

Only after he put the screwdriver, his gift to her, back on top of her diary for the second time, did he realise that he'd given her this idea too.

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Donna was getting used to this.

He disappeared a lot of late, far more than he had in the early days. Whereas before she could expect to find him in the Console Room, throwing stuff around or randomly tinkering with something, now when she finally made it there it would be quiet, well as much as you could consider any part of the TARDIS being silent. The ship was alive, he'd told her, and that meant that some days it was close to unbearably noisy wherever she went. Not today however. Donna had become aware how much the ship mirrored it's owner's mood, so really it was no surprise that the entire place this morning was quiet, reflective. Unnerving.

This wasn't Rose silence. This was different. This was new.

'You're bloody kidding me!'

Donna stops, listens and still can't believe what she's hearing, but it's unmistakable. Somewhere, inside the middle of the TARDIS, she can hear a bell, a church bell, it's mournful tone making her chest suddenly tighten. There it is again, stop it, it's making me scared she thinks, suddenly aware that she needs to find this place but has no idea of where to go because she'll bet anything that's where the Doctor is right now. She's been forced to stick Post It notes on the TARDIS walls to get from her room to the bathroom, from there to the kitchen, from there to here, because however intuitive this ship might be for the Doctor it's never really helped her, as if she were still only a Guest, a temporary intruder. After what River Song told her in the Library, paranoia is something Donna really wishes she could pull out of herself and throw to one side, cut away from as she did when stuck in the Data Core.

She really hopes that wherever they end up next there is nothing electronic to bother them for several hundred miles.

The bell continues to toll and Donna does something she's promised she'll never do, that the Doctor made her promise she'd try but she laughed when he did.

'Don't be daft, I'm not talking to it' she pronounced, hands wrapped firmly across her chest, not breaking his stare for a moment.

'You know, for an intelligent woman you really don't get the basics here do you?' he replied, his face hiding the start of That Smile, trying his best not to goad her any more but really wanting to because she is great when she's fighting, a worthy adversary. A Suitable Companion.

'Ok then, Ship. TARDIS. Whatever you are. I bet you think this is funny, don't you?'

She feels strange talking into silence. It doesn't feel right she realises, I need to make this thing believe I'm genuine...

'Sorry. You can see in my head, can't you, like he can. I should have realised that by now. I've had a bad day, but you know that as well...'

There is a palpable jolt, and the TARDIS stops. Donna stands, aware for the first time of something else in the Console Room, of not a feeling but a presence, outside of her line of sight. The bell, it seems, is getting louder, and the tone pricks, tears appearing at the corners of her eyes.

'Can you tell me where the Doctor is... please?'

'I'm here Donna.'

She hasn't heard him come in but he stands in the doorway, the weight of 4022 bodies saved and one not still firmly on his shoulders, and with something in his hand that she can't immediately place. It's a book, black leather, elegant and slim, but the Doctor grips it perhaps a little too tightly now as she notices it. Too late, he realises, the Cloister Bell is ringing and it's time she knew the truth, at least this part of it. The TARDIS won't let you hide any more.

He tries to lighten his tone, and in a small manner he believes he succeeds as he takes her hand in his, stands there with her, trying to find the words. Neither of them will ever be alright again after this, something fundamental has shifted in the fabric of this Universe, but he has no idea what. So much is suddenly in flux. He knows what happened with River was right, that he's not screwed up a timeline, that this IS the path but suddenly he's lost, unaware of where he's going. He never saw Rose coming, or that she'd leave in the way she did, but he knows now, deep down that it was right. This, whatever they are in now, is wrong.

The Cloister Bell can't ring.

'I need to show you something. Two things, as it happens, but I think you'd appreciate seeing where that sound is coming from first.'

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Just when she thinks he can't surprise her, the Doctor always pulls a better stunt.

Donna just stands, mouth wide open, as he half pulls her into the Cloister Room. Donna's convinced she can hear birdsong, smell cut grass and for a second a memory sparks in her head, of Gramps taking her to Canterbury in early spring.

'How do you fit a bloody cathedral in here then?'

'Well all the Type 22's have a Cloister Room. HAD a Cloister Room.' He corrects himself, a moment to compose, to take the memories marked Time War and put them aside, to focus on the moment and the explanation. She's looking not at him any more but around her. The stone, the large arches, the creeping, all pervasive ivy, a physical metaphor for the TARDIS's myriad control systems, all emanating from the Eye, the power of the TARDIS in the centre. Below them the Universe continues unabated, above them the Control Room, the conduit between the Eye and him is silent as he is, watching her.

No-one's been here for a very long time, he realises, not even you.

'Is there any way to stop the bloody bell from ringing?'

Donna's irritation is sudden and rather reassuring. He forgets she can hear it, that he's long since blocked it out, that at least part of his unease stems from the fact it's ringing at all. There's no-one here to activate the signal, and the only other way...

'Well technically only the person who activated the bell can deactivate it and as that wasn't either you or me... at least I assume it wasn't you as clearly you've never... come here.'

He puts his hands to her head and concentrates, a moment of mental focus, and he takes the bell out of her head, watching the relieve flood across her face as he does. As he goes to take his hands away she stops him, holding him close for a second, intent eyes scanning for his response.

'You can still hear it, can't you?'

'Yes, after a fashion. Difficult to explain, but...'

'Try.'

Her sudden directness floors him, her concern all too apparent with the residual psychic link he has to her. He's sitting, restrained, watching River explode into a million points of light, a pixellated version of his own future being uploaded into his mind. Now he's the one having trouble breathing...

Donna's physical discomfort is apparent this close. What do humans need for changes in atmospheric pressure?

'So, the thing is... you can't breath... respiratory problems, your ears need to pop. It's pressure, here... eat this'

He sticks his hand in his pocket and hands her a jelly baby without thinking and stops, her confusion giving way to disbelief.

'Suck it, it'll help.'

'You don't suck jelly babies you idiot.'

'Indulge me.'

She does, unaware that the small fruit child has a mild relaxant woven into it's molecules, enough to allow her to stop panicking. As he watches her shoulders drop they make their way further into the heart of the TARDIS, towards the walled garden that now houses the Eye. After the War he cycled through all the options the Type 22's had for the Cloister layout, trying to find one he felt truly happy with, but even when he settled on this one he couldn't come here any more, the memories were simply just too painful, so he rerouted the systems he needed from here up to the Console. Yes it violated about 999 Time Lord Rules, but when you're the only person left who remembers those rules does it really matter anyway? No-one was there to file a complaint, no-one existed to remind him of protocol and the need to keep Emergency Programmes in a safe place, to have backups...

'You were explaining about the bell.'

Donna stops, but her hand remains in his. He hasn't a clue where to start with her, it was so much easier with Martha, and Rose, and even Grace. Donna is hard work, but in the best of ways. Not dumb by any stretch, but her mind still doesn't get some of the basics they grasped with ease. Oh please let me have Time to explain so she understands before...

'I was, but I'd rather tell you about the book first.'

'So what's in the book?'

It was a good thing that CAL knew to backup, to save files, to remember the people that the Vashta Nerada considered only as the next main meal. He was able to remember too, but most days he didn't want to.

'Spoilers.'

He smiles, the first genuine one he's managed since he woke to the baleful sound of the Bell, the alarm that signals a galaxy-wide catastrophe, the death knell that that last woke him on the final day of the Time War. Here, with Donna Noble of all people, this brassy and ballsy woman who reminded him of Sarah Jane and Jo Grant simultaneously, he feels a moment of comfort, of safety.

'Good thing about this one is that they've all happened, at least to me. River started a diary coz I suggested it, said she might want to remember things in a more permanent way. Remind yourself, there's an order to everything, a place for

it. The importance... the significance of what passed before. Memories. Best companions you'll ever have. Let me show you.'

He sits her down on a low stone bench and hands her the book. She is hesitant at first, even more so when she opens it and the first page is blank.

'Yeah, very funny..' she begins until he places his hand on the spine and it blossoms to life, elegant writing and drawings magically appearing from the page.

'Psychic paper comes in book form too,' he grins 'and it's a lot simpler than having to put my diary under lock and key... Susan...'

She stares back at him, pageboy haircut and wide smile, how he remembers her best.

'That's when the TARDIS got broken, you know, stuck in the shape of the police box. That's when it all started on Earth for me. 1963. Kennedy died. He was too young, too much he should have done for your planet. Such a waste.'

Donna looks at him, suddenly lost in the mist of memories she knows are long and deep and vast, suddenly aware of her small part in an immense story. The pages in the book are densely packed, thin yet robust, and there is a lot in this book before this page: many, many points he could have chosen to begin at but didn't. The Doctor knows his place in the Universe River had whispered to her as they'd stood outside the Gift Shop, and he knows only too well that rules can be bent but never broken.

There are a lot of questions she wants suddenly to ask, but she knows better than to even try. Instead she focuses on the date.

'So you first came to Earth in 1963?'

'In your timeline yes, but of course I've been backwards and forwards through your timeline more times than... well... the thing about Earth is...'

He flounders, brain and mouth out of synch for a second, and Donna suppresses a smile as she knows what he's trying to do. He's trying to find the right words to help me understand. Gotta love the guy for making all this easy enough for a kid to grasp, coz God knows with the last few days under our belts I'm hardly at my most receptive...

'Earth is... it's where my story begins. The stuff here, the things before, they're part of my history, but they're not what I really am. Earth is where I became me. Earth is my home.'

'What about Galli-wotsit?'

'Gallifrey' He corrects her without showing the tear in his heart, the feeling a little too close now to adequately escape completely. He takes the book from her and finds the page, opening it and holding it in front of her to watch as the panorama he drew as a teenager appears in glorious colour under his hands. Her gasp is worth it alone, her wonder at a simple drawing enough to make the pain subside, albeit briefly.

'You drew this?'

'I'm a man of many talents. All Time Lords were required to take field notes, back in the day. Like most things, I was way too good.'

'This was home?'

'Yes, and then I got into trouble and I ran away. I kept running for a while and eventually... I found a new home. Remind me to tell you the story.'

He closes the book, holding it between both hands, aware of her watching him. There's no-one else to activate the Bell. Gallifrey's not sending a signal. This is a genuine emergency, something is wrong on a galaxy-wide scale. I'm the only one who can hear it.

'Why was the bell ringing?'

'Still ringing Donna, still ringing.'

He's not slept since he left the Library. Like it was when Rose was ripped from him, when Tegan walked away, when Jo went to marry that man, as it was when every single person he allowed inside this box left. Whether death, or choice or circumstance, they remain here, in my memories, in the life I live and the path I choose, the story of my existence I must remain alive one day to tell.

To tell to River Song.

Not to Donna, he realises, still expectant, waiting for an answer. Not to Rose, though his heart aches as he finally grasps what she was to him, what she will be in time, his progression, when enough beats of his hearts have come and gone. When enough places and people have passed, she will be like Susan, and Peri, Bernice and Polly and all the others. She'll be pages in his book.

Spoilers.

'Doctor?'

'I was explaining wasn't I?'

Her exasperation is very endearing, he realises, and he knows that the day when Donna leaves will be one he'll remember with a long entry in his Diary. He'll recall her no-nonsense attitude, her laugh, her way of combining fear and excitement in a way frankly no-one else ever has inside these multi-dimensional walls. He just hopes that she'll not be marked in red in the index as Adric was. He really doesn't want her to be a casualty. He hopes...

'The bells, the bells... Yes. It's a warning. Something's coming.'

'Could we be a bit more specific?'

'It's not good.'

'And that's different from any other day lately HOW, exactly?'

It is time to move on, to turn the page and face whatever they find at the start of the next chapter. The Doctor stands, more decisive than he feels, and takes her hand. He can mourn again, it's a task he always has the time to do because that commodity is never one he's lacked. This, he realises as he squeezes her hand, is something far more precious.

'Let's go see what we can find out, shall we?'

As they leave the Cloister Room the light dims, the stone and ivy bathed only from the pale glow of the Eye of Harmony, but the bell remains, tolling unhindered, ringing across the Universe, a warning that something is most definitely on its way.

That the Doctor is no longer alone.