

Okay. Listen up kid. This is where it gets uncomplicated.

The Seven Year Switch

by Paul Parncutt

First of all, this is *you* speaking. And yes, you really do sound like this. An accent like this one doesn't give up easily, so if you're still thinking you're gonna be all "Marilyn Monroe" when you get older, save yourself some pain and quit now. Tried it out for about a weekend and it just sounded like we were having an asthma attack. I'm not joking. Two boys at a disco offered us an inhaler. Thought we were choking on the dry ice. So ditch the "Monroe" okay?

Secondly, that scrap of paper in your hand right now? Completely psychic. I know, right? How cool is that? Although if you're the age the Doctor thinks you'll be you probably think it's the most boring thing ever and who needs psychic paper anyway and why can't it come in black? Trust me. You'll grow out of it. Oh, and so will those legs. In fact they never really stop, which is a plus. Especially as there's

other parts that never really start. Hope you like that bra size kiddo, because you're pretty much stuck with it.

So anyway. Psychic paper. Means we get to talk. Or rather *I* get to talk. *You* get to listen.

Which is hard when you're fifteen years old and there's hormones exploding like grenades in your stomach every time you see a certain boy go past, I know. But try and pay attention okay? I know it's *weird* that the boy you used to make dress up now makes you go all blotchy inside when he looks at you but believe me, you do *not* want to let him know that. You'll end up trying to punch the smugness off of his face.

Which reminds me -

<Hey! Do NOT go telling your younger self that I fancied you first. She's got enough problems as it is...>

Just caught him smirking into his own psychic paper. Such a kid. Trouble is, if you and the Doctor don't get us out of here soon, he really *will* be. We *all* will.

'Course, you've got a head start on us on *that* one don't you? You're fifteen years old. In the plus column, you just bit your last psychiatrist. Which, if I remember right, felt a whole lot better than it tasted. I mean, yeah, sure, he was probably aiming for a different kind of closure than your jaws around his arm but I *think* we can call it a breakthrough.

Only thing is, in the minus column? His diagnosis was right.

You really *are* on another planet.

Seriously. I'm not joking. Take a look around. You're on another world kid.

Okay, so, yeah, I know what you're thinking. Actually I guess you're thinking *this*, 'cause that's how psychic paper works. But when you get a chance to think for yourself you're gonna be thinking "No way." Because it looks just like Earth right?

Yeah, well. Hate to disappoint you. Turns out a lot of planets *do*.

Don't get me wrong, there's some wacky worlds out there all right. All that "laser grass" and "diamond trees" and "fur-lined oceans" stuff. It's like a first year fashion student got put in charge of creation. I mean it *looks* fantastic, but let's be honest, you're never going to wear it down the shops now are you? Not that I'm saying you could wear a planet. Don't start obsessing about your weight again, *please*. All I'm trying *badly* to say is that your "blue sky, green grass" combo is like

the “little black dress” of the universe. It doesn’t let you down. And it’s all about how you accessorise.

And the planet that you’re stood bewildered on right now? You ever get out of this cave you’re gonna find it likes to accessorise with luscious green jungle, burning blue sky, and a gorgeous beach about a mile away! Not bad going for your first time out kid. Seriously. You should’ve seen *my* first planet. Although, when you think about it, I guess you just have. Which is pretty confusing. So actually, no. Don’t think about it.

Point of it is, you’re on an alien planet that looks like a tropical paradise. What’s not to like?

(And you know, I really wish that was a rhetorical question and not a prompt for a list but there you go...)

(Oh, and psychic brackets. Very cool.)

So anyway. A list of things not to like:

1. There’s a Time Lord time bomb. On the island that we’re stuck on. But we don’t know where it is.
2. It’s an actual *time* bomb. I mean it probably does the ticking thing just to be all dramatic, but it’s not going to explode like in the movies. It’s going to do a whole lot worse.
3. It makes the Doctor say things like this:

“Lot of armies talk about shock and awe, how they’re going to bomb their enemies back into the stone age. Well this is the bomb that can do just that.”

(Wow. I just completely did the Doctor’s voice in my head! How cool is that? Oh, and again with the brackets. Gotta love the brackets.)

(Note to self: Don’t over-use the brackets.)

Note to *younger* self: Stay with me here. It’s psychic paper. There’s going to be some wandering. Maybe jog to keep up, okay?

So anyway. The bomb.

It’s gonna make you younger. Gonna make me younger too. Gonna make me *you*.

The way the Doctor figures, the stroke of midday, bomb goes boom. Which I guess make sense. It's a *time* bomb right? At least it's gotta be punctual. And when it blows, it's gonna turn the clock back seven years. Which means I don't just *look* seven years younger - I really *am* seven years younger. Every part of me reset to seven years ago. Including my memories.

Which means as far as I'm concerned - as far as *you're* concerned - it's still 2003. The Doctor's just a childhood memory that you can't let go of, your life looks like it's Leadworth for forever and Gareth Gates is probably number one.

(Wow. No wonder everything came in black back then. I'm getting depressed just even thinking about it...)

It also means I've got just about ten minutes to get you up to speed on all that's happened, stop you from getting all "*Time Lord Of The Flies*" like all the other jungle juniors back at camp.

Now the way the Doctor tells it, I just think this stuff in real time, and it drops into your head in a heartbeat. Which must be weird 'cause it's a lot to take in, and it's all pretty strange, but you know what? I reckon you can handle it alright. 'Cause you've been waiting for this moment since you were seven years old. Ever since he made that promise; that he'd be back in a "Geronimo!"

So open up that mind Amy Pond. 'Cause I'm about to fill you in...

PART ONE: "The Liar, The Stitch, & The Wardrobe."

Let's be honest. "How did I get myself into this?" is always gonna be pretty high on the list of time travel FAQ. "How did I get myself into this *dress*?" not quite so much, but the dress *you're* in right now, you're gonna wanna know, believe me. So let me start by saying this;

You know your day's going badly when you're taking fashion advice from the Doctor.

I mean, forget about the bow tie and the fez fetish. This is a man who once wore an outfit so tasteless, his own people put him on trial for it. So when he starts exhuming skeletons from his walk-in closet your fashion sense should probably start some serious tingling...

In fact, if we'd have had *any* sense, we'd would have just grabbed the controls and hurled the TARDIS into the nearest star. Probably safer right? But no, we just stood there laughing, watched the madman with his dressing up box.

See, that's the thing about the Doctor, the thing that makes him so dangerous to be with; he catches you up in his slipstream, makes it all so much *fun*, that you don't know that you're in trouble till you're wearing it.

Case in point, this dress.

Or rather, "*that* dress."

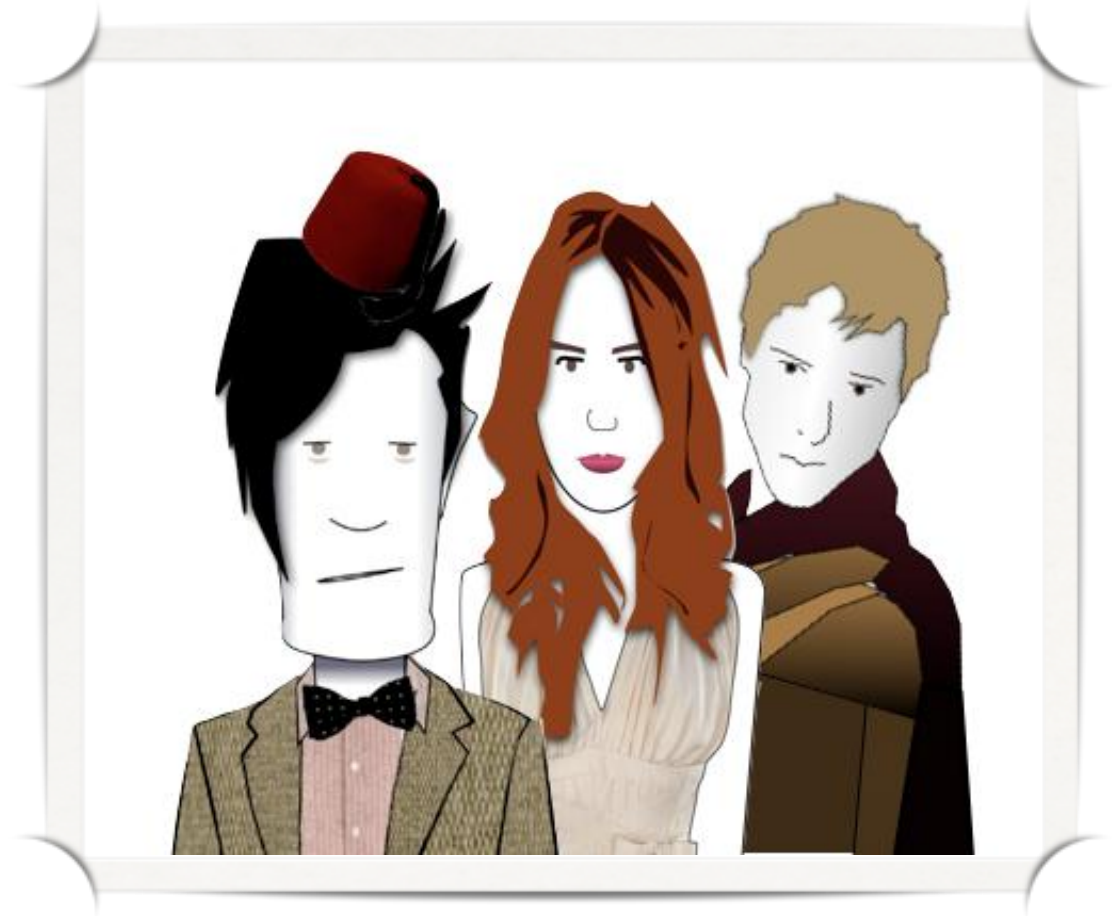
The one we used to have up on that poster on our wall, the one forever blowing up around her legs? Yeah, that's the one you're feeling awkward in right now. Not a copy, not a cover, but *the actual dress* from "*The Seven Year Itch*."

Turns out the Doctor got it in the break up. *OH yeah*, that's right. You're not the only one round here to ditch the "Monroe" you know...

(Oh, and when I said that earlier, I really hope you know I meant the voice and not the dress. I wasn't slipping in any subliminal commands or anything, so if you're about to fling Marilyn Monroe's dress in the Doctor's face and stomp away half naked, for the love of God don't. 'Cause that's exactly how she gave it to him in the first place, and I doubt he wants reminding of it. No putting the "flash" into "flashback" okay? The dress stays on. Just about.)

Of course, the Doctor had to take it in a bit, help us look a little less “glass half empty.” I mean, don’t get me wrong, we can pour ourselves into a dress with the best of them, but we’re never gonna spill a bit like *she* could.

(Sonic Screwdriver setting “two-thousand-four-hundred-and-twenty-eight-E” by the way. “*Basic embroidery*” right next to “*Re-attaching barbed wire.*” Like the Sonic’s filing system was solely designed for making Catwoman outfits...)



So anyway, that’s the “How did I get into this dress?” answered. As for the “Why did I get into this dress....?”

“It’s got a lot of history.”

The Doctor there, with exactly the kind of words you want to hear when a man hands you his ex’s dress to wear. Not that I was the only one currently troubled by skirt issues...

“And *again* with the Roman outfit?”

Rory, doing his best “please don’t put me in the outfit I look ridiculously hot in” act. Fooling no-one, obviously. Like he even *needed* an excuse to break that one

out again. Although to be fair, the Doctor actually *had* one for him; not just a *lot* of history -

“A lot of *ancient* history.”

Which doesn't sound like much more than the Doctor being vague but stick around 'cause it'll all make sense in a minute...

We were in the TARDIS wardrobe room. Or as Rory calls it, “Fashion purgatory.”

And I know there's always been a lot of question marks around the Doctor's choice of fashion. I just hadn't realised how many of them had actually been stitched into his clothing. I mean, let's be honest, when even the *jumper* you're wearing is screaming out “why?” then it's probably time for an image change.

Not that there were any better options in the rows of racks and hangars. Or, as Rory not-so-subtly put it: “The only thing in here with any taste is the stick of celery. And even that's wearing Ian Botham's pajamas.”

The Doctor shrugged off the criticism, shrugged on some kind of smoking jacket/cape affair. (And I don't know if “affair” is the right thing to call it, but it was definitely *something* you'd want to hide from the general public, that's for sure.)

Rory, fast turning into some kind of Roman fashionista, was quick to offer his verdict: “You look like you just mugged Austin Powers.”

I tried the more tactful approach. 'cause criticizing stuff the Doctor *used* to wear is one thing, but dissing what he's into now tends to bring out his “grumpy face.” And that is so not a good look.

“It's a little bit... *retro*, don't you think?”

“We're in a wardrobe on a time machine. Show me something that *isn't* dated.”

“*Grumpy face*” muscles were starting to twitch. Time to bring out the big guns: “*Ask the Doctor some questions*” and “*Look confused when he answers.*” Never fails to cheer him up...

“Okay then, so. What's with the vintage look?”

Which is when the Doctor dropped “The Bomb” bomb.

Now I could bore you with the details -

(I mean, I *really* could. Psychic paper gives you total recall. Which is how I get to remember every word without being some kind of “Rain Man” weirdo. “*Yeah, I’m a good narrator.*” Actually, I’m really not ‘cause I’m wandering again..)

- but we pretty much already covered that one. “Bomb go boom, time go backwards.” And if we were gonna stop it, then it wasn’t just about the *time-code*. There was the *dress code* too...

“We’re turning back the clock!”

The Doctor, in full flow by this point; flouncing round the room, picking random fights with piles of crushed velvet nightmares, then dismissing them again like some kind of Time Lord diva.

“Going old school. *Really* old school. Frock me Amadeus!”

There was now some kind of Mozart-looking wig in his hand and a real sense of danger in the room; this thing could go to his head any second now. Def Con One: time to break out the tag team.

Rory got my look completely, played it nice and cool, distracting him...

“Yeah. That’s a *bit* before our time.”

“No, it’s a *lot* before your time. Which is good.”

Oh it was good all right. ‘Cause now the Doctor was back into his specialist subject: talking. And as he picked up the conversation he also put down the wig...

“You see, a devolution wave doesn’t just target *people*. It targets everything in its path. Every fabric, every fibre, every thread. *Everything* reset.”

I quickly grabbed the hair-piece of history, chucked it under a pile of tartan and fur. Slipped Rory a quick “A-okay” sign as he played it dumb with the Doctor...

“So, what? You mean our jeans are going to just turn into flares or something?”

“No, Rory. I mean your jeans are going to revert to pre-denim cotton, your underwear will revert to a silkworm cocoon, and the only clothing you’ll be wearing is your birthday suit.”

Rory looked across at me a moment, gave me one of his “*you just had to tell him, didn’t you?*” kind of looks. Tried to claw himself back some machismo.

“You know, I don’t know what she’s been telling you but I really don’t wear silk underwear, okay?”

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. Shot Rory a sly kind of smile.

“Rory. Please. You only live once. Why deny yourself the pleasure?”

Life with the Doctor. Never ceases to amaze you.

And so the too-much-history lesson continued, the Doctor now rummaging through the maze of pockets in his smoking jacket as he carried on his spiel.

“It’s all one of my younger selves ever used to wear. Well, not the *only* thing he used to wear, that would have been a little strange. Although there *was* that time he foiled an Ogron attack in just a pair of Calvin’s. Not sure who was the most surprised really, the Ogron or the Brigadier... But anyway, yes, he used to also wear things like *this* which means that *somewhere* in here there’s probably going to be...”

And then he suddenly pulled out this little metal thing, like a tyre pressure gauge, from out of one of his pockets. Waved it up in the air for a bit, conducting this little orchestra of beeps and whirrs and whistles. A fanfare for -

“A very old friend -”

Ancient friend more like. Because it turns out *this* was -

“The Sonic Screwdriver!”

Or at least what used to pass for the Sonic Screwdriver back in the day. Things have definitely changed a bit since then that’s for sure. You could probably find one of *these* things looking embarrassed at the back of your local “Curry’s.”

“*That’s* the Sonic Screwdriver?” Rory again, proving one more time that “tact” does not exist in his dojo.

“It’s not all about the *flashing lights* you know, Rory,” defended the Doctor. “And anyway, design classic this is. Iconic.”

My boys and their toys. Time for me to step in.

“Alright, alright. Let’s not start getting all “Top Gear” about it. It’s a classic Sonic. We get it. It’s got more shelf life. Same with the ‘Seven Year Stitch Up’ and the ‘Rory The Roman.’”

(I was getting one of my rants on. I could tell by the way that the Doctor and Rory were slowly backing away. Didn’t stop me though. Still kept on going...)

“But what about *us*? What’s gonna happen to us if this bomb goes off? ‘cause seven years ago *you* were still late, *he* wasn’t even a nurse and *I* was with a different

kind of Doctor all together. The kind who when they talk about patients regressing don't tend to mean it *literally*."

And I really like to think the Doctor actually had a plan and that he was gonna lay it all out for us there and then, put our minds at ease. Not just drop out of the sky and hope for the best. Which is ironic actually, because exactly then –

– the Cloister Bell boomed out, echoing through every inch of the TARDIS.

For a second I didn't even react, 'cause, you know, it does go off pretty much every day. (When Rory first came on board it took me ages to convince him it wasn't just a clock that went off on the hour.) But then the Doctor started running, heading off towards the Console Room, shouting back like a lunatic: "Hold onto your hatstands!"

Not a chance. We were running after him down the corridors, dressing up gear still in hand.

"What's going on?" I shouted after him.

He didn't stop, just pelted down the stairs towards the Console, started flicking levers like a proper madman. Looked up and gave a nervous little grin as the TARDIS bucked and shuddered.

"We're about to hit the beach!"

Sunlight and sand spilled across the TARDIS floor as Rory opened up the doors and let the world outside fall in. A miniature wall of soft white sand collapsed against his legs, formed little dunes across his feet. A bit of sad looking seaweed clutched against his ankle. Rory looked down at it, looking almost as tragic. Finally let out the sigh he'd been saving up for a while now.

"You know, when most people say 'hit the beach' they don't actually mean it literally."

He kicked himself free, then trudged outside.

I grabbed a pair of sunglasses from the console, slipped the heels I was wearing off and into my hands, and headed down the ramp towards the door, calling out another question from the list of Time Travel FAQ: "What's it like out there?"

(Pretty high on the list that one actually. Pretty understandable too, especially as the Doctor's like the worst travel agent in history. When "sonic spires,

crystal mountains, and a lake of pure tranquility” turns out to be a quarry filled with monsters for the fiftieth time, you tend to chuck the brochure out the window and go with the view from the doors before you let yourself get too excited.)

But actually, stepping out behind him, this world was looking pretty promising. The sand was warm and white and everywhere. The sky was paintbox blue, the sun was hardly shy and there was a bunch of lush shady jungle at the edge of the beach. Or to sum it up *à la Rory*: “It’s like an episode of ‘Lost.’” He looked around as he gave his verdict. “Sun, sea, sand. Impenetrable jungle. Impenetrable plot.”

The Doctor’s voice drifted out from behind us. “You know, it’s really not that complicated.”

The Doctor stood leaning in the TARDIS doorway, decked out in that classic beach wear you’ve no doubt seen in countless movies: the top hat and tails. I know, right? Honestly, the man is such a poser sometimes it’s unbelievable. Still, at least it distracted Rory from making another comment about the Doctor’s parking.

Which was pretty bad, it had to be said. Or rather *not* said. ‘Cause it’s bad enough to criticize a normal guy’s driving, but to criticize the Doctor’s? Ouch.

Nine hundred years behind the wheel you’d think he’d have least got the parallel parking bit sorted. By which I mean parking the TARDIS without it being almost parallel to the beach. Right now it was sticking out of the sand like the flake in a “99” ice cream. *Slightly* embarrassing.

(Because apparently a “normal” landing would have been too risky, some bunch of stuff about the temporal engines setting off a wave of boring. I mean I *could* recite the entire conversation but let’s be honest, this is me I’m talking to. You’re going to shut off just like I did. Let’s just leave it at “*In order not to set off the bomb the Doctor had to land the TARDIS from the sky. Pretty badly.*”)

So anyway, the Doctor kicked the sand out the doorway as he pulled the TARDIS shut, talking all the way as usual.

“We just rock up, we be magnificent, and then we save the day in style. Couldn’t be simpler.”

He gave the TARDIS door a little pat, pocketed the key in his top pocket, then walked across to join us, sand kicking up all over his spats. *So over-dressed I couldn't help but smile.*

"Look at you, all 'Putting On The Ritz.'"

He gave a little bow, flicked his hat along his arm. The kind of move he likes to make out is spontaneous, but you know he's really spent all week practicing in front of a mirror in the TARDIS.

"Just a little something I threw together. Seemed rather appropriate."

"What? For the beach?"

He looked back at me in that infuriating way that he does from time to time. Like *I* was the idiot. (Although, to be fair, stood on a beach dressed up as Marilyn Monroe, in between Kirk Douglas in "El Cid" and Fred Astaire in "Top Hat" that was kind of how I felt. Like a "Stars In Their Eyes" Caribbean special. *"Tonight Matthew, I'm going to be feeling pretty awkward. Please don't ask me to sing."*)

"No, Pond. Not for the beach. For New Year's Eve!"

He put his arms round us both, gave us an excited smile. Of course, yeah sure. Like we really should have known.

Rory took another look around, probably scanning for a beach bar, or some kind of party. But nothing doing.

"*This* is New Year's Eve?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yep" smiled the Doctor, taking a quick glance at his watch. "Just over three hours to go." He rubbed his hands together in anticipation, gave us both a little nudge. "Bit of fancy dress, just what you need. Go out in the old, see in the new."

"It's a bit bright for fireworks isn't it?" said Rory, scanning the skyline, shielding his eyes with his hand. The sun wasn't even at high noon yet, but you had to squint against the blue. The Doctor switched into travel guide mode: "We're on the island of Pan Carabessa on the fifth moon of Phemera. Round here the New Year kicks in at midday."

"Seems a bit daft."

"Their planet Rory, their rules."

"So it *is* inhabited then?" I had to ask, 'cause if it had been me living here, I'd have least have been sat in the shade with a magazine and an iced tea. (Yeah, we still

don't tan I'm afraid. "Bone white" or "flash fried," that's your choice of skin tones right there.) But anyway, yeah. *This* beach was completely deserted. Turns out all the action was in -

"S'Ansara City. About three miles that way," pointed the Doctor.

"Right. And that's where we're headed is it? Through the three miles of jungle?" Like Rory didn't already know the answer to *that* one. The Doctor already had the antique Sonic out and was scanning in that direction, translating the "R2-D2" beeps into "The Screwdriver's Guide To The Galaxy";

"About a thousand people in a city five miles wide with a level of technology roughly comparable to the Roman Empire. All sitting on a pile of pent up temporal energy, the level of which is, frankly, scary." He gave us both a little smile, loving how this day was panning out. "So yeah. You bet we're heading that way."

And with that he was off, striding through the sand towards the tree line, calling back to us over his shoulder: "Come along Ponds! Work to do!"

Rory shook his head, tried not to let the smile escape his lips. "Why do I just *know* that this is his idea of a New Year's Eve party?"

I just smiled and shrugged. Couldn't help myself. I grabbed his hand and away we trudged, across the sand. Caught up in the Doctor's slipstream once again.

So the jungle was fun.

(And if you have a psychic emoticon for "*Nuclear levels of sarcasm*" please feel free to insert it right about here.)

Unless, of course, walking across a carpet of crawling things in a pair of open-toed Manolo's is your idea of a good time.

(Mind you, knowing you like I do, walking *anywhere* in a pair of open-toed Manolo's would be pretty far from a good time. Because they're not *black Converse* are they? Honestly, "Sex & The City" never stood a chance. Not when you've got "The Raggedy Doctor" as your style icon.)

I wasn't the only one suffering for my art. Rory the sandal wearing Roman was also getting a bit "Veni, Venti, Bici." (Latin for "He came, he swore, he grumbled." Actually sounds a bit *Welsh* when you say it, which is weird...)

"So what *exactly* are we looking for?"

The Doctor was letting the vintage Screwdriver lead, continually holding it out and then grinning at the ZX Spectrum sound effects.

“Keep up at the back there Rory. We already covered that one on the TARDIS.”

“Yeah, got that bit thanks. I was actually there for the briefing. With the... briefs.”

Bless him. He *does* always struggle with underwear. Don't know why, but the lingerie section in department stores is like his own private hell. Think it's 'cause he hurts his eyes trying to stare at safe bits like the “Pay Here” sign and the floor.

“What I *meant* was ‘What does it look like?’”

“Couldn't tell you. It's “The Constant Promethian.” One of Rassilon's little nasties from the Time War. Comes with chameleon circuitry fitted as standard. Could be anything around us.”

I couldn't help myself. The words just popped out of their own free will.

“Oh. My. God.”

“What is it?”

The Doctor had stopped in his tracks, concern all over his face. Didn't stop me though. Sometimes you just have to call him on these things.

“You gave the bomb a *name*?”

Rory couldn't help himself either: “You gave the bomb a *really pretentious name*?”

The Doctor shifted awkwardly, tried to shrug it off. Not a chance.

“It was a *Time War*. Everything was very...” He squirmed a little at the thought of it, embarrassed at the words coming out of his mouth. “...prog.”

Grumpy face be damned. This was fun for a moment. Took my mind off the creature feature round my ankles anyway.

“Oh I'll bet it was. You and your Time Lord mates making up big scary names for all of your weapons. Like a bunch of sixth formers playing ‘Dungeons and Dragons.’”

I was on a roll by this point. Threw in an impersonation of the Doctor for the win...

“Chuck us the dice Rassilon, another double six and I can slay “The Constant Promethian.””

The Doctor got his strop on, tried to defend the outbreak of Tolkien.

“It’s a temporal weapon with the power to strip entire generations from the fabric of history. We’re hardly going to call it ‘Bob’ now are we?”

“Oh I don’t know, I quite like ‘Bob.’ Makes it sound pretty sweet.”

My teasing smile was probably the breaking point. The Doctor shook his head, then turned on his heels, went back to holding out the Sonic like a retro-metal detector. Voice laced with sarcasm as he called back after us.

“Okay then, fine. If it makes you feel better. Rory? We’re looking for ‘Bob.’ Master of disguise, nasty habit of exploding.”

“Oh. Okay. Great.” The enthusiasm in Rory’s voice was inaudible. “I’ll just keep an eye out for an unexploded bomb in a gorilla suit then shall I?”

The Doctor really wasn’t listening by this point. Wrapped up so much in his lo-fi Sonic radar he was practically correcting Rory via auto-pilot;

“This is Pan Carabessa, Rory. They don’t have gorillas on Pan Carabessa.”

Which is true. They really don’t.

They just have far, far worse.

And as we made our way into the jungle, although we didn’t know it yet, we were being tracked by something weird. And something also pretty wild.

Rory was the first to sense it.

“You know, I hate to sound all ‘Scooby Doo’, but does anybody else get the feeling that they’re being watched?”

We were following a rough kind of path through the trees but either side of us was proper sweaty jungle, all dense undergrowth and shadows. Plenty of space for the imagination to run wild in.

The Doctor slowly swept the area with the Sonic. Whispered back at us dramatically... “Not until about five seconds ago.”

Rory found himself whispering back as he squinted at shadows.

“Why? What happened five seconds ago?”

“You asked that question.”

We both let out a sigh, gave the oh-so-satisfied-with-himself Doctor a look.
“Okay then matey, fine. One-all on the wind ups.”

The Doctor was about to put the Sonic away when it gave a different “beep” than it had done just before. Just a semitone higher, but enough to wipe the smile off the Doctor’s, and in that case *all*, of our faces. He aimed the Sonic back in that direction. Got an identical “beep” in return. Gave us both another whisper;

“Although... Now you mention it...”

We were instinctively bunching up by this point, the whispering becoming contagious. Even *I* was doing it, and all we know the gob that *I’ve* got...

“What is it?”

“Excellent question Pond. Glad you asked. Natural history badge in the post.”

The Doctor was riffing. He tends to do that a lot when he’s nervous, like he’s sponsored by the syllable. So this was probably not good. Time to try and focus him -

“Yeah, thanks for that. But do you actually *know*?”

“Course I know. I know everything. I’m just working out how to break it to you is all.”

Rory followed the Doctor’s gaze; a dingy gap between some nearby trees, frustratingly coated in shadow. Kept his eye on the spot all the time as he spoke.

“Well I don’t know about Amy but I’ll just settle for ‘quickly’ thanks...”

“Works for me,” I nodded.

“Okay then, fine.” The Doctor checked the readings one more time. Still not changing to “good news.” Broke out the inter-galactic “*David Attenborough*” act.
“What we’re facing here is a Koralla Para Kalla. A carnivorous quadruped with an inbuilt cloaking device.”

“Oh, well that’s just fantastic,” said Rory, pulling out the pop culture comfort blanket. “We’re on the wrong island. This isn’t ‘Lost’, this is ‘Predator.’”

(My fault for buying him that “101 Movies To Watch Before You Die” book last year. We’ve had to watch a movie every day now just in case.)

“Kind of,” replied the Doctor, still not taking *his* eyes off the spot. “Except thicker, and squatter, and four legs, and more teeth. Oh, and it can only retain its camouflage by remaining absolutely motionless.”

Rory nodded towards the nothingness in the dark.

“So what does that mean then?”

The Doctor flicked the Sonic round his fingers, slipped it back into his pocket. Gave us both a manic little grin.

“It means we’ve got a head start.”

It took a second to dawn on us. And so the Doctor shouted -

“RUN!”

And then it dawned on us pretty fast.

Word of advice if you ever have to run in heels; bring your passport. ‘Cause you’re about to enter a world of pain.

We belted past trees, our clothes and skin scratched by branches, trying to find a path in the semi-darkness that didn’t have some alien nasty on the end of it. The canopy above us held out the sunlight so well we might as well have been running blindfold. Which is *my* excuse for falling flat on my face and I’m sticking to it.

I don’t know what it was that tripped me over but I hit the floor so hard it knocked the wind out of me. Another burst of adrenaline kicked in and I rolled around on to my back but it was no good; there was this creature bearing down on me, maybe fifteen feet away, and there was no way I was getting out of its path. This kind of hybrid thing, between a rhino and a panther, but with a face that was pretty much just teeth, had picked me out from our three course menu; I was the tasty little starter.

And there’s a lot of reasons why I love my man so very, very much. And as you’re fifteen years old I don’t want to spoil them *all* for you, but I will say this; he does not let *anything - ever* - mess around with his girl.

“Amy!”

I couldn’t see him right then but I knew that cry alright. Knew what was coming. Just didn’t know if it would work.

Rory landed in front of me, sword drawn for battle, standing guard between his Amy and the world like he had done for forever. My boy, my man, my “Lone Centurion,” ready to step up and die just to buy me some time.

I mean, I’m not trying to make you swoon here or anything, but you’ve got to admit: it’s pretty bloody high on the list of romantic gestures.

Plus it doesn’t hurt that he looks hot in a skirt.

Certainly made the Koralla Para Kalla think twice anyway.

It skidded to a halt about some six feet away, baring teeth and letting out this hell-a-scary growl, but it didn't come any closer. Just stayed there, dragging its claws across the dirt, and glaring at us. The pussy.

"Okay then. Right. Wasn't really expecting that to work." Rory kept his sword trained on the furry bag of hate as he caught his breath a moment. "Kind of glad it did though."

"At ease Centurion." The Doctor came over, stooping down to pick me up, his Sonic sussing out the situation as he spoke.

"Say what?" Rory kept his eyes firmly on the big toothy fur-ball. The creature just stared past him, kept its glare fixed firmly our way.

"Don't take this the wrong way Rory... But it isn't *you* our friend here's scared of." He aimed the Sonic at a nearby tree, checked the reading. "It's the age difference."

Rory gave the Koralla Para Kalla a weird little look. It returned the favour by baring its teeth even more.

"Yeah. Maybe I'm getting mixed signals over here, but I really don't think she's interested in dating."

"Oh, but she is." The Doctor was bounding round the little clearing we'd fallen into, checking every plant and tree that he could get to. Scanning from them, then back out into the jungle where we'd come from. Reacting to the "beeps" with a satisfied smile;

"*Carbon* dating." He pointed to a nearby tree, the one our bitey little stalker had stopped in line with. "You see that tree? That's the boundary marker right there."

He moved a little closer, careful not to get too close to "*The Fur and the Furious*." Pointed out the thing we hadn't we noticed. Because, you know, why would we?

"The side of the tree facing 'Mrs. Teeth' here is exactly seventy-seven years older than the side facing *us*. The side of that tree over *there*, the side facing *us*, exactly seventy-seven years younger than the side facing out. Everything this side of

those trees, *exactly* seventy-seven years younger than the world beyond. To. The. Second.”

I squinted at the trees. Couldn't really tell the difference. What's seventy-seven years to a tree, right? But the Sonic could see it. The Doctor too. And so could bitey girl, staying put behind the line that she had clawed out in the dirt. Okay, nice action. But there had to be a reason. It didn't take me long to throw out a guess;

“This is a ‘Bob’ thing isn't it?”

The Doctor nodded. (Bonus points to “The Pond.”)

“We're inside the blast radius. The outer edges.”

Rory looked concerned. “You mean we're too late? It's already gone off?”

“It's a temporal weapon. Late is relative.” The Doctor studied the readings again, working out the world we'd walked into. “But yeah, it's gone off alright. And more than once.” He took another look around, almost asking the trees directly;

“But why?”

“Doctor...” Rory's voice was low and urgent. And not surprisingly either.

The Koralla Para Kalla was moving backwards, padding out a figure of eight in the dirt, its eyes on Rory all the time.

“What's it doing?”

The Doctor came and stood beside Rory. Didn't need the Sonic to read this situation.

“Working out what she's more afraid of probably. Going beyond her comfort zone or going home hungry...”

“Yeah, but, we're in the safety spot right?”

The Doctor gave a grim little smile.

“Oh I don't think we're out of the woods just yet...”

The Koralla Para Kalla had stopped its back and forth and had made its mind up. Scary trees or not, this was dinner time. It stomped its claws against the earth, coiled back a wall of sinewy muscle, every vicious little part now getting ready for the run up...

Rory called back to me. “Amy! Run!”

Yeah, I know. I really should have. But I just stood there, hoping maybe I could help if it all kicked off. Not exactly brave, just stupid.

The Doctor was frantically zapping the Sonic at the creature, pulsing through a range of high pitched signals. Annoying Rory more than anything...

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to find a frequency her ears can’t handle. Make her maybe think twice about a snack attack.”

“You couldn’t have done that before?”

“I was scanning the wildlife!”

The Doctor’s voice was frantic as he searched through the sounds. And with a bit more time he’d have probably found just what he needed. But the Koralla Para Kalla was done with the waiting. The massive beast was steaming down towards them, fresh razor teeth splitting out of its jaws, filling all the air before it with this sky-shaking *roar* before -

Bam.

- hitting the ground in a crumpled dead heap; one giant spear and a quiver’s worth of crossbow bolts buried deep in its hide.

We all stood still for about a second. Tried to process the shock. I was the first to find my voice. *“What just happened?!”*

But before anyone could even hazard a guess, something else started happening; something freaky. The weird that had been following the wild...

A bunch of mask-wearing shapes detached themselves from the surrounding jungle shadows, unmoving wooden faces patched up with straggly fur and daubed with war paint, skinny bodies wrapped up in robes and patchwork animal skins. A bunch of “Short Rounds” too, the lot of them. None of them more than four or five feet tall.

“I think we just got rescued by some Ewoks,” said Rory, processing the weird the only way he knew how to.

Another group of masks emerged from a patch of nearby brier. Slightly taller than the others, their masks adorned with horns and not furs, these were obviously the group that had felled our monster; every one of them holding a nifty little

crossbow. Their leader, the tallest of them, pulled back his mask. Revealed the face of a teenage boy, no more than fourteen probably.

Rory re-assessed his opinion. "Okay then... Maybe *not* Ewoks."

This second group now aimed their crossbows our way. Rory re-assessed his opinion one more time.

"And maybe *not* rescued... "

"And maybe you should put down your sword," hissed the Doctor, trying to project a calming smile through gritted teeth.

"Oh yeah. Right. Sorry," said Rory awkwardly, before gingerly setting the weapon down in the grass.

Two of the taller kids at the front fell into a little conversation as they trained their weapons on us. We later found out the taller, slightly more athletic one, was called Lux DiLanthe. The other one, the one talking right now, was Dap Dupello. Whatever else these S'ansarans were into, they were obviously pretty big on the alliteration.

"Think he's a Sandman?" asked Dap warily, their weapons tracking every movement Rory was making.

Lux shook his head, gave a little "big man" scowl. The kind you see on chav kids outside the Leadworth Co-Op on a Friday night.

"He's not a Sandman," he said, his voice a little deeper than Dap's. "Sandmen never run."

The Leadworth memories were obviously flooding back to Rory too, reacting just a little *too* defensively to being rated by a couple of jungle cub scouts.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he said sarcastically. "Just this allergic reaction I get when I see invisible jungle monsters in my rear view mirror."

"Pardon me for asking," said the Doctor, stepping forward slightly, "but what exactly *is* a "Sandman?"

Dap looked across at him as if he was mad. Spoke to him that way too come to think of it...

"Temporial Guard," he told the weirdly suited madman. And then, with extra "*surely you must have heard of them*" emphasis: "The Lord Tempora's huntsmen?"

Dap looked genuinely thrown by the puzzled exchange of looks and shrugged shoulders his reply brought out of us.

Lux wasn't having any of it though. "They're playing with you, stupid," he snorted. "They know full well what Sandmen are."

The Doctor looked the little big man in the eye, gave a knowing smile.

"No," he replied enigmatically. "But I think I'm getting it."

(Why does he never just turn around and say "*Hey guess what Amy and Rory, I've worked this out already now. It's all just 'this, this and this.'* Fancy heading back to the *TARDIS* to watch some telly?" instead of leaving us to hang and try and work things out for ourselves. Life would just be so much easier...)

If the Doctor *was* thinking of sharing any big brain stuff around, his train of thought was properly derailed then anyway, a sudden minor tremor striking the island, causing everything around us to go all "*shaky-cam*" for a moment or two.

"What was that?" I asked another moment later, as the mini-quake subsided.

Dap took it upon himself to answer the question. Probably wanted to impress me. He had that little blushing thing going on his face, the blood in his body not quite sure where to rush to every time he looked my way. (I'm not trying to sound full of ourselves here, by the way, just stating the facts. Plus, he was a teenage boy in a loincloth, hanging out with lots of other teenage boys in loincloths. Chances are he might have been really excited about my *dress* more than anything else...)

"Tempora's Hourglass," said Dap, excitedly. "It's beginning to turn."

"Tempora's Hourglass," said the Doctor, shooting me and Rory a smug little look. "Bit pretentious don't you think?"

Dap was definitely getting freaked out by our apparent calm in the face of what *he* was pretty sure was *Danger* with a capital "*D*".

"Stay standing there and the sands will find you out," he called out to us.

"You need to run!"

"No," said *Lux* decisively. He threatened his crossbow at us even more as he spoke, the little jungle ASBO. "You need to come with us."

He turned to Dap and the rest of his posse, explained it to them. "They may be spies," he said dramatically. "We'll let Old Man Sand decide what to do with them."

Nods and whispers broke out among his little gang of followers like a fresh bout of acne as they processed this course of action.

“And I don’t suppose you’d like to come in here and get us would you?” asked the Doctor with a mischievous smile. He watched the rows of awkward glances and nervous looks that followed. “Any takers? No?”

He turned to me and Rory, gave a satisfied smile. “Didn’t think so somehow,” he said.

Lux marched a little closer, menacing as ever with the crossbow. Not too close to breach the boundary, but enough to get the respect of his little posse.

“We could send in our arrows, leave you dead if you’d like,” he said in his best grown up threatening voice, giving a little shrug as he spoke, like this was no big deal. “Let the sands bring you back around in time.”

That last bit I had no idea about, but then again, he *kind* of had me at “arrows...”

The Doctor got it though. Got pretty much everything by this point.

“No need for that,” he said, still smiling. “I’m sure we’d love another little walk in the jungle. Oh and blindfolded too. That’s Amy’s speciality!”

He looked across to where several others of Lux’s gang were holding out leather strips that they’d pulled from their headbands.

Yep. All we needed now were the handcuffs and it would’ve been a real “*New Year’s Eve*” party...

“Old Man Sand” turned out to be a man named S’an DeLorca.

Like all the jungle juniors, his skin was olive blushed and burnished, a kind of Mediterranean look going on, and he wore the standard mix of robes and bits of leather.

Unlike the kids he commanded, he could also grow a proper beard, his one all close cropped and silver. Less Gandalf, more Sean Connery. For a fella pushing eighty, the rest of him was in pretty good shape too. I mean, I’m no Catherine Zeta Jones, but even *I* could tell he was rocking the sexy pensioner vibe pretty hard.

Plus, the other major difference?

The dude could smile.

“Welcome to sanctuary!” he beamed, as we pulled back our blindfolds, blinked the world into focus.

We were on another stretch of sand, this one bordered by jungle and mountain. A gaping cave mouth yawned behind us, curtained by a draping fall of water leading out into the sea. Such a lush little slice of paradise it was all I could do not to order Piña Colada.

S’an shook us all by the hands, apologising for the journey as if we’d just arrived at some kind of hideaway holiday resort. “Lux likes to take the scenic route I’m afraid. Not that you can appreciate that from behind a *blindfold*...”

He looked pointedly at Lux who was standing guard nearby, still rolling deep with his gang of noble little chav-ages. Lux looked awkwardly away a second, suddenly more embarrassed teenager than hardened jungle hunter. Whatever else you could say about these kids, they at least had respect for their Elder.

“S’an DeLorca. At your service.”

S’an gestured for us to take a seat at a makeshift table of rocks, as around us most of the kids got to work at stripping down the Koralla carcass, building up a fire to cook it on. Like a really brutal episode of *Junior MasterChef*.”

“I take it then the ‘Sand’ is short for S’an Delorca?” smiled the Doctor as he sat himself down. Like he hadn’t worked the whole thing out already, the little liar.

“That, and the fact I used to be a Sandman myself.”

S’an ignored the Doctor’s feigned look of surprise, instead plucked Rory’s sword out of the sand where Lux had planted it, checking it over as he spoke. “Which is why I can tell that you’re no Sandman.” He was looking now at Rory, who nodded hopefully down towards the weapon.

“Different sword is it?”

S’an gave a gentle smile back. “Different swordsman.”

“Oh right. Thanks,” said Rory. “Now I’m getting dissed by pensioners as well.”

S’an gestured around us with the sword, pointing out the horde of swarming kids. “Once I was their guard. Now I’m their guardian.”

“Strange career move,” said the Doctor. “Swapping warfare for childcare.”

“You’ve obviously never looked after children before,” said S’an, smiling wryly as he placed the sword back in the sand. “It’s not so different you know.”

“And you’re the only adult?” I asked. ‘Cause there was no-one else around looking even troubled by puberty except for Lux, and he was hardly what I’d call responsible.

S’an craned his neck, like he was looking round the group of kids for the first time ever. Turned back to me, teasing; “It certainly looks that way doesn’t it?”

Though I didn’t get the in-joke yet, the Doctor wasn’t fooled for a heart beat. “Exactly how old *are* you S’an?”

“This coming year I should be one hundred and eight.” His smile was sadder this time, the eyes no longer sparkling.

“Wow,” said Rory. “Talk about your Mediterranean living.”

S’an looked puzzled. “*Mediterranean?*”

“He means the years have been kind,” I covered, shooting Rory a quick “*We’re not in Kansas anymore, stupid*” kind of look.

“The years outside that city have been anything but,” said S’an, sounding suddenly bitter. “But I would never go back. My life there is dead. Not even Tempora’s sands could bring that back to me now.”

“You *should* be one hundred and eight,” said the Doctor, taking a short cut through the conversation to get back to his point. “Only you’re not though are you? You’re more like, what? Eighty?”

“Eighty-one,” confirmed S’an.

“I don’t get it,” said Rory. I didn’t either, but that’s my man for you; always taking the fall for me.

“Tempora’s Hourglass!” boomed the Doctor, grandly. “The Constant Promethian!”

He was up on his feet by this point, attracting bemused stares from pretty much everyone, ourselves included. He slapped his arms round mine and Rory’s shoulders, nodding at S’an while still grinning like a loon. “Or, if you’d rather, ‘Bob!’”

Rory followed the Doctor’s gaze, staring puzzled at S’an. “*He’s ‘Bob?’*” he asked, mentally flailing.

“No Rory, he’s not ‘Bob,’” said the Doctor disparagingly, now moving round to clasp his arm round S’an’s shoulder. “This is S’an DeLorca. Pay attention.”

The Doctor turned to S'an a moment, giving him a little pat on the shoulder. "Sorry 'bout that S'an," he whispered loudly. "Kids, eh? Never listen."

I had to 'fess up too. Couldn't stand to see Rory copping all the "stupid" on his own.

"Or you could just try explaining what's going on a second, help us out," I said, giving the Doctor one of my best "*moody girl*" stares.

I suddenly realised S'an was staring at us all, like we were all like, maybe, I don't know... from another planet?

"You really don't know what's been happening all these years?" he asked, incredulous.

"Oh I bet that *smarty pants* over there has got a pretty good idea," I said, trying to cover up the fact I'd just said "*smarty pants*" for the first time since I was about five by giving the Doctor a really grown up, pouty glare. "As for the rest of us..."

"We kind of just... dropped in," said Rory, gesturing up at the sky.

"Here to pick something up," continued the Doctor, jumping up onto one of the rocks. "Something that shouldn't be here..."

He gave S'an one of those infuriating smiles of his. The one he breaks out when he already knows the answer to the question he's about to ask. Which in this case was this: "Why don't you tell us all about the Lord Tempora?"

"The Lord Tempora is a madman." The reply was simple, almost bare of emotion.

"He doesn't have a box does he?" chipped in Rory, shooting the Doctor a little look.

"He has an hourglass," continued S'an, "and with the hourglass he can turn back history. Send the sands of time backwards. Which he does, every seven years, on 'Tempora's Eve.'"

"Which is today," said the Doctor, checking his watch. "In just over an hour, am I right?"

S'an nodded gravely.

"But why do that?" I asked.

“He craves perfection. Nothing less.” S’an shook his head, maybe lost in his memories a moment. The beaming smile had long since gone, probably wasn’t coming back for a good while yet. A hollow kind of grin took its place as he spoke. “He lives his life in the ruthless pursuit of it. Believes the world within his reach should share in his obsession.”

“Define ‘perfection,’” asked the Doctor, still looking down from his rock.

“A life without regret,” stated S’an, giving a little shrug as he recited the words.

“But that’s not possible,” said Rory, looking more than a little concerned.

“Tell that to Lord Tempora,” said S’an, now very much looking every day of his eighty-one years all of a sudden. Like a broken old man.

“Wrong decisions, missed opportunities, screwing everything up. That’s what makes us... *human?*” Rory shot a quick look at the Doctor, just to check he wasn’t screwing this up as well. The Doctor give a little nod back; yeah, the S’ansarans were human. Rory carried on with the speech. “These are all the things you have to learn from. You can’t just... *cheat.*”

Bless him. He was probably having flashbacks to all the cringe-inducing moments he’d ever been through. Not to mention the haircuts. For someone who’d spent their teenage years in an almost permanent state of squirm, finding out that life had probably had a reset button all along was a bit too much to take.

“So the clock gets turned back, and the city rewinds,” mused the Doctor, idly jumping down from his rock. “But then you still erase the memory. So how do you ensure the mistakes of the last seven years don’t simply get repeated?”

“The Cave of Tears,” said S’an.

“The Cave of Tears,” said the Doctor, wrapping his mouth deliberately around the words. “Oh yes, I like that one. Overly dramatic names. Under appreciated art form.” He gave us all a little smile, loving the fact he wasn’t the only one round here chucking out the dodgy titles.

The Doctor took a seat beside S’an, put his arm around the old man’s shoulder.

“So then, S’an old fella,” he went on, “this ‘Cave of Tears.’”

He paused a moment, pulled on his best “BFF” smile. The one you have to watch out for, because it’s usually followed with the kind of request that should come with a public health warning. A request like -

“How about you let us all take a peak inside...?”

There had been a change of plan.

Obviously this had come as a massive shock to me and Rory, who’d had no idea there was even a plan in the first place, let alone one we could actually change.

‘Course, if we *had’ve* known then you can bet we’d have made some pretty serious revisions to it, that’s for sure. Like maybe scrapping the mile long trek through the grimy, dodgy tunnels and the subsequent clambering through every rotten, dirty crawlspace on the planet. We’d have probably added in a shower and some drinks by the beach while we were at it too.

Instead, we got a tour of every pokey little nightmare we could squeeze through, all these nasty little cave mouths stuffed with stalactite teeth and a persistent urge to bite. A definite “Raiders Of The Lost Ark” vibe going on by this point. Especially now the dress I was in was fast becoming this filthy, torn up mess of fabric; less “Marilyn,” more “Marion.”

And all because “The Cave of Tears” had been a spot too hot to get to.

Heavily guarded at the best of times, on “Tempora’s Eve” it was like a fortress. Mind you, as I scraped another fresh patch of skin against another vicious little scrap of rock, my knees didn’t care about the odds. By this point pretty much *all* of me was screaming out for a fight. “*Bring it on soldier boys!*” At least I’d get out of this bloody cave system.

But no. The plan had changed.

Now we were heading somewhere worse

According to S’an there were only really two caves that mattered to any S’ansaran on the planet; the “Cave of Tears” and the “Cave of Life.”

The “Cave of *Tears*” works like this: every seven years, just before the clock gets reset, every S’ansaran takes a walk out to the cave, which is outside the range of any time travel weirdness, and then they write themselves a letter, leave it there in a little wooden box. Like a time capsule in reverse.

Then, once the clock gets turned back and they're all seven years younger, with their memories now reset, they take another wander out and pick up their letter (or, as Rory calls it, their "cheat sheet"). And inside the letter are all the things their sort-of-future self messed up, all the mistakes they'd made, the bad choices, whatever. So now *this* version of them gets to try and avoid all those mistakes, get it right this time. Better living through time travel.

Then there's the hilariously titled "Cave of *Life*," which is where we're both now standing. Though to be fair, I'm guessing you're seeing it in a better light than I am.

How did we end up *here*? Well let me finish up, 'cause time bomb's a-ticking...

Our guide was S'an, constantly lighting up the way with his torchlight and the conversation with his commentary. As he picked out every path and made his limber way through every crack I couldn't help but think that he was depressingly spry for an old guy. I was *also* thinking "*Can't we just stop a minute?*" and "*At least take a breath why don't you?*" but I held off actually saying it.

Not least because the story he was telling as he lead us underneath this strange, messed up planet of his was just so mad that every one of us - even the Doctor - was now hanging on his every word...

"I was thirty-two the first 'Tempora's Day.' I'd been a husband twenty years, and a Sandman twenty-two, my life in two perfect halves. To *me*, 'regret' was an unknown country. But to the Lord Tempora..." S'an let slip a wry little smile as he spoke. "Well, the man was a frequent visitor to its shores, carried there on brutal moods and his waves of anger. But now he had the Hourglass of course," said S'an, turning up the sarcasm to eleven. "Now everything would be alright."

He held his torch out ahead of him, briefly considering a junction of passages, before leading us off into another predictably narrow alley in the rock.

"I was Temporal Guard," he went on, "so it was never an option to question the Lord High Tempora's decree, but there were others in the citadel who had voiced their concerns.

“Tempora listened to every one of them, then made his promise; at the end of every turn of the Hourglass, before the time turned back again, any citizen who wished to leave the city was free to do so. Free to grow old and move on.

“More than that, Tempora would see that there was a settlement built for them, a place beyond the reach of the Hourglass. If life was good then move on, but if you had made your mistakes then remain, let the sands take you back to the start.”

The alleyway at last became *another* cave, this one leading to what I hoped would be our final grotty grotto of the day. S’an seemed happy that we’d maybe reached our destination, suddenly jamming his torch into a crack in the rock, then taking a seat on a mossy outcrop.

The Doctor scanned the entrance to another nearby passageway. “This is it,” he said. “This is the boundary. Beyond this point it’s rewind time.”

S’an nodded towards the gap in the rock. “The ‘Cave of Life’ can be found through there,” he confirmed.

“Which is where they keep the dead people,” said Rory, still looking slightly puzzled by the whole affair.

“That’d be the one,” smiled the Doctor, briefly placing his hand on Rory’s shoulder as he swept past him.

“I am the only one round here who finds this whole place really confusing?” said Rory, shaking his head. I was gonna back him up, maybe mouth a silent “nope” his way, but the Doctor was back into mouth mode himself by this point;

“I shouldn’t worry about it Rory,” said the Doctor. “Time we get in there in, oh, about... twenty minutes time,” he said, checking his watch, “place’ll be teeming with life. Won’t be able to move without bumping into a recently ex-deceased.”

“Yeah, that’s really not as comforting as you probably think it is,” said Rory, giving a little shiver.

I’ll admit, the thought had freaked *me* out a little bit too. Something weird about burying your dead, and then, seven years later - pop! - back up they come. I mean, I know me and Rory have got previous when it comes to reanimation, but when *we* do it, it’s more kinda romantic than creepy. This just felt kind of - *yeesh*.

Anyway, the Doctor didn't care. (Big surprise there, right?) He had other things on his mind. Like prying out the final nasty bits of S'an's life story...

"The thing I want to know about," said the Doctor, taking a seat on a rock opposite S'an, "is the children." He pulled out that smile again. The '*tell me just how clever I really am*' smile that he loves to throw down at a time like this. Leaning forward as he spoke. "Because they're not really children, are they?"

Okay, so. You're probably way smarter than me. Let's be honest, you're at that age where you think you know everything anyway, so you probably saw this one coming back at the Koralla bit. But for me and Rory, (especially Rory) this next bit was a revelation.

"They're my penance," sighed S'an, leaning forward himself a moment as he rubbed his face in his hands, weary with the weight of the world all of a sudden. "The debt I have to pay."

He straightened himself up again, ready to get this off of his chest...

"It wasn't till my fourth 'Tempora's Day' that I woke up to the lie of it all," he said, the regret in his voice palpable now. "You see, there *was* no 'settlement' for all of those who had wished to leave the citadel. There was only the 'school'."

He paused a moment as the emotion choked his voice a little, the story obviously a hard one to tell.

"All of those who had left us over the years, all the free spirits and the poets and the dissidents, Tempora hadn't granted them *freedom*. Instead he'd had them secretly rounded up by the Temporal Guard, delivered to his palace. This was where he would give his *true* 'gift' to those who wished to turn away from his rule: to expose them to the Hourglass, make them children again. Once the deed was done the Guard then spirited these new creations away out of the citadel, to a place beyond the Hourglass's reach. To the 'school'."

There was an anger in his voice now as he spoke, simmering just below the surface. Gave me the feeling that, for all his old man pleasantries, back in his day S'an DeLorca was probably not the kind of guy you'd want to get on the wrong side of...

"The 'school' was where they'd then be re-educated/ Tempora's fiercest devotees now their teachers, every lesson a fresh reminder of the glories of

Tempora. These minds that were once so free and vibrant, full of challenging new ideas, now reduced to child sized, filled to the brim with Tempora's propaganda. It was horrific."

The Doctor sat watching as S'an shook his head at the memories. Wouldn't let it go though. Forget about the two hearts and the "regeneration" thing he can do; you really want a reminder that the Doctor isn't human, just watch him pulling out the truth from a old man on the brink.

"So what was it woke you up?" he asked, his eyes fixed firmly on S'an's. The Doctor's smile hadn't moved but I could tell it had gotten colder. 'Cause he already knew the truth.

S'an reached into his tunic, brought out this withered piece of parchment. "My letter," he said softly, holding it up into the light. "My one regret."

"I'd been promoted apparently," he went on. "My wife, Maya. She was so proud. But then it seemed that with promotion had come these other duties..." His voice tailed off.

"Like delivering these 'children' to Tempora and his school," said the Doctor, picking up the tale without missing a beat.

S'an nodded back shamefully. "There had been nothing my future self could do about it, except to write and warn me, hope to make it better this turn of the sand." He looked around wretchedly at our disapproving faces, trying to make this right in our minds as he spoke. "And I tried," he said, "I really did. Maya and I, we tried to convince others that there was something wrong, even tried to find the 'school' but we couldn't track it down. There was no promotion for me this time around, probably my questioning attitude holding me back, so I had no access."

You could feel his frustration pouring out now, all those years of impotence, rallying against a madman and his alien toy. "In the end our plan was just to wait until the next 'Tempora's Eve,' use my position to access the letters written in the 'Cave of Tears,' alter them so that people's one regret was that they hadn't overthrown the Lord Tempora. A stupid plan, I know, but all that we had left."

"What happened?" I asked. Pretty stupidly actually, given his current situation. Hardly going to be a happy ending tucked away in there.

“We were betrayed,” said S’an simply. “And as punishment for our potential treason the Lord Tempora turned my wife back to fourteen years old. To before we’d even met. Turned me into a stranger to her, this weird older man, who looked at her with tears in his eyes, making her turn away from him in fear and confusion.”

You know, there’s times *the Doctor* can seem pretty cold when he’s dishing out the karma to some alien meanie or whatever, but *this...* this was freezing. To take a couple’s life and subject it to this kind of...

“Temporal lobotomy,” spat the Doctor, equally disgusted. Any ill will he’d felt towards S’an and his betrayal of the “children” was now firmly blowing Tempora’s way. “Cutting out a life from the time stream like that.”

“I was then given a choice,” continued S’an. “I could fall upon Tempora’s mercy, become young again myself, or I could be banished.” He looked across at us all. “I had already lost my wife. I wouldn’t now give up my memories of her too to the faint chance that we might live that life out again. I accepted my banishment.”

He turned to look at me and Rory a moment. “Treasure these times together, won’t you,” he said. “Don’t give them up easily. Keep their memory alive.”

By this point I was pretty sure the scars on my knees would make this memory pretty immortal actually, but after hearing S’an’s story I just smiled and nodded silently.

Rory must have felt the same, ‘cause even *he* resisted the urge to point out that a fancy dress/potholing mash up was probably not going to be taking pride of place in the treasured memories department any time soon. Instead he just smiled awkwardly, didn’t say a word.

It was down to the Doctor to clear the strange, embarrassed silence that had suddenly fallen. Which, to be fair, *did* make a change from him actually *causing* those kind of silences...

“So you spent your time rescuing the children,” he said, his smile now back to it’s natural warmth. As far as he was concerned S’an had already paid for his mistakes several lives over. He was back on the good guys team.

S’an nodded. “Those that I could,” he said. “Although most of them made their own way to freedom in the end. For all of Tempora’s brain-washing, he couldn’t crush the spirit of rebellion that they had always had within them.”

“Nature one, nurture nil,” said Rory, giving a little smile as his own pet theory just got validated. (“*Debate night*” on the TARDIS could get quite fierce at times. I could tell that Rory was now mentally tucking this one away in his back pocket for the next time that particular subject popped up on the Doctor’s “*topic randomiser.*”)

Before I could even *start* to call Rory on this being so the wrong time for a bit of brainy boy gloating, the cave started to violently shake, the world around us going into some kind of spasm.

“The Hourglass!” shouted S’an. “It’s getting ready to turn!”

“It’s not supposed to keep on turning!” shouted back the Doctor over the din. “Much more use like this and it’ll *really* blow!”

Suddenly parts of the roof started falling down around us, the stalactites spearing down towards the ground. S’an rolled out the way as a large chunk fell upon his seat, pulling himself back into a nearby alcove as more of the roof collapsed around him.

“Run!” he shouted. “Make your way to the cave!”

Which we stupidly did.

I mean, yeah, great, we were out of the storm of a collapsing cave mouth, but as the rumbling subsided and the dust started clearing and the Doctor did his best to light the darkness with the firefly glow of the ancient Sonic, that didn’t really seem to be the end of our troubles.

’Cause we were now trapped.

In a vast, pitch black cavern.

Filled with dead S’ansarans.

Joy.

“S’an!” shouted the Doctor, up against the rock-fall that had sealed us in. No answer.

He turned away from the blockage, striding back away into the chamber, Rory and I sticking close to his light and trying *really* hard not to see the freaky mummified shadows that clung to every alcoved wall around us.

Eventually we reached the other end of the chamber. And another rockfall.

“Fantastic,” said Rory sarcastically. “Another cave in.”

(Apparently Rory also has previous when it comes to cave-ins. About 2000 years previous actually. And in another timeline. The sort of thing that stays with you, even when you're no longer plastic...)

(Did I tell you we lead pretty complicated lives?)

"Not to worry," said the Doctor, frustratingly not worrying. "In fifteen minutes time it's going to be seven years ago. And seven years ago, that was still a big front door."

"Oh, great," I said. "I'll be sure to tell my younger self that that's the exit."

"Actually," smiled the Doctor, "you just did."

(Oh, he is *so* bloody "*meta*" sometimes it's untrue.)

"Okay," I replied, "I have literally *no* idea what you're talking about." I could feel another trademark rant coming on. "We're trapped in a room with the soon-to-be-living dead," I rumbled on, "we're about go seriously retro *ourselves*, and *you're* talking cryptic crossword. So what do we do?"

The Doctor rummaged in his pocket as he spoke. "We think fast," he said. "Into this."

He was now holding up the psychic paper in front of the Sonic's tiny light.

"Psychic paper?" asked Rory.

"Yep," replied the Doctor as he swiftly tore it up into three equal scraps.

"Psychic energy, impervious to temporal shenanigans." He smiled as he handed us the paper, his voice suddenly heard in my head as my fingers touched the skin of it: "*I love the word 'shenanigans.'*"

"Same reason ghosts still hang about," he continued, his voice now thankfully back to hanging round *outside* my head.

"And this helps us out *how* exactly?" asked Rory, squinting at his scrap of paper in the half-light.

"Rory," said the Doctor, "in fifteen minutes time, and for probably not the first time in your life, you're going to be a confused young man in a skirt." He put a hand on Rory's shoulder as he gave a teasing smile. "Make it easier for him this time around. Let him know how he got here."

"And how do we do that?" I asked, ignoring Rory's very telling silence.

“Think into the paper, tell the story, let your younger selves know everything that’s happened,” replied the Doctor.

“But I’m rubbish with stories,” said Rory. “They always end with ‘and then I woke up and it was all a dream.’”

“Yeah, I don’t do prose” I lied, about to fill this helpless scrap of paper with a non-stop stream of the stuff.

“It’s psychic paper,” explained the Doctor, obviously. “It’ll edit out the boring bits, do the grammar, all that dull stuff. Probably give you chapter titles too if you ask it nicely. You just have to do the thinking.”

And so here we are, right where we came in all those bloody pages ago.

One minute left to go.

And before I go, I just want to say one thing.

(In case, you know, you end up actually stuck here as a teenager, have to grow up all over again. No point in you making the same mistakes that *I* did. “When In S’Ansara...” right?)

(Psychic brackets, I *will* miss you.)

So anyway, yeah. The most important information I can give you. Hope you’re ready for this one kiddo, ’cause here we go...

Rory Williams is so not gay.

There you go kid, you can have that one on me.

Trust me; you may *think* he is, ’cause he pays no attention to girls, plus there’ll also be this other time when you both raid the drinks cabinet and *you* end up acting forward and *he* ends up acting backwards, but it doesn’t mean he plays for *the other team*, stupid.

It just means he’s crap at the game.

But if you *do* end up on the slow path, making your way back to me, here’s another little bit of good news for the journey.

He’s a very fast learner.

;))

And on that bombsh.....

PART TWO: "His~~her~~story Repeating."

Hey Amelia. Long time, no be.

This is Future You again. Not the other Future You though, she was ancient. I'm the one you get to be in seven years' time, the cool one. Got myself a "myspace" page and everything. Twenty-three hits and counting.

(Yeah, I don't really know what that means *either*, but Mels insisted that I get one. Plus all the hits are from Rory, so I guess that doesn't really count...)

Anyway. Here I am: *the Pond from beyond*. Legs no longer dumpy and a brain nobody thinks is insane.

Sounds like a pretty sweet gig, right?

Good. 'Cause if you want to get to here then you're gonna have to work at it, get us out of this little jam we got ourselves into.

(Oh, and if you could get it done real soon then that'd be neat-o. No pressure kid, but we're not exactly getting any older right now.)

See, here's the deal.

In about five minutes time the Lord High Tempora's gonna be hitting the "*Benjamin Button*" button again, just for us. Which means I get to put the "*me*" into "*Amelia Pond*" one more time.

So before I start repeating myself I need get you all caught up, and fast.

Now I'm guessing you already got the "*Previously...*" memo from our later model, same as I did. And I'm also guessing it was just as weird for you as it was for me. Well, maybe not *quite* as weird...

You see, as far as my "*old school*" memory was concerned, two seconds earlier I'd been happily sat in my warm cosy bedroom, letting Rory copy from my "*Invasion of the Hot Italians*" essay and teasing him that he should wear that kind of outfit himself.

"Yeah, don't get me wrong," he replied, "but I know what happens when I let you dress me up, and I don't really fancy being 'The Doctor' again anytime soon."

“Oh, I don’t know” piped up this other voice nearby us. “Nothing wrong with the odd repeat...”

Both me and Rory jumped at the sound, the pair of us turning round to find this strange, skinny man smiling back at us, his sharp face framed by sideburns, his spiky fringe jutting up like a punk rock quiff and his hands sunk deep into his tailcoat pockets. Bit like a well-dressed weasel actually. Kinda handsome too though, in a weird kind of way. (Not that I’m into weasels or anything...)

Weirder still, he was standing in the middle of a torch-lit cave.

“Second chances,” he beamed. “I’m that kind of a man.”

I looked to Rory, who had also now decided he was going to be standing in a torch-lit cave as well by the look of it, only *he* was also going to wear a badly-tailored suit of Roman armour and a dumb-struck expression.

Not that his expression was surprising, the amount of skin I was suddenly showing.

I was trying to work out just *when* it was I’d drifted off to sleep, and also *why* I’d be wearing Marilyn Monroe’s extremely revealing dress to a post-pubescent “Rory dream” when I suddenly felt the psychic paper in my hand kick into life and the world around me blotting out. And at last I could hear myself think...

“Okay. Listen up kid. This is where it gets uncomplicated.”

Two seconds later and my life was anything but.

“Are you okay?” I asked a shell-shocked Rory as the sudden psychic downpour ebbed away.

He gave a hollow kind of nod, looking awkwardly down at his new found outfit.

“Apparently, I do this kind of thing a lot,” he said, squirming more than just a little. “In fact, I think we *both* do...”

I wrapped my arms across my chest, suddenly super self-conscious. *God, why couldn’t he just be gay and keep this simple...?*

The Doctor came to the rescue, like I guess he always does. Light years away from the raggedy, bow-legged alien that I remembered from back when I was *you* though; actually pretty human for a guy wearing someone else’s body. He swept his

tailcoat off and draped it round my shoulders, helping me to cover up my embarrassment.

“Uh uh,” he said, shooting Rory a “*too much information*” kind of a look as he spoke. “*Spoilers...*”

“Wait a minute,” said Rory, scanning from his scrap of psychic paper to this very dashing-looking Doctor. “*You’re the ‘Raggedy Doctor?’*”

“Oi!” replied the Doctor. “*Less of the ‘raggedy.’*”

“*Less of the ‘Doctor.’*” I didn’t mean to sound cruel, but I couldn’t see how this could be the same man at all.

“Oh, come on Amy,” he said, looking slightly hurt. “*It’s me, it’s - honestly - it’s me.*”

Despite all the “*crazy*” my telepathic telegram had just delivered into my head, this was still a step too far. I tried to keep my mental balance by clinging on hard to convention.

“You can’t be,” I said.

“This is what I do,” he said, before letting his next words drift away half finished. “*What I did...*”

He shook his head, muttered something under his breath that sounded pretty close to “*here we go again*” then fixed me with those brand new hazel eyes of his.

“Do you remember the first time I took your hand? My future, your past. Standing in your bedroom after fish fingers and custard, about to open up a crack in the world and take a peek inside just for you, I held my hand out to you and you took it and I said just four little words, just the four.”

His hand was held out to me now, and I couldn’t help but take it again, and as I did and he spoke I could feel that exact same pulse that had left me entranced as a child; the same twin beat of excitement and danger.

And then, from all those yesterdays ago, those same four words in a brand new voice.

“*Everything’s gonna be fine.*”

He flashed a warm little smile as the belief in him flooded back across my face.

“Hello,” he grinned.

Yep. No doubt about it. This was the Doctor alright.

Time to let the shifty bastard have it.

“Five minutes, you said!” I shouted. “Five bloody minutes!”

“Yeah, now look,” he said, letting go of my hand and backing off just a little, “that wasn’t exactly my fault you know. Although, I suppose, strictly speaking, cause and effect, but if you’re gonna go down that route you might as well hang it all on the joyriding pensioner, he’s the one started it all.”

“Seven years I’ve been waiting! Seven years and four psychiatrists!”

“And four sets of bite marks, yes. I know.”

The fact that he’d just taken a bite from my next line had left a little gap in my rant for a second. The Doctor didn’t hesitate to fill it in.

“And you know, I hate to interrupt the pre-prepared spleen venting,” he said, “but we *have* already done this bit.” He held up his own little scrap of psychic paper, as if in evidence.

“Believe me,” he went on, “you think you’re mad at me *now*, wait until you add in another five years of waiting.”

Before I could I get the words “*Twelve years?!?!?*” out of my lips, the Doctor had placed his long forefinger on them, let out a weird kind of “*Shhhhhh.*”

“Plus,” he continued, as I fell unexpectedly quiet for a moment, “you are seriously waking up the dead.”

Me and Rory followed his gaze, to where there were now several mummified figures frantically tearing at the gauze that had been holding them together while they’d been busy playing dead. To be fair, the gobby little Scots girl was probably the last thing on their mind right about now, but I wasn’t looking to move up the list anytime soon.

“What do we do?” I whispered, my voice creeping back to me.

“Standard operating procedure,” shrugged the Doctor.

“And for those of us who are *us*,” hissed back Rory, “what that does that actually mean?”

“It means we leg it,” winked the Doctor. “Come along Ponds!” he called, as he spun on his heels, “Allons-y!!!”

We took off with him, keeping pace all the way as we sped through the torch-lit tomb and its awakening alcoves.

“We shouldn’t even *be* here,” puffed Rory, as we took a breather just before the vast ornate exit, trying to gather our thoughts as much as our breath.

“Tell me about it,” said the Doctor.

“So why *are* you here then?” I asked as I adjusted my shoes.

“Because my time’s running out,” he said grimly. “Sometime in the next seven years I’m going to die.”

“How can you even *know* that?” I asked, horrified that anyone should have to carry such a detail with them.

“Because it’s already happened,” he replied with a matter-of-fact shrug.

“That’s cheery then,” said Rory.

“Well,” said the Doctor, drawing out the word as long as he could, “no point in moping about it. Did that before apparently, almost blew up the TARDIS. Made *your* Doctor start out all ‘raggedy.’”

“You got all that from your psychic paper?” I asked.

“Yep,” he nodded, patting the paper in his pocket. “Postcard from the future. And that’s exactly where we’re gonna get you back to.”

“I’m more than happy being me you know,” said Rory. “Just not here and now though would be nice.”

“Too late for that Rory,” said the Doctor. “The world’s moved on. Time for us to go and catch it up.”

“So then,” I said, straightening out Marilyn Monroe’s dress like it was the most natural thing in the world. “You got a plan?”

“I do a bit, yeah,” said the Doctor.

He stood up straight, gave his silk bow tie a little tweak, and ran his hand through his mess of male model hair. Not too shabby for an old dude I guess.

“‘Cause Rory’s right,” he continued. “We shouldn’t be here. Which means we’ve got the one thing no-one else is gonna see coming...”

He threw his weight against the large wooden doors to the world outside, watching with glee as they swung wide apart, the natural light now flooding in.

“Surprise...!”

His voice tailed off as saw what was waiting for us, the smile on his face becoming frozen in an embarrassed kind of grimace. Rory and I squinted as the sun hit us too, both of us moving round to get a better look at whatever kind of weird had stopped the Doctor in his tracks...

A mariachi band was stood before us: a bunch of shabby looking fellas with a shamble of strange sounding instruments. The doors flying open must have been the cue that they were waiting for because they suddenly broke into a furious fiesta of sound, serenading us with horns and strings and overly enthusiastic singing.

A crowd of onlookers showered us with blossom petals as the music rang out, others coming over to join in the impromptu festival.

"Ah," said the Doctor, as he spotted several angry looking priests making their way towards us through the crowd. "Little bit awkward..."

"They hired a band," said Rory.

"A *mariachi* band," I confirmed.

"I've heard worse," shrugged the Doctor.

"This kind of thing happen a lot does it?" I asked, as the priests starting calling over to some nearby guards.

"Angry locals, mad dictators, the odd bit of running. What can I say?" grinned the Doctor, shouting out above the music. "They're playing my tune!"

And as the guards starting heading our way, their faces grim and unmoving, one thing was suddenly certain; it was time for us to face the music.

I don't know for sure what kind of music the Lord High Tempora is into, but if I had to take a guess then I'd go for "*Goth*." You know, like in those pictures Aunt Sharon always hates from back when she was younger. All the black hair and eyeliner.

Not that he was wearing eyeliner, but he *did* have the long black hair and cheekbones look working hard for him, his skinny body sat wrapped in black leather and red robes, draped across his throne like a bored looking rock star.

"*If I Could Turn Back Time*" by Cher started playing in my head as we were marched across the throne room towards him. Pretty appropriate really seeing as, just like Cher, he looked about thirty years old but was probably more like a hundred.

The Captain of the Guard who was prodding us before him was a big, burly fella, the kind of goon who probably gets a lot of their job satisfaction from pushing people around and shouting. He took the chance to give the Doctor a final “*shove and shout*” as we were brought before Tempora’s throne.

“Kneel before the Lord of Time!” bellowed the Captain as his hand sent the Doctor forward.

The Doctor gave a little smile towards Tempora, holding out his hand in a “*don’t mind me*” kind of a way.

“Please,” he said, “no need for all that nonsense on my behalf. You just stay where you are.”

The Captain’s face flushed an angry red and he stomped up to the Doctor, his wooden staff raised to strike him hard.

“I said ‘Kneel!’” he growled, as his staff thrust down.

And I’m not really sure exactly *what* it was that happened next, except for the fact that it was super fast and it ended with the Captain on the ground and the Doctor standing over him with the staff in his hand.

“And I said ‘you just stay where you are’ but I’m guessing that got a little lost in translation,” said the Doctor as he held the tip of the staff against the Captain’s throat.

Me and Rory looked at each other for a second. Yep, that was pretty cool.

The other Guards in the room whipped up their crossbows in an instant, their arrows now aimed at the Doctor.

“Stay your weapons!”

The Lord High Tempora was on his feet, moving pretty fast for a guy who looked like he should probably be in a green room somewhere eating blue M&M’s.

“Good idea,” said the Doctor, suddenly swapping his badass face for a smiley one. He shoved the wooden staff against the sprawled out Captain’s hand. “Hold on to that one for a mo for me will you?”

“Oh,” he continued, as he paused a moment, leaning in to the astonished looking Captain, “and maybe make a mental note to self while you’re at it; next time around be a bit more polite to the Time Lord.”

He swung around to face an intrigued looking Tempora.

“Hello there!” beamed the Doctor. “I’m the Doctor. These are my friends Amy and Rory. And you must be the Lord High Tempora. Love the title by the way. Very grand. Got a lot of time for that one. In fact, I’ve got a lot of time for everything, thanks to you.”

Tempora pursed his thin, cruel lips into the coldest of smiles.

“Fascinating,” he said, sounding genuinely enthralled. “You speak to me as though we are equals.”

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. If he was trying to hide the disdain in his voice he wasn’t doing such a bang up job...

“Oh no. We’re light years from that, believe me,” he said, his words now coated in a thinly veiled layer of contempt. “Although,” he went on, his voice now slightly mellowing, “we do have a little something in common I suppose.”

He leaned in as Tempora stooped closer, the hook now well and truly baited.

“We’ve both been seduced by a time machine,” revealed the Doctor gleefully. “Not the same one of course,” he continued, barely pausing for breath. “Don’t get me wrong, the TARDIS is a bit temperamental, but she’s not *Tempora*-mental...”

“And now you dare to mock me,” said the Lord High Tempora, staring at the Doctor with a mix of bemusement and simmering anger.

The Doctor looked genuinely hurt for a second.

“I’m not mocking you,” he said indignantly. “I’m stating a fact. You’ve got a time machine, stuck in your head. A sentient weapon, using you as it’s voice-box.”

He moved up closer to the man in black, tried to pull back the shadows for him...

“You see, Lord High Tempora, the truth of it is, all you *really* are is just a figure-head, a regal puppet.”

The Doctor was now standing face to face with Tempora, regarding him with something close to pity. Made me think how strange it was that he could be all these things at once; madman, wise man, badass, clown... You couldn’t pin the Doctor down for an instant. In fact, just when you thought he was about to offer Tempora a little moment of kindness, he suddenly bounded past him, disappearing round the back of the throne.

“The *real* power behind the throne,” he shouted out as he vanished, “is behind the throne!”

The Doctor emerged a second later, brandishing something large and golden in his hands like a trophy: Tempora’s Hourglass. Just like the kind of thing you’d expect to see on “*Antiques Roadshow*” really, when some old granny’s trying to prise a bit of cash out of the attic. Although I think old Mrs. Angelo might struggle to get *this* one down the stairs on her own: the thing was pretty big for just a timepiece. Pretty valuable too by the way Tempora suddenly cried out...

“Put me down!”

The guy looked pretty freaked now actually. Almost inhuman all of a sudden.

“Or what?” replied the Doctor, giving the Hourglass a little shake. “You’ll detonate?”

He threw the Hourglass down contemptuously onto the cushioned seat of the throne, ignoring what I was guessing was the puppet master, and talking only to the puppet.

“You don’t have the power right now, you’re still recharging,” said the Doctor, switching to a mock look of concern. “Bit of a design flaw there don’t you think? And here’s me thinking you were all about the perfection.”

Tempora flew past him, snatched up the Hourglass, clutching it hard to his chest like a childhood teddy bear. Any sense of rock star cool he might have had had now been torched away beneath the Doctor’s glare. He started ranting wildly, like a spoilt little rich kid...

“I can rewind! I can rectify! I can redesign! I can regenerate!”

“Oh get over yourself,” dismissed the Doctor. “You’re a time *bomb*, not a Time Lord.”

“I’m a child of Rassilon!” spat out the Lord High Tempora, his mania sending little flecks of spit into the air as the words burst out of his mouth.

“You’ve got your Dad’s gob that’s for sure,” said the Doctor, holding up his hand like a little glove puppet mouth, fingers and thumb slapping along with the words. “‘Rassilon and on and on’ we call him. ‘The eternity of earache.’”

Dissing Daddy didn't go down too well with Tempora. The guy looked like he might explode any second. Pretty ironic I guess, seeing as he was being possessed by an intelligent bomb.

"I will reduce to you a mote of dust in the vortex" he hissed.

"I'd like to see you try," smiled the Doctor coldly.

"I don't need to try," smirked Tempora. "Time is mine to control. I'm 'The Constant Promethian.'"

"Yeah, well hate to break it to you," said the Doctor, sliding casually onto the throne like he owned the place, "but you're not as 'Constant' as you think you are."

He let the words hang in the air as he started checking out the throne, shifting round the cushions to try and get himself comfy.

"You're lying," said a slightly shaken Tempora.

"Yeah? Well *you're* dying," shrugged the Doctor.

"It isn't possible," whispered Tempora.

"Of course it's possible!" shouted the Doctor, whipping back up from his seat. "You're a bomb! You're a one-time event! You go 'Boom!' and that's it!"

"Only you've been cheating," continued the Doctor. "Eking out your death in little bursts. Prolonging the inevitable."

"And you wouldn't do the same?" cried out Tempora.

Don't ask me why, but those six little words seemed to hit the Doctor hard for a moment. For once he didn't have an answer. Tempora gladly took the silence as a victory.

"It seems we've more than just a *little* in common after all," smiled Tempora humourlessly.

The silence between them was suddenly deafening. So thank God for Rory...

"Yeah... sorry to interrupt and all that," said Rory, interrupting and all that, "but if he's an actual bomb..."

"He's not a bomb," I said quickly, eager to show that I was still keeping up. "He's like the voice of the bomb."

"Yeah, right, okay, but if you're still like, having a conversation with a bomb," Rory carried on, "shouldn't you be more like... you know...? Trying to defuse the situation?"

“I can’t defuse a bomb that’s already exploded, Rory,” said the Doctor simply. “The detonation’s already happened. It’s just we haven’t felt the full extent of the blast yet because it’s being held in; released in seven year intervals.”

“But why would it do that?” I asked, before realising I was talking to the wrong person.

“I just want to fix the world,” said Tempora. “That’s the reason I exist.”

“You exist to wipe the Skaro Degradation from the timeline,” said the Doctor grimly. “That’s the reason you were born. One mission. One target. And guess what? You missed.”

“My mission was to wipe out a mistake, an event that should never have happened,” Tempora countered.

“Of course!” said the Doctor, running his hand through his hedge-backwards hairstyle. “So you adapted your parameters to your diverted location. Same mission. New target. No more regrets.”

“Is that so wrong?” asked Tempora, sounding like he genuinely couldn’t work out the answer himself.

“Of course it’s wrong!” snapped the Doctor. “You destroyed people’s lives so you could rebuild them again. That isn’t wiping out a mistake, it’s creating a huge one!”

Suddenly a massive tremor rocked the throne room, knocking all of us to the floor, Tempora included.

The Doctor was the first back to his feet as the vibration subsided. He held his hand out to a shocked looking Tempora.

“Tempora! Listen to me! The bomb can’t hold on to both you and itself for much longer. It’s struggling to keep itself together as it is. Let me help you break free of it, get that thing back to my ship before it blows for good and wipes this island out of history.”

“Doctor...” Tempora’s voice was weird, like he was vibrating himself, like maybe fighting on the inside, I don’t know. I guess we’ll never find out ’cause just as the Doctor was about to get to him, put his hands against his head, do something magical probably...

Bam!

The Guard Captain cracked the Doctor round the head with his staff, knocked him out cold to the floor. Job satisfaction guaranteed, the moron.

“No!” I shouted, as Rory did the sensible thing and held me back.

Tempora pulled himself together, probably in more ways than one, and got himself back to his feet. He glanced across at me and Rory, instructing the guards nearby to grab us.

“Take them to the cells!” he snapped before they started dragging us away. “I shall re-educate them shortly.”

“Doctor!” I screamed. (Yeah, I know, not too cool, but it was kind of a situation alright?)

“It’s okay,” said Rory, “I can see he’s still breathing.”

“And how much longer is that going to last?” I hissed as we were dragged towards the door.

Good question actually. ‘Cause the last words I caught the Lord High Tempora saying, as we were lead towards our cells, was how the Doctor looked broken. And how he knew how to fix him...

So that was twenty minutes ago.

Since then there’s been a couple of mini rumbles and the sound of Rory being taken from his cell.

I guess they’re coming for me next.

So this is it Amelia Pond. This is the cliffhanger.

The Doctor left for dead and me and Rory sent to school. Get out of that one if you can.

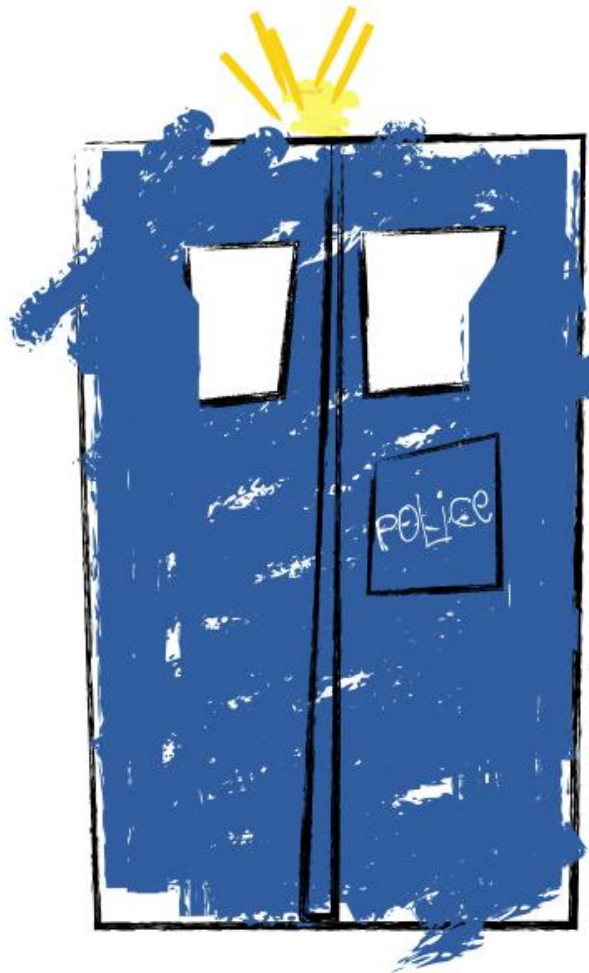
I mean, really. Get out of it. Get us back to normal. If anyone can it’s *you*, right?

You’re the girl he rated.

You’re the girl the Doctor came back for.

So now you get to come back for him too.

Best of luck kiddo.

PART THREE: "Once, Upon A Time Machine..."

Dear Amys,

Thanks for all the stories and the psychic paper and the dress. The dress is a bit big right now but that's okay. I'm not allowed to wear it in here anyway.

Today's my first day at school, which is rubbish. We have to wear this scratchy uniform and listen to grouchy old teachers talking boring stuff all day.

And the chairs here are all this splintery wood. And there's no windows. And you can hear the sea outside on the beach but you can't go out and play in it.

Honest, it's the worst school in the world.

I'd rather be in Mr. Kirkland's class and listen to all his dull stuff about history. Mels likes to tell him that he's wrong then watch him look like Popeye when he gets all mad.

I wish that Mels was here.

Rory is though.

He sits at the same desk as me in class. The grown up one of him must have dropped his psychic paper or something 'cause he thinks we're still in normal school back home.

I keep trying to tell him what's happened but he won't believe me. He thinks we're in the special class that Mrs. Daly always says I should be sent to.

And he likes the scratchy uniform. He says it's called a toga but I reckon it looks like one of Aunt Sharon's dresses. Only this one actually fits him.

I don't know why the grown up me has him as a boyfriend for. Probably 'cause he's just always around and he does what you ask.

I'm glad I didn't lose *my* psychic paper. Now I get to talk to myself and no-one's gonna think that I'm mad.

Me and Rory just got given homework to do.

We have to write a story about what happened today.

My one is called "First Class" and this is what it goes like...

"First Class" by Amelia Pond.

Me and Rory were sat at our desk like all the other kids, supposed to be all quiet 'cause we were waiting for the next teacher. But being quiet is boring.

"This is boring."

I was whispering to Rory.

"Maybe you should ask Santa to send you another 'Raggedy Doctor,'" whispered Rory back.

"There's only *one* Doctor, stupid."

"Oh. Okay."

He waited a bit and then he whispered again.

"Why don't you ask him to send the same one as before?"

"I'm trying to. But you keep interrupting."

That last bit was a lie, 'cause I didn't want Rory to know that it was *his* idea to call Santa.

"Sorry," he said.

I put my hands together and closed my eyes. Put on my best “*talking to Santa*” voice. The one where you try and sound like you’ve been good all the time even if you’ve just been mean to Rory for a bit before.

“Dear Santa. Sorry to bother you again. Only, this time it’s a real emergency. ‘Cause you know that scary crack in my wall you sent the Raggedy Doctor to fix? Well this is worse. I’m stuck on a planet with Rory and we’ve been sent to this school and it’s rubbish. Please can you send the Doctor back to take us home? He said he’d be five minutes and it’s been a lot more than that so if you can give him a nudge that would be great. Thank you Santa, you’re the best. Love Amy.”

“Tell him / love him too.”

“Tell him yourself lazybones.”

“I don’t think he really listens to me,” shrugged Rory. “Or maybe he just gets my address wrong.”

“Or maybe he can’t fit a robot Kylie ninja doll down your chimney.”

“Maybe,” said Rory, trying to work out the size for a bit before giving up again.

“So do you think he’s going to come then?” he asked.

“Any second now I reckon.”

We both looked at the door for a bit.

Then looked at the door for a little bit more.

I gave a little sigh and put my head in my hands. *Not again.*

And then the door burst open and the Doctor stepped in.

Only not like I expected.

“Pay attention class,” said the teacher. “You have a new student joining you.”

The old grump pushed this new boy with a floppy mop of hair into the classroom. The new boy looked as old as me and Rory and he wore the same stupid uniform that we did.

The teacher sent him our way, towards the empty bench beside me.

“Move along at the back there won’t you,” snapped the teacher. “Let the ‘Time Lord’ take his seat.”

The new boy kept his head down and walked our way and sat down on the seat right beside me. He looked really sad, like he was the loneliest boy on the planet.

I gave him a little nudge on the arm, and my best “*best friend*” smile. I didn’t want him to be sad so I whispered the words the Doctor said to me when he opened the crack in my wall -

“It’s gonna be alright.”

The new boy looked at me and gave a bit of a smile so I carried on.

“My name’s Amelia,” I said. “What’s yours?”

Which is a thing, ’cause even *ancient* Amy still called him the Doctor. He *had* to have a *real* name ’cause everybody has a real name even if they don’t like it when they’re older and they get to change it into something else. Bit like...

“Amelia Pond!”

I sat up straight in my seat and turned around. The teacher had a proper mood on.

“Pay attention girl!” he snapped.

“Sorry sir,” I said quite quietly.

“I can see you’ve got a lot to learn if you’re ever going to complete your education here young lady,” he said, doing that thing that teachers do when they just go on even though you’ve already been told off. “Fortunately child, you have an excellent teacher.”

I was going to ask him where this excellent teacher was but I was probably in enough trouble already.

“Now then class,” he went on, forgetting me for a bit at last. “Today is a very special day for you all. A very special day indeed...”

He carried a sack from the door and placed it on his desk as he spoke.

“Not only do you have a ‘Time Lord’ in your midst,” he said, pointing over to the new boy at the back of the class, “but you have another special visitor as well.”

He pulled the cord from the top of the sack as all the kids started sitting up in their seats. I’d seen a sack before so I just acted cool.

“The most prized of all the Lord Tempora’s possessions,” said the teacher. Some kids at the front started to gasp and murmur.

“The Lord Tempora’s Hourglass!” cried the teacher as he pulled the Hourglass out the sack and held it up. “Or as a certain someone likes to call it...”

His beady eyes were back on me again.

“Bob...”

I scrunched my face up in a sort of “*Huh?*” kind of way.

‘Cause “Bob” was what the Ancient Amy called it in the psychic paper and only the Doctor and Rory knew that and they were both sat at the back with me and really young, not stood at the front and really old.

“Come along Pond,” said the teacher, like he’d just heard me talking in my head. “Do try and keep up won’t you?”

He put the Hourglass back down on the desk, put his hands together like he was all excited. Some kids at the front didn’t like the Hourglass and sort of sat back in their seats.

“Don’t be afraid children,” said the teacher, looking pretty pleased with himself. “It’s not going to hurt you. It’s not going to hurt anyone ever again.”

He picked it up again and gave it a great big shake. “You see? It’s empty. Quite empty.”

He plonked it down on the desk in front of them, let them pass it round and play with it.

I put my hand in the air just like I did at real school.

“Excuse me sir,” I said, being polite just in case. “But what happened to it?”

“And do we have to write all this down?” said Rory, looking worried that there might be a test.

The teacher came over to the back of the room. He stuck his hands up on his chest and puffed his arms out like they were wings. Scary looking, like an old white haired vulture. Only smiling, which I don’t think that vultures can do very well...

“I think that might be wise, don’t you?” he said to Rory.

Rory nodded.

“In fact,” the teacher said, “I think I have some paper right here...”

He took this little scrap of paper out and waved it at Rory.

“I believe you may have dropped it dear boy,” he whispered as Rory took the paper from his hand.

Rory's eyes went really wide for about five seconds as the psychic paper had a talk with his head. Then his face went proper red and he spoke really quiet -

"I think you might be right..."

And he didn't really say much after that for a bit.

"And as for what happened to the Hourglass," said the teacher, ignoring him.

"Well the answer is simple."

He stood up all straight and proud for a second and then said -

"I did."

My face was still stuck in a "Huh?" 'cause I didn't really get it.

"I provoked the weapon into unleashing an explosion it could no longer control then threw myself in the path of the blast. As the device exploded I absorbed the temporal energy."

It's funny, 'cause I didn't know what it meant but now I sort of understood it too. Which was just like talking to the Raggedy Doctor.

"At least," the teacher said, as he nodded to the new boy sat next to me, "most of the energy anyway."

I looked at the new boy and tried to work it all out.

"So, you must be..." I said, not really sure what words were gonna come out next.

"The Lord Tempora," said the teacher, waving a bony old hand towards the floppy fringe and sad blue eyes. "At least he used to be. Only *now* he's just a young man with a lot to learn. Seems to me a school is the best place to start don't you think?"

"I suppose so," I said, before asking the teacher -

"So are you the Doctor?"

"Indeed I am," said the old man. "And the first of many apparently."

Rory just shrugged and looked as confused as I was. *Everything* was weird today but this was *really* weird. 'Cause if this teacher was really the Doctor and the Doctor had been zapped by the thing that made everyone younger...

"How come you're all old now?"

The Doctor found that one *really* funny.

“My dear child, this isn’t *old*,” he laughed. He put his hands up on his chest again, and grabbed his robe like he was wearing a coat. “In fact you could say this whole business has taken me back to my youth.”

He did a weird little chuckle and went like “*Hmm? Oh, ho ho! Yes...*”

No-one else got the joke though and we all just sat and stared at him.

“Wasted on the young...” he said.

And then a sort of little cloud of light floated out of his hand, like tiny fairies, just like when the Raggedy Doctor first fell out of his box and burped.

“Ah,” said the Doctor. “It seems as though time has caught up with me. Very well then.”

He walked to the front of the class and opened up the door to the beach outside.

“Class, I rather think we need to take this lesson outside. Come along now, all of you, up you get, come along! Quick smart!”

And all the children got up quick and ran outside.

The Doctor waved us out too, and then he followed us out onto the sand.

It was getting dark outside and the sun was in the sea. There were men with torches coming out the woods and walking our way across the beach.

“Who are they?” said Rory, pointing at them.

“Just a few old friends,” said the Doctor. “Joining us for the party.”

“What sort of party?” I asked.

“Why, a New Year’s party of course,” said the Doctor. “After all, it *is* a New Year don’t forget.”

The Doctor held his hand up to the men with torches, shouted over to them.

“That’s close enough Mr. DeLorca! Just the girl if you don’t mind, and quickly.”

This man with jet black hair and a beard stepped out into the torchlight, nodded back at the Doctor. The man wasn’t all that old which was weird, ’cause he had the same name as the really old man in Ancient Amy’s letter.

He did a little wave and this girl a bit older than me ran out the woods and came across towards us.

The Doctor turned to me and Rory and the sad looking boy who used to be a bad man.

“Now then you three,” he said as gently moved us back towards the sea, “I need you to stay back here and keep yourselves out of mischief.”

“What’s happening now?” said Rory looking all concerned.

The Doctor ruffled Rory’s mop of hair. “Nothing for you to be worried about young man,” he said all kind, like the best Grandad in the world. “In fact I have a feeling you’re going to grow up not really worried about anything at all.”

He turned to the sad little boy. “And as for you, Mr Tempora Junior, I’m sure with your new teachers you’re going to learn to be a better man this time around eh?”

The little boy nodded. “Yes sir.”

“Good, good,” said the Doctor.

Then he looked at me and smiled.

“And Amelia Pond,” he said. “The girl with the fairy tale name.”

“Fairy tales aren’t real though,” I said. “They’re just stories.”

“And what’s wrong with stories, eh?” asked the Doctor. “After all, you’re in one *now* aren’t you?”

“Am I?” I asked, ‘cause I didn’t think I was.

“Of course you are,” smiled the Doctor. “You’re writing it right now, as you speak. The story of Amelia Pond.”

“Does it have a happy ending?” I asked, trying to make sure the words came out all spelt right.

“All in good time,” said the Doctor. “After all, *your* story’s only just beginning.”

More fairy light starting coming out of his hands now, all glowing orange in the dark.

“But it’s time my chapter was over,” said the Doctor, as he stood up slowly.

“Goodbye all,” he said, walking back up the beach towards the girl and the other kids from the class. “And make sure you stay well back where you are now, won’t you?”

“What’s he doing?” whispered Rory, as we watched him go.

"I don't know," I said quietly.

The Doctor must've heard us though, 'cause he turned back round to face us, calling out to us...

"My people have a way of seeing out the old and bringing in the new that's quite unique," he said as light started leaking out of his face and floating up round his head.

"Although," he said after thinking for a second, "when we do it properly, we do have *one* thing in common with all your New Years back on Earth..."

The old man winked as the light grew brighter.

"There's a lot of fireworks."

And then he went off just *like* one.

His head went back and his arms went out and all this light exploded out of him.

I closed my eyes for a bit and when I opened them again he was still all bursting out like a volcano but I could see his face a bit under the light. Except it wasn't *his* face. And it kept on all changing.

His hair was floppy, then curly, then frizzy, then mopyy, his nose got small, and then *he* got small, then he got quite big, and then his ears got *massive* and then - He stopped.

"I don't want to go," said the skinny man with the spiky hair, standing there in the Doctor's clothes. I took a guess that he was also the Doctor. It was that kind of day.

"At least not yet anyway," said the Skinny Doctor as he messed his hair up even more with his hands and grinned across at us all. "Not when there's a hootenanny about to kick off..."

We just stood there and watched him for a second, not really sure what to do.

"Come on you three!" he yelled over. "No need to sit this one out. It's not *all* grown-ups at this party you know..."

And then I got what he was talking about - all the children had gone. And standing in their place were all these grown-ups wearing all our rubbish uniforms -

only none of them really fitted 'cause they'd grown all out of them. And they were all laughing and crying and hugging and looking confused and really happy.

A woman wearing the same dress as the girl from the woods ran over to the man named DeLorca and they hugged and cried and kissed for quite a bit.

A bunch of music started playing as people brought out instruments and started singing and the men with torches started up a big fire on the beach.

"Come on then," said the Skinny Doctor as he walked up over to us. "I'm only here for a bit, don't all be party-poopers."

"You made them right again," I said, pointing over at the grown-ups.

"Well," said the Skinny Doctor. "I *am* a Time Lord. The day I can't re-route a bit of temporal-energy-induced regeneration and re-root a bunch of family trees while I'm at it... Well, it's never happened before so I don't actually have a name for it. But it's not today though, that's for sure..."

"So you can fix us too?" asked Rory.

"Yeah, in a bit," said the Doctor. "Why, you're not in a rush to get old are you?"

"I don't think so," said Rory.

"Good, 'cause trust me," said the Doctor. "All those awkward hormones will still be waiting for you."

The Doctor put an arm round the sad new boy's shoulder, gave a great big smile.

"Right then, Tiny Temp, let's get you introduced to your new teacher shall we?"

Me and Rory followed as the Doctor walked with the boy across the sand.

"You're gonna get looked after by my good friend S'an DeLorca," said the Doctor as they headed over to the smiling man with the beard. "Used to be one of your guards, now he's going to be your guardian. What I like to call a Tempora-rary solution!"

The boy just shrugged.

"Blimey," said the Doctor. "Tough crowd."

Rory looked confused as we watched the man with the beard kneel down and shake the new boy's hand. He got his psychic paper out again and looked at it and frowned.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Rory nodded at the man with the beard.

"It says his name is Cyndi Lauper."

I just shook my head and sighed.

"Grown Up Rory," I said. "What *were* you thinking?"

So the party was fun and we ate lots and danced and stayed up beyond our bedtime and at the end the Skinny Doctor walked towards us across the beach as me and Rory kicked our feet in the sea.

The bearded man and his wife were waving to him as he went. The bearded man was dressed up like a Roman and the wife had Marilyn Monroe's dress on.

"Look at that!" said the Doctor as he came up to us. "They found the outfits. Bit of fancy dress for the New Year's party. Think I might have started a tradition."

"Who are they supposed to be?" said Rory.

"Isn't it obvious?," said the Doctor. "They've come as you two!"

"But we don't look like that," I said.

"No," said the Doctor. "But it's probably time that you did."

The golden light was dancing round him again. He gave a little sigh as it did.

"New Year," said the Doctor. "Gets me every time."

He looked down at us both and gave a sad little smile.

"Time to go, Ponds."

Rory reached over and took my hand. He looked a bit scared so I let him keep hold of it.

"Allons-y..." said the Skinny Doctor.

Then he exploded like another firework.

"Glad I got that out of my system."

I opened my eyes as the light went away and although they took a bit to work things out I could see the Raggedy Doctor was back at last.

“Hello Ponds!” he laughed, and put his hands on our heads.

He was still really tall, 'cause we were still really small which meant -

“We haven’t grown up,” I said.

“Quite right too,” said the Doctor. “Nasty habit that, try not to catch it.”

Me and Rory looked at each other then let go of our hands real quick, rubbing them on our uniform in case we’d caught something.

“Right then,” said the Raggedy Doctor, “time we made a move I think, back to the TARDIS.”

“You mean we have to walk back through the woods?” said Rory, looking scared again.

“Um...,” said the Doctor, “Not exactly...”

The big blue box was round the corner of the beach.

“We were right next to the school all along,” said Rory.

“Yes alright Rory,” said the Doctor, “no need to go on about it.”

“I only said it once...” muttered Rory.

“So do we have to grow up the slow way now?” I asked as we walked up to the box.

“Nope, not at all,” said the Doctor. “Don’t worry, I kept back a bit of energy for the pair of you, enough to get you fast-tracked back to when we were when all this started.”

He stopped and turned back to us.

“Only trouble is,” he said, thinking for a second, “might be a little gap in the memory. So you’re gonna need to do a quick bit of homework, tell your psychic paper all the stuff that just happened today. And try and get it right this time Rory...”

“I’m rubbish at stories,” said Rory.

“Yes I know,” said the Doctor. “Never know how to finish them.”

“Or how to start.”

“How about this?” said the Doctor, and he clicked his fingers together and behind him the big blue box opened up and all this light shone out.

“Once upon a time machine, there were three great big kids...”

Me and Rory blinked in the brightness.

“Can we get to go inside?” said Rory.

“Once you’ve done your homework, yeah,” said the Doctor. “Cause I made a promise, quite a long time ago now actually. But the promise still stands.”

He bent down to me and smiled.

“And I didn’t make that promise to *Amy Pond*,” he said. “I made it to *Amelia Pond*. The girl who’s back dated.”

He reached out and took my hand again just like he did that time before.

“All of time and space. Anywhere and everywhere. Every star that ever was.”

Then he said the best words ever.

“Where do you wanna start?”

And that’s the end of my story.

And I know it’s really long, but that’s the thing about being with the Doctor - there’s not a lot of boring bits to chuck away.

So I’m going to go now. Hope you don’t mind. But there’s a blue box with its door open.

And I’ve waited long enough.

DOCTOR WHO

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