

It's dusk; the colour of a fresh bruise, like someone accidentally got blood on the sky and the stain wouldn't come out. Everything's left in murky shadow, and I can barely see the hotel properly. It's just an L-shape of shadow with lots of darker squares on them; wide open windows, some with crooked blinds, open onto dark rooms.

"Is this it?" I'm not impressed. "It's a bit... lame, innit?"

"You were expecting looming gargoyles, thunder and lightning?" asks the Doctor, as always like he couldn't believe how stupid I was – which is a bit rich, given how often he gets things wrong and people get killed. It's getting harder not to hold that against him, the way he refuses to learn a lesson. *Any* lesson.

Still, at least he's showing a bit of flipping enthusiasm for once, grinning like a vampire in his skinny black suit with blood-coloured cape. Sometimes I wonder if he's ever had fun in his whole miserable life.

"No, Donna Noble," he goes on in his concussed Billy Connolly voice, "you will not find any whispering voices and creaking doors, or windows that seem to stare out like eyes from under skull-slatted roofs here."

"Is this you telling me you've taken us to the wrong place? Again?!"

He looks at me, hurt. "What are you talking about? Of course this is the right place!" He flaps a hand at the hotel, pointing with some of his fingers. "What do you think that is? Modern art? No, we're looking at a silent, run-down monument to times long ago."

"Yeah, but is it *haunted*?" I ask him pointedly.

Those mad blue eyes look at me, scarier than any gargoyle and he grins a grin that says he's going to go for my neck. I used to call him Spaceman, but nowadays Nosferatu fits him better. Except I think Nosferatu was more of a laugh and not so rude.

"There's only one way to find out."

I kick at the dirt almost smothering the pavement. "And there is, honest-to-God, nothing else you'd rather be doing on a Saturday night?" I sigh.

"Of course not! C'mon, Donna! This needs investigating!"

"I thought there were professionals supposed to do this? You know, Martha and Mickey and Captain Jack and whatsername on Bannerman Rd..."

"Pah! Rank amateurs!" sneers Nosferatu. "Besides, they've all got better things to do on Saturday night. Are you coming into the haunted hotel or not?"

I'll go with him. This time.

## Stress Fracture

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by James Kyle

Nothing's moving in the hotel. The trees all need a good trimming, and the evening wind blows through them like a tired sigh – not that I can hear that over Nosferatu's little travel monologue. "Colloquially known as the Exorbitant due to its high prices, it was built in the post-war boom phase when there were enough visitors and custom to justify building a hotel this far from anywhere," he says.

"Which is why there's no railway or bus stop or even a takeaway," I chorus.

"Exactly, all in-house provided," Nosferatu tells me. "But prosperity is like glory, and both are fleeting. It's been closed ever since. Question: why has no one in the last fifty years or so even considered buying it? Answer: no one wants a hotel so far from the rest of civilization. The remoteness means you don't even get any drive-by custom."

I don't know why he needs me. He's happy enough talking to himself. In fact, that's about the only person he seems to like talking to.

"They could tear it down, build something new?" I suggested as we trudged towards the hotel. "Use for a reality show or something. Renovation nightmares."

"Oh, the myriad complexities of British television franchises," he says, like he's trying to hide a bad taste in his mouth. "More important, why aren't there any homeless here? The last few years have seen unusually harsh winters. But no one's thought of this as shelter."

"Look, sunshine, it's haunted. You know it's haunted. I know it's haunted. That's the only flipping reason we're here in the first place." I would have waved the newspaper that got his attention in the first place if he hadn't crumpled it up and thrown it away, angry that you could only use nine letters in the sudoku.

"We know no such thing! A trio of undergraduates on a drunken pub crawl get lost, end up here by accident and decide to stay for the night. Later, a passing truck driver hears screams coming from this hotel and call for the police..."

"Who found them," I remind him, "alive and well."

"Oh yes, apart from being covered in scratches and all clinically-insane!"

Why did I even buy that stupid newspaper? Why did I let him read it.

"Newspapers can exaggerate, remember!"

"They can also downplay things," he replies, pointing at invisible things all around him like he's poking unseen ghosts in the ribs. "That lorry driver's regular route take her along this road – she'd heard plenty of screams and howls at the witching hour, this was just

the first time she was compelled to call the authorities.”

“Yeah, yeah. But there’s never been any murders or disasters or disappearances before, have they?” Yeah, that might shut him up for a second or two. “I ain’t stupid, I looked this place up. Those students are the first weird thing to happen here.”

“Wrong! Pudding-brained ignoramuses!” he fumes. “What about the stories of something here, eh? Moving back and forth behind the windows with a light! Question: who would start hanging out here after a crime scene investigation?”

“Well, us for starters!”

We’re lost in the shadow cast by the hotel now, surrounded by overgrown bushes and trees we can barely see. It’d be pitch dark if it weren’t for an open window on the other side of the hotel, letting in just enough sunlight to pick up the front hallway. I bang my shin against something hard and sharp and Scotsman Skeleton tells me not to swear.

“Why didn’t you bring a torch?” he asks me.

“Because it wasn’t my idea to come here, was it?”

“Oh, don’t dwell on your shortcomings, Donna. You’d have thought of it eventually.”

Yeah, if only to have something blunt to whack him with. I almost say that when he delves into one of those pockets of his and takes out a torch and gives it to me without a word. I thank him anyway and turn it on – and this torch has to be the saddest, wimpiest torch ever made. A gnat lighting its fart would provide more light. I can barely see the rusting gate right in front of us, blocking the hotel entrance.

The Doctor tries the gates; they’re not locked, just so warped and old they’re jammed closed. He scrapes them apart with way too much ease; he might look like a skinny preying mantis in a tuxedo but he is very strong. Makes him even scarier, knowing he could tear people limb from limb if he ever felt he had to.

The hallway is covered in dust and cobwebs. The plants outside cast weird shadows on the walls, like burn marks in the wallpaper. Rubbish crunches and creaks under our feet as we squeeze through into the lobby. I bump into some kind of urn or fancy flower plot next to me but grab it before it falls. It’s full of dust. That’s probably not important.

As we make our way down the hall, the sunlight’s almost gone and it’s taking what little heat there is with it. Finally we reach what was once the foyer; it’s so dark and there’s no furniture to give a clue as to how big it is. I can just make out some double doors in the far end, all grubby and the glass panes broken and beyond them a staircase leading up out

of sight. Everything's still and the cobwebs are so thick it looks like the spiders were meth-addicts with plenty of time on their hands. The torchlight causes the shadows on the grimy walls and tiled floors to just blur into each other. You wouldn't think a couple of weeks ago this place was crawling with coppers, paramedics and all the rest. You wouldn't think anyone had been here since Gramps was a kid.

It's very quiet, but I don't say this out aloud. That'd be well thick, that would.

Nosferatu's peering up at the shadowy ceiling. "Seems a good a place as any to set up camp. Right near the main exit, right next to a bathroom, and probably in the same place that those students chose to spend the night."

"So we're going to do what they did?"

"Exactly what they did."

"Yeah, that sounds clever, given what happened to them..."

"Donna, we are trying to recreate the events of that night, remember?"

The silence is broken.

"It's just the wind," Nosferatu says, as if I'd squeaked and grabbed his arm.

"Duh," I mutter, rolling my eyes.

"The noise is just the wind," he clarifies. "But what is that light?"

"What light?" I ask. "Probably just a streetlight come on."

The Doctor peering at the shapes beyond the doors. "Maybe," he says like only a fool would think that was likely. "Maybe it's the phantom with the light?"

"Maybe it those boggle-eyes of yours playing tricks! Besides, if someone is playing silly buggers with a torch upstairs – how did they get there?" I kick the double doors and I get the horrible sense the whole wall wobbles. Even so, I'm busy tearing a strip off Nosferatu. "Locked, aren't they? So how did they get up there?"

The Doctor rattles the doors, shaking loose dust everywhere but they won't budge. "A hamster with a blunt penknife could get through these..."

"A hamster with a blunt penknife?" I echo. "Did that actually sound clever in your head? Anyway, no one's gone through the doors, hamsters or not. Or is there some planet of the hamsters with blunt penknives who can break down doors then put them back, lock them and arrange the dust perfectly?" My teeth are chattering from the cold, but taking Nosferatu down a peg can keep me warm.

"There are other ways to the top floor," he says, pretending he hasn't heard.

“Not one any of the police could find.”

“Police are pudding-brained plodders,” he grumbles. “This needs an investigation by someone who actually knows what they’re doing.”

“Well, you better let them get on with it, then.”

He glares at me. “Do you think this is endearing and productive behavior, Donna?”

“Oh, you can dish it out but you can’t take it?” I snort. “We’ve been here for half an hour and what have you deduced with your big fat alien grey cells? Sod all, that’s what. At this rate the roof’ll cave in before you find any ghosts...”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he sneers. “We’re quite safe. This place is built like a fortress.”

I shine the torch right at him. “You what?” I demand. “We’re safe, you said? Safe from what? This hotel’s a fortress? We got in easy enough.”

He shrugs. “Maybe they were more interested in stopping things getting out.”

I don’t have anything to say to that.

Which sort of rams home how bleeding quiet it is here. It’s like the whole place is insulated, swallowing up all the noise we make, filling the gaps when we’re not talking. In the right mood you could be impressed. Or scared witless. Or annoyed so much you decide to keep talking anyway, make the silence work harder.

“So what do you think happened here? A ghost, a curse, aliens, what?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t have come looking. Could be mass hysteria,” he shrugs.

“Jumping at shadows, expecting a scary old hotel to be full of things to scare them. You humans, with your horror movies and your ghost stories and your urban legends...”

“Yeah, thanks, we agreed only one Humanity Is Crap rant a day, remember?”

He looks down his nose at me. I honestly can’t tell if it’s because he’s so tall or such a git. “I was just saying that if you really wanted a fright, you’d just watch the evening news. You’d rather imagine some lunatic in a hockey mask is murdering teenagers of low moral rectitude than deal with the hellhole you’ve turned this planet in to.”

“You’re saying Humanity Is Crap, again, aren’t you?” I remind him sweetly.

He coughs, self-consciously. “Anyway, you and I are of sound mind and judgment...”

“Well, I am.”

“...and we are prepared for anything...”

“Really? You got a Ghostbusters’ gun in one of your pockets?”

“...we expect the unexpected, we walk in the shadows, we go in the places no others

no others will go, we stick to the tracks where the sun never shines..."

I stop listening. The last of the sunshine's gone now. Outside is all cold and black and wind howling in the trees. I pull my coat tighter; it's definitely getting colder nowadays.

The Doctor minces around the lobby, peering at things. Then he sits on something that looks like a grotty old orange box, chin in his hand and looks bored. Like it wasn't his idea to spend the night here. Like he doesn't actually want to be here.

Or he doesn't want *me* to be here.

How long have we been doing this? Hours? I dunno. No screams, no howls, nothing but an old building and rushing wind.

"Remember when we used to have fun?" I ask.

He grunts. *Yeah, so what?*

"When there was more to life than sitting in the dark rooms worrying about all the rotten darkness inside the hearts of mankind?"

Another grunt.

"I miss those days."

"Why?" he asks, genuinely confused. "What's wrong with this?"

"You're actually enjoying this, are you?"

"Course I am. Are you not?"

"No. And I'm surprised you are."

"Why?"

"You don't look like you're having the time of your life?"

He cradles his jaw and peers up at me out of that old, haggard face. "What gives you that idea?" he asks, and I wonder if he literally could give less of a damn about anything.

"You," I grumble. "You never smile. You never laugh. You just stand around looking miserable for those five minutes every century you're not hiding in the TARDIS with all the lights off avoiding everyone."

"So because I don't want to end up getting groped by your grandpa's army of geriatric molesters down the pub you think I'm incapable of enjoying myself?"

"Ain't seen any evidence saying otherwise, alien boy."

"You mean I have to scream out my emotions at the top of my voice every minute of every hour of every day to let you know what I'm feeling?"

"Least it'd show you were feeling something."

“Donna, think it through. Imagine the problems if I started acting like that.”

“What problems?”

“How would people be able to tell us apart?”

“Oh, don’t tell me! Pudding brains! Been at least six minutes since you said that. Tell you what, let’s check out a hospice next so you can go around telling everyone that you’re going to live forever and they’re all dead meat!”

“That sounds a bit rude.” I refuse to get my hopes up. “Even though it’s probably quite accurate, factually-speaking.” See? “Are you saying you think I make fun of people?”

“I say every third word out of your mouth is telling people off for not being as good as you! If you gave that up for lent, people’d think you’d taken a vow of silence.”

“And probably suggest you do the same,” he tutts.

I’m getting into it now, having put up with him like this for longer than I should have. “I mean, if you really think Earth and everything on it is so rubbish, why are you hanging around here? I don’t even know why you even step out of the TARDIS nowadays!”

“Because things need answers!” he says, getting frustrated.

“Like what? The number of times you can insult a total stranger before they get a word in edgeways? How clever you are compared to a whole species?”

“Like who unlocked those doors.”

What’s he on about? I turn around, shining the oh-so-weak torch at the double doors to the stairwell.

One of the doors is slowly swinging open, and as we stop talking we can hear the loud creak of rusty hinges. The door finally stops, and it’s a wide open mouth of cobweb and dust and darkness waiting for us to go through.

“You didn’t do anything with the sonic?” I ask, lips suddenly dry.

He shakes his head.

“So... maybe you loosened it earlier?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“A squirrel, then? Or a badger? You know they get into these old buildings...”

There’s a loud, sharp noise above our heads. I look up. No bats or monsters or bat-monsters hanging from the ceiling. At least none in the torchlight.

“Odd that a badger upstairs would suddenly be so clumsy,” the Doctor says.

“Badgers are nocturnal. It might’ve just woken up?”

“It’s easy enough to check.”

“Oh yeah! Prowl round an old hotel in the middle of the night on stairs no one’s used for years – what could go wrong? Oh wait, we could end up like them students!”

He’s getting impatient. “The students remained here on the ground floor. It could be that they were safer upstairs. Besides, even with today’s standards of education it takes more to drive someone insane than something upstairs trip over something else, doesn’t it?”

More noise as something creaks and shifts overhead. We look up and see those struts and crossbeams flexing, shrugging off dirt and dust. It’s like the whole hotel is rocking back and forth in a hurricane but the icy air around us just isn’t moving. Everything’s as still as ever, as quiet as ever. Just me and the Doctor and whatever is dragging itself back and forth upstairs, where no one is supposed to have been for years.

But which can be reached by the staircase. Behind the doors that have now opened.

“You reckon it’s a trap?” I ask the Doctor.

“An invitation, certainly.”

“If we run for it, you think it’ll follow us outside?”

“It left us alone for the first four hours.”

“But it could just have woken up. I mean, you don’t know, do you?” I hiss at him.

“You don’t know what’s happening here, you don’t know how to deal with it, and you sure as heck don’t know if we’re in danger or not! And you call us pudding brains!”

“What do you suggest then?”

I don’t know, but I’ll be damned before I admit it to him. So, I bluff. “Well, if this thing attacked the students, it didn’t kill them... I mean, it beat them up but not kill them, and they might have stayed here or run outside, but the one thing we know they didn’t do was go upstairs because the doors were locked.”

He nods, encouraging. “So upstairs is the one place no one’s been attacked!”

He holds out his hand I realize he’s tricked me into doing what he wants.

Again.

So I take his hand, and together we creep into the stairwell. Like I thought, the stairs haven’t been fixed for decades and they buckle under our weight. Well, my weight if I’m honest – Nosferatu’s as skinny as a rat, probably doesn’t weigh a thing. We’re kicking up dust and the creaking staircase sounds like old bones snapping under pressure. You know, I

might have said something nicer like, I dunno, celery snapping under pressure but you just think of old bones whenever you're with the Doctor these days.

Trying not to sneeze or fall through the steps, I make it to the sturdier landing. The torchlight shows bare walls, sagging floors and a long corridor lined with doors. Most of them are open. Nothing moves. Nothing makes a noise.

My teeth chatter. Nosferatu, as ever, doesn't notice the cold. "It's getting colder. You think that the cold's what's woken it up? Like it's hibernating in reverse?"

Next thing I know, he's shoulder charging me out of the corridor and into some alcove or other, pressing me into a dark recess. "Hands!" I snap. He really should know better by now! Instead, he jabs one of his cold skeletal fingers on my lips and gives me a death glare. I shut up and switch off my torch, not that there's much difference.

And then there is.

I can see the outline of Nosferatu, then the rotting edges of the cubbyhole we're hiding in, like dawn's breaking early. But it's the wrong colour, sick and green like some filthy neon lights in a dark alley. And it's getting brighter and closer.

I press back into the shadows and I turn my face away on instinct. I dunno what the Doctor does; knowing him he probably tries to outstare it and look even more frightening. I'm not surprised if he succeeds, and he does. That horrible glow just dwindles away and I open my eyes to catch a glimpse of it disappearing round the top of the stairwell and we're left in darkness again.

"What was that?" I ask.

The Doctor's crouched on the floor, running his fingers through the dust and the trash. Whatever was giving off that glow didn't disturb anything as it went by. There was no sign what we'd just seen had actually happened.

"Oi, asked a question!" I hissed at him.

"I heard. It's a good question. You answer it, go on."

I take a deep breath and count to ten. "Well, it didn't hurt us or drive us crazy. Maybe it's not whatever it is that cobbled the students? Or maybe... Oh, I don't know! It was a green light and that's all we actually know!"

"Nothing to be ashamed in being ignorant," says Nosferatu, straightening up.

"Choosing to stay ignorant? Oh, that's a very different kettle of macra."

"We're going to go chasing after it, are we?"

"I am. You stay here." He points two fingers at his eyes, then to me. In case I'm too dense to work it out. "Just in case it sneaks back round the other way through the fire escape up on the next level."

"Hang about, what am I supposed to do if it does sneak around?"

"No idea. Think of something."

"Why can't I go with you?"

"The stairs wouldn't take your weight."

"Are you saying I'm fat, are you?" I demand. And of course that's the moment the linen closet or whatever I'm leaning against buckles, the screws are torn out of the frame and suddenly I'm lying in a heap of dust and splinters.

Nosferatu tilts his head like a dog, as if trying to work out if I meant to do that.

"So, anyway. I'll be upstairs. Try not to tear the building apart while I'm gone."

My gut instinct is to tell him to be careful. I suppress it.

Nosferatu skips up the stairs and out of sight chasing the lightning or hologram or spooky glowing green alien. Just me and the dark and the quiet and the—

"Donna!"

"Doctor?" I call. Nothing. I yell, really giving it all I've got. "Doctor!!"

The echoes eventually stop.

Nothing.

Oh, god something's happened to him. He's fallen through the floor or chased something out the fire escape or maybe that green wil-o-the-wisp turned out nasty after all...

But I'm not going to panic. Oh no. Donna Noble, Super Temp, the DoctorDonna. I do not panic. Just because it was a spooky green light does not mean I get scared. It's only spooky because I don't know what's caused it. If it's an alien thingy, then no problem. It can't be anything else, it can't be a ghost. No one died here and even if they did, how rubbish were they that they'd turn into a green light?

So why am I scared? Why am I so, so scared I feel like weeping?

I'll work that out later. Nosferatu needs rescuing.

I head in the direction he took. Ahead is another long, straight corridor lined with doors. No light, green or otherwise. This piss-weak torch says that there's no holes in the floor. No bodies. No blood. Nothing. All the rooms I pass are empty. Why is that scarier than

if they were full of monsters?

And why is getting easier to see? The torch isn't getting any brighter... and if it was, why would everything be tinted green? It's like the light is growing out of the hotel itself and I'm walking right into it like a great nana. Still, at least I'm only going into it because the Doctor's got himself in a pickle. It's not cause I'm a pudding brain.

Everything's bright green now. I'm at the end of the corridor and there's nowhere left to – wait. To the left, there's some steps and another landing but on this one there's only one door. And it's not closed properly and beyond it is that boiling green light. It's spilling out from behind the door, and I can't see anything beyond except the doorknob and even that's all in shadow.

OK. Green light has its own hotel room. I've seen weirder. I've been weirder.

It's just a couple of steps made out of creaking, mildewed wood and then I'm at the door and I can look through...

...

I really wish I hadn't.

I can barely see, it's so bright. The room's trashed, with the wallpaper peeling away from the sides and plaster falling from gaping holes in the ceiling. The grubby broken windows are squares of jet black, because the naked bulb hanging overhead is just too bright.

*Too green.*

Wrong.

I turn back and nearly have a heart attack as I realize someone is standing behind me.

It's Nosferatu. The Doctor. A streak of black in the endless unnatural green.

He's standing in the doorway, looking right at me. Giving nothing away.

Then he slams the door shut, trapping me inside.

I run for the door, screaming and pleading. The door won't budge, the handle won't turn. I'm bashing against the wood. Somehow I know he's sonicked it. I'm trapped. I shout and I threaten and I beg and I pray.

The Doctor doesn't come for me.

The apple-coloured green has a core of hot white. I can't take my eyes off it, and my back's hurting like I'm bending over limbo-style to stare up in it. I can't move my left arm,

it's just hanging there like I've had a stroke. My legs are stumbling, and I can barely keep my balance. I reach out with my right hand but it's drawn to that horrible light bulb. Either it's covered with cobwebs or something's wrong with my eyes. No, something's wrong with me... I realize my left arm's come to life again and is scratching my face. There's blood on my fingertips, dripping onto my tongue. I can't swallow...

I'm falling to the dirty floor. I think I've gone blind...

Help ...

Was that me screaming? No? No. Not me.

"Help you?" I say, but my lips aren't moving. "How can I help you?"

There's a feeling of joyful relief. It's been so long but finally it can talk to someone. It wonders why I'm the first to understand what it's saying. My mind is deeper and broader than anything it's met before.

"Those students... you hurt them..."

It's sorry. It didn't mean to.

"Can you fix it? Undo the damage?"

It's angry. What about the damage that was done unto it? It feels like it's been treated badly. It just wants to go home. It was abandoned here, in this world that is too hot and heavy for it to be comfortable. It was left here by, well, its parents I guess. Some kind of growing up ritual, it got kicked out and forced to live on its own and it's been waiting for mum and dad to change their minds and come back. But they haven't.

"They want what's best for you," I say, working it out. "They want you to be independent. Live your own life. They're being cruel to be kind."

Oh, that doesn't go down well, let me tell you. But eventually it accepts that point. But it's lonely. So lonely. It's waited years for its parents to show up, or maybe drop off the next generation.

"Your mum and dad wanted you out there in the universe, not haunting a hotel, right?" I ask. "You can travel the stars, see the unseen, visit the unknown. Maybe you'll find a world that isn't so hot and heavy and you can start a new life there?"

It's nervous.

"What else can you do? Wait who-knows-how-many years until them come back? What if they don't? What if the next generation of your family is born and they're sent here and find you cowering in the dark? Is that a good thing?"

Sadness. But there's no choice. It has to go.

"I hope you find what you're looking for," I say.

The green light vanishes like a punctured balloon, leaving only darkness. There tattered old cord swinging above me is empty, without any light bulb.

It's over.

I get up. I'm filthy. My face is covered with cuts and dried blood, like I tried to scratch my face off. Dirt and grime's stuck to the sweat on my skin. I don't think I've ever felt filthier in my entire life. My whole body aches.

I get up and try the door. It's locked, but the hinges have all-but pulled free of the wood and after a few kicks it comes free. I stumble out of the landing and into the corridor, which is dark and quiet – not scarily silent, not sickly green. Just an old building.

I work out I've got about one hundred and two different bruises as I limp back to the stairwell. The Doctor's standing at the top of the steps, peering at his sonic screwdriver, bushy eyebrows all a-frowning.

"It's gone," I croak, my mouth is dry.

"A discarnate entity," he says grandly. "Pure thought with no physical presence, trying and failing to communicate with human beings. But the pudding brains are too shallow and small to take it all in. They're undergraduates, too, which makes it even harder. No wonder they all went mad. Oh well." He drops the screwdriver into his jacket. "Can't be helped. Could think that Time Lord hybrid consciousness of yours could pick up the slack. Gave it directions and sent it on its merry way, I suppose?" He grins that death head's grin of his. "Another temp job for Chiswick's finest."

He doesn't seem to notice all the blood on my face and hands. Or how much pain I'm in.

"You knew what that thing was?" I asked.

"Nope," he shrugs. "Still don't. But it wasn't hard to guess at its general nature and work out what the problem was. Few rough guesses, observation, theorization, deduction. See, Donna Noble?" He taps his forehead. "Nothing's inexplicable, only unexplained. Come on, no point hanging around here."

He holds out a hand to lead me down the stairs. I take it, and I let him lead me down and out the front entrance into the night. Then I tear free and, tugging my coat tighter, limp away from him. This, he notices.

“What?” He frowns suspiciously. “What is it?”

I tell him.

When I’m finished he asks me if I kiss Gramps with that mouth.

“Oh, actions speak louder than words then, do they?” I say and go to slap him across the chops. His hand shoots out and grabs my wrist before my fingers can touch him. His hand’s like a vice and his eyes are narrowing as if he’s just sensed the faintest clue I might be angry enough to whack him so hard his children would be born bruised.

Finally he lets me go.

“Question,” I say, trying to rub away the finger-marks in my wrist. “What was locking me in that room?”

“A stroke of tactical genius using all resources at hand to resolve the matter peacefully with both elegance and élan,” he says as if it’s an answer learned from a book.

“Wrong, mate. What locking me in that room was, was the last straw!”

“There was no point *me* going in there,” he argues. “Time Lord mental firewalls wouldn’t have let it in, that’s why it went after humans. And a human with Time Lord brain capacity was the only one who could make contact.”

“You locked me in! You let me think I was trapped and going to die!”

“I’d never do that!”

“You already did!” I shout at him. I’m crying, tears stinging in my cuts. “You could have just told me from the start. You could have been in there, held my hand. You just threw me in the deep-end and I thought you were going to let me drown.”

“You weren’t going to drown,” he says crossly. “You were perfect for the job.”

“And what if you were wrong?” I’m screaming now, my voice cracking. “What if I’d died in there? What if I’d gone mad and never came back? What then? You just going to chalk it down as another mistake, dump me at mum’s front door and head off?”

“Oh, don’t be so stupid!” he snapped. “We’ve been in much tighter scrapes!”

“We? *I* was the one in the scrape! *I’m* the one who’s probably going to need tetanus shots after tonight!” I shake my head, mainly to pull my hair out of the congealing scabs.

“I’m out of here, Doctor.”

He rolls his eyes impatiently. “OK, I’ll see you back at the TARDIS.”

“No. I’m going home. Back to Gramps and mum and Mini and Shaun.”

“Donna, don’t do anything you’ll regret...” he says, witheringly.

"I regret not doing this sooner, sunshine! That's what I regret!" I squawk at him. "It used to be fun. It might have been scary and mad and exhausting, but at the end of the day I was glad it happened. We saw wonderful things. Beautiful events. We joked and we laughed and we were there for each other. Now we hang around in crypts and dungeons, people get hurt and die and I might have gotten over that if you weren't such a miserable, horrible old bastard. So, that's it. I'm off."

I turn and trying to ignore the pains in my legs, head for the road.

"Donna..." he cries, scuttling to keep up.

"What? You're surprised? You think I want to stay with you? You think I like being treated as dirt? You think I get out of bed each morning so you can call me thick while you show off? And now I can't even trust you to watch my back!"

He gets in front of me, looking crestfallen. "You think I don't care about you?"

"I think," I say through gritted teeth, "we're not friends. Friends don't use each other as bait when it's useful! You don't even pretend to like me any more.

"Hey," he says, all defensive. "I tell you what I think and how I feel. I don't pretend to be something I'm not. I respect you enough to tell you the truth."

"How do I *know* that? How do I know you're not just coming up with new excuses to say my head's full of pudding? And when I complain about it, it's my fault! And you get to tell me that I'm nothing, cause God knows I never get tired of being told that!"

"Donna Noble, you are not nothing. You're so, so much better than you think you are."

"Maybe, Doctor. But you're not. You're worse than you think you are. Much worse."

I wipe tears and dirt and blood off my face with the back of my hand and limp off towards town. I refuse to look back at him, but I can still hear him.

"I need you," he calls after me. "I need your help."

"You need help all right – but you don't want it. You want everyone to live up to your high and mighty standards, but you refuse to live up to mine. You won't even try."

"Donna..."

I round on him. "Will you? Cause you want to be so honest about who you are, you'd never pretend to be normal! Never pretend you want to be with other people! Never pretend to have human pudding-brain friends! That'd be a lie. And rule one is the Doctor never lies. Well, congratulations!" I add, then I turn off again and head off into the night.

Eventually I get to the end of the road and turn the corner, letting me take one look back.

I can't see the Doctor. It's dark, he might still be there, in the shadows or maybe not.

All I can see is a crumbling old hotel at the edge of town. It used to be very popular once, but then the good times went and all that's left nowadays is a ruin that'll get you hurt if you're stupid enough to get too close to it.