

A World Apart

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‘Now what?’ moaned Rose, brushing her hair as she strolled into the console room. Her mouth stretching wide as she failed utterly to stifle a yawn.

‘Sorry if I’m keeping you up,’ said the Doctor, glancing over his shoulder as he adjusted numerous controls on the amber-coloured console.

‘Well, yes, you are, actually,’ she replied, following the Time Lord around the room as he bounded to the opposite bank of controls. ‘I was in bed. It’s the middle of the night. Why’d you wake me up?’

‘One, the TARDIS exists outside of time, so technically there is no night. So if I say it’s time to get up, the kettle should be on in five minutes or under. And two, I’m trying to track a very faint but very important signal, and I need you to hold down that button there.’ The Doctor planted his forefinger on what appeared to be a champagne cork screwed into the glowing turquoise innards of the console.

‘Fine,’ said Rose, holding the button down. ‘So what kind of signal is it? And where’s Jack?’

‘Right behind you,’ said the cheerful brogue of Captain Harkness. Rose turned to see him standing behind her, grinning and holding a tube of tightly coiled wires.

‘Rose, finger on that button!’ shouted the Doctor.

‘Will this do, Doctor?’ asked Jack, holding the contraption up.

‘Should do,’ he said, fiddling with more gizmos. ‘Just plug it in down by my foot here.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Rose. ‘And again, what kind of signal is it?’

‘It’s a power booster,’ said Jack, getting straightening back up.

‘It’s Time Lord,’ said the Doctor.

‘What?’ gasped Rose.

‘Finger on the button!’

‘Sorry! But how can it be Time Lord? I thought you were definitely the last one?’

‘So did I. Looks like I was wrong. We’ve picked up the signal of another TARDIS. It’s fully functional and primed, so it must be occupied.’ The Doctor flashed her a broad, toothy grin. ‘Wasn’t that worth getting up for?’

‘Guess so,’ smiled Rose.

‘Good. Now Jack, you seem wide awake.’

‘Beds aren’t for sleeping in, Doc.’

‘Whatever. Stick the kettle on, would you? Two sugars, ta.’

Finally, after much fiddling, adjusting, rocking about and two rounds of tea, the TARDIS materialised on the cracked and weathered surface of a planet. The doors opened, the Doctor hurrying out, followed by his two companions.

‘Where are we?’ asked Jack, slipping into his shiny leather coat.

‘No idea,’ said the Doctor, straightening his considerably more battered leather coat. ‘Somewhere in the Acteon Group. Not that that helps much.’ He sniffed the air. ‘Bit ozoney, isn’t it? Perfectly breathable, though. Bit nippy.’

‘You’re telling me,’ said Rose, zipping up her fleece. ‘So where’s this TARDIS?’

‘Just over that hill, I think. Didn’t want to materialise right next to it, just in case, y’know.’

‘In case of what? It’s one of your people, right? What’s there to worry about?’

‘D’you trust every human on your planet?’

‘Fair enough,’ she said.

‘I’ve had problems with most Time Lords at some point. Bit of a troublemaker, me.’ He grinned. ‘But there’s always worse troublemakers.’

‘Understood,’ said Jack. ‘It could be the Time Lord equivalent of Magnus Greel over that hill.’

‘Who?’ said Rose.

‘After your time,’ said the Doctor. ‘Come on.’

They trekked across the rocky plain, ascending the hill quickly, kicking up a cloud of dust. The Doctor reached the summit first, and stopped dead in his tracks.

‘Oh no,’ he said. ‘I don’t believe it. I really don’t believe it.’

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’ cried Rose, hurrying up behind him.

‘Is that a bus?’ asked Jack. ‘That is a bus, right?’

‘The Number 22,’ sighed the Doctor, ‘for Putney Common.’

‘Is that a TARDIS?’ asked Rose, faintly incredulous.

‘Yep. That’s a TARDIS all right.’ He started to make his way down the hill. As the trio approached, a head popped out of one of the windows. A head topped with long, golden waves of hair, and wearing far too much make-up.

‘Coo-ey!’ she said. ‘Come on over, I won’t bite!’

‘Doctor,’ said Rose, ‘does everyone from your planet sound like they’re northern?’

‘No, not everyone. Just a couple of us.’ By now they were almost upon the bus. The mysterious traveller had now exited the vehicle. She was clad in a black PVC catsuit, and high heels.

‘Hello, Iris,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s me.’

‘Well, bugger me!’ said the woman.

‘Gladly,’ smirked Jack, receiving a punch to the arm from Rose.

‘Doctor! It’s you, isn’t it? Blimey, don’t you look rugged? Love the leather look. Suits you. Ooh, I just knew you’d turn up! Our destinies are as entwined as ever.’

‘Iris, how did you get here?’ said the Doctor, his gob clearly smacked.

‘I took the bus, luvvy. Same as usual. You still in that old police box?’

‘I mean... how are you here at all? It’s impossible!’

‘Oh, nothing’s impossible luvvy. I’ll explain it all later. So, who are your friends?’

‘Hi,’ said Jack, grasping Iris’s hand, and planting a suave kiss upon it. ‘Captain Jack Harkness.’

‘Iris Wildthyme,’ said Iris, beaming.

‘Nice to meet you, Iris,’ said Jack, beaming back.

‘I’m Rose,’ said Rose, eager to interrupt any unnecessary flirting.

‘She the latest one, then?’ asked Iris.

‘Latest one?’ mouthed Rose, turning to the Doctor.

‘I picked up Rose on Earth in 2005,’ said the Doctor. ‘Best travelling companion I’ve ever had,’ he added, smiling at Rose.

‘Oh,’ said Iris, looking a little crestfallen. ‘Does that include me?’

‘Jack joined us in 1944,’ subject-changed the Doctor, ‘but he’s originally from the 51st Century. Funny story - he nearly destroyed humanity. Still, you only live once, don’t you?’

‘Not us, Doctor. Not us.’

‘This is Iris. We go back a long way.’

‘He was only a touch over three hundred when I met him. What a young rogue he was!’

‘Six hundred years?’ said Rose. ‘That is a long friendship.’

‘What?’ said Iris. ‘He told you he was only nine hundred? Love, he passed a thousand a *long* time ago. Cheeky monkey. Anyway, you lot must come into the bus! G and T’s all round!’

‘Doctor?’ said Rose in a suspicious tone of voice.

‘Come on, she’s harmless.’ Jack was in the bus before he’d even finished the sentence.

‘Yeah, but who is she?’ Rose whispered.

‘Just an old friend. We go back a long way.’

They followed her into the bus.

Quietly, unnoticed by the four travellers, something was moving. It existed between what the Doctor would have called ‘striations of the continuum.’ It lay between the borders of universes, pushing blindly against the dimensional fields that restrained it. Extending feelers, it probed the darkness, grasping futilely in the nothingness in which it existed. Lived wasn’t really the appropriate word – it couldn’t truly be said to be alive in

any real sense. It was a function, a mathematical anomaly quivering in a theoretical absurdity. There was no way it could ever break into true existence. It would always be confined outside of everything, a mere possibility. Until its alien, geometric senses happened upon a discontinuity, and it began to seep through...

Rose clambered in after Iris, subconsciously manoeuvring to block the Doctor's view of her plastic-clad buttocks. She stumbled over the steps, her mouth dropping open as she took in the interior of the magnificent transcendent time machine.

'So it's just a bus?' she said.

'Just a bus?' spluttered Iris. 'I'll have you know this is a fully functioning Time And Relative Dimension In Space craft. Type – oh, I forget. But it's one of the better ones.'

'But it's the same size on the inside!'

'Oh yes. It's the latest thing you know. Dimensional transcendence is so passé.'

'But it looks just like a bus! Where's the console? The roundels? That bit that goes up and down when it takes off?'

'The control console is ingeniously disguised as the dashboard and gears of your standard London double-decker. The time rotor is integrated into the rear engine of the craft. And there's a roundel over there.' She waved vaguely left.

'That's a washing machine.'

'It's round.'

'Hey,' said the Doctor, suddenly bounding across the length of the bus to where Iris was perched on an old fashioned wooden seat, 'Is this mine?' He laid his hands on a white hat stand, which was stood in the corner, numerous floppy hats and feather boas draped over it.

‘You gave it to me, Doctor,’ said Iris. ‘Don’t you remember?’

‘Oh, you know what my memory’s like Iris,’ he said, still looking amazed. ‘I thought I’d lost this. I was looking for it for ages. Now I can have a matching pair!’

‘Who said I was going to give it back?’

‘Iris, it’s – no, hang about, no problem. You keep it. You’re right. It’s yours now.’

‘You’ve lost the other one, haven’t you Doc?’ said Jack, who was happily reclining in a battered armchair next to the drinks cabinet.

‘I left it on Frontios,’ he said, looking a little shamefaced.

‘Ooh, Doctor,’ said Iris, ‘you want to be careful. That’s right at the end of the noosphere. You’ll get in trouble if you go messing about at that end of time.’

The Doctor looked Iris directly in the eyes, gripping her gently by the shoulders. ‘Iris,’ he said firmly, ‘there is no noosphere. There’s no limit to Time Lord observation, because there’re no Time Lords left. They all died. How did you survive the War?’

‘What war?’

‘What war?’ said the Doctor, confusion across his face. ‘The Time War, Iris. The damn war we were fighting for centuries. The war against the Daleks. The war in which you fought. I was there by your side. I thought you’d died with the rest of them.’

‘Oh, Doctor, I’m so sorry. There’s something I’d better tell you.’

‘What? What the hell is going on here?’

‘I’m not, well, you see -’ Iris paused, and started again. ‘I’m not your Iris. I’m from another time stream. A parallel universe. You know the type of thing. History goes in one direction there, another here.’

‘But that’s a theoretical absurdity,’ interjected Jack. ‘You can’t cross timelines. You can overwrite histories, but not jump between them.’

‘Oh, can’t you? You listen to me. I’m a Time Lady. This old bus can do more than just go backwards and forwards. It can go sideways too. I try not to cross timelines too often. This is just the sort of thing that’s bound to happen.’

‘You and this knackered old TARDIS,’ complained the Doctor. ‘It’s never been stable. So, why’d you come to this reality? What’s so terrible about yours?’

‘I’d really rather not say,’ said Iris, looking sheepish. ‘Not in the company of those I’ve only just met.’

‘Oh, all right. You two, outside please.’

‘Why do *we* have to go out in the cold?’ complained Rose.

‘Because I asked you to. Nicely. We’ll only be a mo. Two mos at most. All right?’

‘OK,’ sighed Rose, as she and Jack slinked off outside.

The two humans were playing with the rocks. Jack was crouched, picking up pebbles and tossing them across the ground, as if throwing stones across the sea. Rose was pacing around, hands in pockets, kicking the rocks by her feet as far as they’d go.

‘Relax, Rose,’ said the Captain. ‘I’m sure they just need to sort out a bit of history.’

‘Oh, so they’ve got history, you think?’

‘Well, that’s pretty obvious. What’s wrong with you? You’re acting just a little -’

‘Don’t even say it.’

‘- jealous.’

‘I’m not the one who was staring at her tits.’

‘I wasn’t staring at them. I was staring at the Doctor’s bottom. Iris’s chest just happened to be in my line of sight.’

‘You just don’t think of him as having ex-girlfriends though. I know he must have done, you know, at some point, but all he ever does these days is saving planets. We’re never on a planet more than half a day before he’s got to save it. How’s he got time for anything else?’

‘Best way to meet girls. Trust me.’

‘Yeah, cos all girls are impressed by blokes who swan in, saving the day in their time machines.’

‘Well, you went with him after he saved your world,’ said Jack, smiling.

‘That’s different, that’s – look, not everything’s about sex, you know. Or is it different in your time?’

‘Do you know how many planets called Angvia there are in the 51st century?’

‘Don’t be a cnut, Jack.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Now what?’ snapped Rose.

‘That,’ said Jack, pointing across the plain. The ground was swelling. Ripples undulated across it, rocks flying off in all directions.

‘It’s like some kind of wave,’ said Rose.

‘Rose? It’s coming this way.’

‘This is your ninth incarnation, right Doctor?’ said Iris, pouring herself and the Doctor large scotches.

‘That’s right,’ said the Doctor, taking his glass and settling down in the now vacated armchair. ‘Although sometimes I wonder if I’ve lost count.’

‘Well, back in my reality, your ninth incarnation looks a bit different. You know, regeneration doesn’t always behave predictably. Your eighth regeneration could have led to all sorts. In this case, you – well, you were a bit more traditional, if you know what I mean? Stuck with the frock-coated look, the waistcoat and the long hair. Still had a big nose, though.’

‘Enough of that.’

‘Sorry. You know I’ve always loved your noses. Anyway, this version of you was a bit of a romantic. Met this girl, took a shine to her. Emma, I think she was called. By the time I met her, the two of you were engaged. You were going to retire on Earth. Have the honeymoon on Betelgeuse Two, I think, but back to England after that. We said goodbye, you – the other you, I mean – went off to tell that idiot Koschei, and I went on my way.’

‘Iris, is this going anywhere?’

‘Well, I took it a bit badly. I always thought we’d end up together again, eventually. So I fiddled with the bus, jumped across the timelines and came here. Set the old fella to find a reality where your timeline diverged before you met her. I knew we’d find each other, we always do. So there it is.’

The Doctor leaned forward. His face had lost its edge, and he was smiling now.

‘Oh, Iris. You never did get over me, did you?’

‘You always told me you weren’t the settling down type,’ she said, tears welling in her eyes. ‘But you bloody well were, weren’t you?’

‘Well, that me was, but this me isn’t. Well, I don’t think so. I’ve not been in this body long. But I’ve always cared about you. We’ve had some good times, in the past, haven’t we?’

He took her hands in his, and she replied, ‘Yes, we have, haven’t we? Remember that time on Venus? Behind the volcanoes? We nearly didn’t get dressed quickly enough to make it to safety.’

‘I seem to remember that you started that one off.’

‘But it was definitely you who lured me there in the first place. “Oh, Iris, look over here at these fascinating rocks! Ooh, it’s a bit warm, isn’t it? Hmm?”’

‘I wish you’d kept your old hair.’

‘I wish you’d kept your old c-’

But then he kissed her.

‘Doctor!’ said Rose, bursting in. ‘There’s something outside and what going on in here?’

‘Sorry to interrupt,’ smirked Jack. ‘But there’s trouble outside.’

The Doctor stepped outside, avoiding Rose’s glances at him.

‘There,’ said Jack, pointing across the horizon, ‘Some kind of distortion wave. It’s heading straight for us, and growing.’

‘What is it?’ said Iris.

‘I’m not sure,’ said the Doctor. ‘Something in the planet’s make-up, perhaps? Or a dimensional anomaly?’

The wave was very close now, but slowing. It slowed to a stop, but began to bulge upwards, the rock distorting further, becoming fluid, stretching into a

serpentine form. The end split, snapping wildly like the mouth of a fish out of water.

In the distance, more wormlike protrusions could be seen to be rising from the ground.

‘In the bus,’ said the Doctor. ‘Now.’

‘Iris, how does the scanner on this ship actually work?’ cried the Doctor, jabbing the dashboard in vain. ‘If it actually works, that is?’

The Time Lady joined his side. ‘Here, let me,’ she said, and fiddled with a couple of buttons. The windscreen lit up, no longer showing the external environment in the visible spectrum, but as a wide array of readings of differing radiations and energies.

‘Look, there, you see?’ The Doctor turned to Iris. ‘It is a dimensional distortion. But the level of complexity, the self-regulation – it’s alive. Or at least, it’s close.’

‘And it’s spreading. It’s going right through the heart of the planet.’ She looked back at the Doctor. ‘We’ve got to get off of this planet. The whole thing could be alive and churning up in the next few hours.’

‘And we’re hardly likely to survive that long. You three stay in here. Iris, get your ship off the planet. I’m going back for mine.’

‘Doctor, you can’t,’ said Iris.

‘Course I can.’

And he was gone. Before they could stop her, so was Rose.

Iris began to dematerialise the bus. The familiar grinding sound ensued, and the world outside faded into the swirling patterns of the space/time vortex.

‘What are you doing?’ cried Jack. ‘Rose is out there, she’ll -’

‘She’s with the Doctor. She’ll be all right. If we go out for her now, we’ll all probably get killed. The whole bloody area’s ripping apart.’

‘Doctor!’

‘Rose! What the hell are you doing out here? I told you to stay with Iris!’

‘I just didn’t want to be left without you. Just in case you didn’t make it.’

‘You’d rather... No time for discussion now, we’ve got to get going.’

He grabbed her by the hand, and hoisted her up the hill. The rocks churned beneath their feet, rippling and sucking at them. The Doctor pushed Rose up to the summit, from which she tumbled, head over heels, to the ground below.

‘Rose!’

The Doctor leapt down to her, narrowly dodging a rock tentacle that ripped through the ground towards him. He grabbed her by the shoulders, dragging her to her feet.

‘Rose, come on, we’ve got to get back to the TARDIS.’

Painfully, she walked with him.

‘Nearly there. Come on.’

He unlocked the ship’s door, bundling Rose through and entering himself. Sprinting up to the console, he set the dematerialisation codes, and the engines began to grind.

Immediately, he was back at Rose’s side.

‘Are you OK?’ he gasped.

‘Think so,’ she said, smiling through a split lip, ‘just a bit knocked about, that’s all.’

‘Never, ever do that again, Rose.’

‘Fall over?’

‘Leave somewhere I have told is safe.’

‘I’m sorry. I know it was stupid - ’

‘You’re telling me.’

‘- but I just panicked. I didn’t want to be left without you.’

‘Rose. You know I’d never leave you.’

‘Excuse me, but if you could just turn this way a moment,’ came an American voice.

The Doctor and Rose looked behind them. On the scanner were Iris and Jack.

‘Any chance of a rendezvous? Or are you two gonna leave me with her?’

‘I’m sure you’re in good hands, Jack,’ said the Doctor, ‘but we can meet on the ninth planet. Should be far enough away to be safe.’

‘OK, Doc. We’ll see you there.’ And with that, he was gone.

This planet was even colder than the previous one. The four travellers stood between the two TARDISES.

‘So, what was it, exactly?’ asked Jack.

‘Some kind of extradimensional entity,’ said the Doctor. ‘Must have existed between striations in the continuum. Slipped through with Iris’s TARDIS, I expect. Started using the local matter to build itself a stable form. Perfectly harmless now. Just one more life form for the Universe. Bit bigger than the usual, of course.’

‘I’m so sorry, Doctor,’ said Iris. ‘The whole thing’s my fault.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said the Doctor. ‘I suppose it was. Never mind, eh? All’s well and all.’

They stood in silence for a moment.

‘I, uh, think we’d best get that kettle on, huh, Rose?’ said Jack.

‘Oh, right. Good idea.’ They both entered the police box, closing the door behind them.

The Doctor put his hands on Iris’s.

‘You could come with us, y’know. Knock about the Universe together. Just like old times.’

‘No,’ she sighed, ‘I’d best get back to my rightful place. Always so much to do. I’m so sorry about your Time Lords. Perhaps you could come with me?’

‘Then there’d be no one left at all. Being alone is bad enough, but it’s better than there being nobody. At least this way, someone will remember them.’

‘You’re not alone, Doctor. Not at all, from the looks of it. I hope you’re very happy together.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You always were a bit slow, weren’t you, Doctor?’

And with that, she kissed him, then walked back to her ship.

The Doctor was still standing there when it had faded away.