best way to go about it," he agreed. "Is there anyone else not coming with me? I can run you all home faster than you can blink."

"As long as you don't strand them in the middle of sodding *nowhere*," Amy pointed out. "Was he that bad at piloting before?"

Sarah Jane just laughed. "Oh, you have *no* idea," she said. "I think we're all coming with you, Doctor, so that's four, and Amy, of course."

"I've got my own way home," Carmela said, pulling her worldgate remote out of her pocket. "And I think I'll do it by way of the Crossings; I never did cash in those shopping credits."

"Mind if I tag along?" Ronan asked. "It wouldn't hurt for us to go by and fill Sker'ret in on what's been going on over here. Depending on how the timeline patched, he may not even remember us having come through today."

Carmela just shrugged, grinning, before turning and activating the remote. Her worldgate appeared in mid-air in front of her. "Coming, Irish?" she asked, and without waiting for an answer she stepped through the gate.

"Look me up in a couple of days," Ronan told Clyde just before he stepped through. "I'll take you around so you can meet some of the other locals!" And with that and a cheery wave, he stepped backwards through Carmela's worldgate, which closed behind him.

"That leaves us," the Doctor said, looking at Sarah Jane, her young friends, and Amy. "It's a bit of a hike back to the TARDIS. I hope you're all ready."

Clyde and Luke shared a grin, which Rani joined in on a moment later; Sarah Jane reached down to ruffle Luke's hair a bit, and Amy reached over to sling an arm across the Doctor's shoulders. "For anything," she said. "Always."

In the space between seconds, the Lone Power fumed. "I can't believe it was that *easy* for them!" he raged. "It took months setting that up!"

"Months?" From around the level of his feet -- this particular appearance of the Lone Power was human, for the moment, tall and handsome and red-haired -- a familiar voice spoke up. "Funny. It seemed like something of a rush job to me. Are you sure you aren't losing your touch? There've been rather a few changes to your nature recently, after all."

The Lone Power pulled a leg back to kick at the Transcendent Pig, but the Pig just smiled and stepped aside at the last moment. "You're not going to with," he insisted. "Not in the end. You've already lost, starting with the Battle of Central Park, and ending with the Hesper. Nothing you do, nothing any of your remaining shades do, will change that. Do you realise, there wasn't even any bloodshed today? Not a single life lost, in the end. And they *know* it, too. Those wizards, those humans, they know that they not only managed to stop the destruction of an entire planet, but they saved the lives of all of those who'd been killed in the first place."

"Shut. Up." The Lone Power gritted his teeth, an oddly human gesture. "I will not lose."

"You already have," the Pig repeated. "Not that you're going to give up. You're decidedly human that way. Stubborn to a fault." The Pig's grin widened. "Really, it's their most admirable quality."

The second ended; around them, time began to flow once more, as much as time flowed in the in-between place they now found themselves. "One of these days," the Lone Power said. "One of these days, you're going to slip up, and you're going to answer one of them when they ask you the meaning of life."

The Pig, as much as a pig could, shrugged. "Probably," he agreed. "But I think even you'd be surprised as the answer." With that, the Pig turned and walked away, leaving the Lone Power alone to his brooding.



Epilogue: Take Me Back [Life Through Tinted Windows]

The scene in the kitchen -- and the entryway, and the living room -- of 13 Bannerman Road was more than a little hectic. "Are you sure it's okay?" Ronan asked, raising his voice to be heard over the din from the living room. He was currently standing with Sarah Jane at the counter in the kitchen, his hands wrist-deep in a ball of bread-dough as he kneaded. "I don't have much of a kitchen in the flat where I am, otherwise I wouldn't have asked, but I *miss* this sometimes."

Sarah Jane waved a hand dismissively. "It's perfectly fine," she insisted. "I don't get as much use out of this place as I should, so it's nice to see *someone* using it. You should talk to Clyde, too, though; he's more than a fair hand in the kitchen himself."

Ronan nodded, grinning. "I think I will," he said. "Thank you, Miss Smith."

"Oh, please, call me Sarah," she insisted. "I imagine we'll be seeing a bit more of you around as it is, so let's skip all the formality, shall we?"

"Sarah it is, then!" Ronan agreed. "Um. Do you mind if I ask you a question that is quite likely none of my business?"

"I made my living as a reporter, for the longest time," Sarah Jane explained. "Asking questions that were none of my business was how I got *paid*."

Ronan nodded and considered how well Sarah Jane would get along with some of his other friends. "I'll have to introduce you more formally to Dairine at some point," he said. "Anyway, I was just wondering if you know whether or not Luke and Clyde are together."

Sarah didn't answer at first, instead putting down her book and watching Ronan as he continued kneading the bread dough. "Not yet, I don't believe," she finally answered. "At least, I haven't seen any signs that they've been sneaking around, and I can't imagine that Luke would be anything but horrendous at it, and Clyde likely not much better. I expect it's only a matter of time, however."

"Yeah, that was my read on it, too," Ronan agreed. "I don't want to push them in any directions at all, but... If Luke comes to you at any point? With questions, or whatever? You can send him my way. I'd be more than happy to talk to him about it. Clyde, too, if he comes to confide in you."

"Personal experience?" Sarah Jane asked, smiling a little ruefully. Ronan nodded. "Thank you, Ronan. I'll keep that in mind. I'm quite sure that Luke and Clyde, Clyde especially, would prefer to have someone closer to their own age to... give them advice. And Clyde certainly seems to appreciate your counsel already."

Ronan nodded, chuckling a little. "You might want to watch that Luke doesn't get jealous," he added. "Just in case."

"It's definitely a risk," Sarah Jane agreed. "He's still so young, in so many ways."

"But older than he looks, too, in others. The perfect son for a former time traveler."

From out in the living room, Rani's voice grew louder, her tone of exasperation cutting through Luke and Clyde's laughter. "Sometimes I wish he didn't have to grow up at all," Sarah Jane admitted. "But you don't want to hear all that, the ramblings of an old woman!"

"Not so old, Sarah," Ronan insisted. He gave the ball of dough one final punch-down before splitting it in two. "All right," he said, "these need to rise for another half-hour before baking, but they should be ready in plenty of time for dinner. Think Clyde'll want to help me make the rest of it?"

Sarah Jane grinned. "He's been talking fo nothing else for the past two days," she warned Clyde. "In fact, you *might* want to watch out yourself for Luke to be a bit jealous. It might hit sooner than you think."

As the TARDIS finished materialising, Amy opened the door. "Hello, Cancu-!" She cut herself off. "Oi, Doctor! Still not Cancun! In fact, you've brought me right back home!"

The Doctor came out behind her, standing in the TARDIS doorway, and frowned. "Well, that's unexpected," he said. "I was sure I got it that time. I used the blue boringers and everything! The old girl must have something up her sleeve," he added, looking back into the TARDIS

"It's even the same night we left," Amy said, smiling as she walked the perimeter of her room, her hand tracing across drawings, dolls, and models. "Look at the calendar. And everything's just like I left it."

The Doctor nodded. As he stepped out the rest of the way, the TARDIS door swung shut just enough to jar his arm, pulling it out of his jacket pocket and sending a small, red box flying across the room, and right into Amy's hands.

"What's this, then?" Amy asked, popping open the box. "Ooh, *Doctor*. Is this for me? I *absolutely* say yes."

"No, Amy!" the Doctor tried to say. He glared at the TARDIS. "It's not- It's yours, Amy, but it's not from me. It's from Rory."

Silence. Amy frowned at the Doctor for a long moment. "Who's Rory?" she asked. "I don't think I've ever met a man named Rory. Met a girl once, when I was a kid. She was here visiting from this place in the states called Stars Hollow?"

"No, this is definitely a male Rory," the Doctor said. "And you were - are - were engaged." The Doctor reached out for the box. "But he came with us, and he... You know what the crack does, Amy. He... ran afoul." He shook his head. "This is the second time we've come back here," he explained. "I don't even know if you remember the first time, or how you remember it - the timeline's not clear in my head, I

still remember the original one too vividly. But the last time we came back here, Amy, you told me that tomorrow you were getting married."

"So you're saying that I've lost someone," she said softly. "That tomorrow -- today's tomorrow, from when we are right now -- that it was to be my wedding day."

The Doctor nodded, look down at the little red box that held her engagement ring. "It must have only survived because it was in the TARDIS when he was taken," he explained. "But I think it might give us some way to get him back. It will be dangerous, of course, but since when has that stopped us?"

"That's two lost things to look for, then," Amy said. "This... Rory, and my Manual."

"It must be here somewhere." The Doctor snapped the box shut and put it back in his pocket. "Manuals don't just disappear."

"But things do, around me," Amy pointed out. "The crack, and all that. I swear it's following me around."

The Doctor shook his head. "Maybe," he said. "Or maybe we're following it. Anything's possible with this. That was brilliant of you, by the way, sending Bob back through the crack to restore the timeline with him out of it. We saved all the Demisiv!"

Amy just shrugged, turning into her closet and rifling through her clothes. "I couldn't just let them all die," she said. "And I couldn't let anyone hurt Bob. He'd been hurt enough already. I wonder, though, did he just come through on his own? Someone hired the Sontarans to kidnap Sarah, which means they knew both that he'd be there, and that he'd need to feed on artron energy."

Tugging on his shirt-cuffs, the Doctor nodded again. "The thought had occurred to me," he admitted. "What it *means*, I don't actually know. There aren't many beings who could pull an entity like Bob through a crack like that."

"'Aren't many' doesn't mean none," Amy pointed out. "Surely you must have some idea."

"The only idea I really have," the Doctor admitted, "says that the best way to solve this will be to find your Manual. Hopefully we can save Rory in the process."

"It's not here." Amy took one last look around. "No book called 'So You Want to Be a Wizard'. Just dolls and drawings of you, Doctor."

In the corner of the room, the light on the top of the TARDIS flared once, brightly, before subsiding. The Doctor turned to look at it before beckoning Amy inside. "Come on," he said. "She wants to tell us something."

The TARDIS was dark when they entered, although more as if she were being quiet; the sense of her lie, her heart, was still strong. "What is it?" Amy asked, walking over to the centre console and placing her hands on it, letting herself feel the thrum of its energies. "What do you need to tell us?"

On one of the console's screens, brilliant blue text began to pass across a black background: text with which Amy was infinitely familiar. "That's the wizard's oath!" she exclaimed. "Doctor, the TARDIS -- she's showing us the oath."

"She's-" the Doctor started, cutting off as an idea that had never occurred to him as a *possibility* started to come to the forefront of his mind. "When I arrived here, that night, fourteen years ago, the TARDIS had to repair herself. She'd been damaged. And I think, when she repaired herself, she needed to use some new materials. Amy, I think she used your Manual."

"My Manual is *part* of the TARDIS?" Amy asked, bewildered. "How is that even possible?"

"I don't know," the Doctor said. "But it definitely complicates matters."

Amy grinned. "Maybe," she said, "but at least we've solved one mystery. Time for the next!" Around them, the TARDIS lights began to come back on, one by one. "Next stop, my wedding!"

