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PROJECT

FALLOUT

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Fallout

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A little girl and a small puppy.

“NEXT”

A little girl and two little boys on the steps of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

“NEXT”

A little girl and her mother sitting by a Christmas tree opening presents.

“NEXT”

A little girl sitting on her grandmother’s lap.

Pause.

“Nana...”

ONE

The Doctor rounded the corner of the corridor effortlessly, his shoes making little squeaky noises on the floor.

“Tamara?” The Doctor knocked on the closed door of his companion’s room and expected a happy sounding response. He didn’t get one.

“Hold up.” Tamara sniffed as she called back from the other side. Had she been crying?

“I’ve brought some more ibuprofen for your headache. Can I come in?”

“Give me a second, will you?” Tamara’s voice carried an indignant color that the Doctor hadn’t heard before. Suddenly the door clicked open.

“Tamara, what’s wrong?” The Doctor entered and handed her the pill and glass of water, which she swigged down quickly.

“Nothing.” Tamara said assuredly. The puffy, red eyes hinted at the real truth.

“Is this still about Miss Pilling and the Kein?” The Doctor placed his arm around Tamara’s shoulder. The events surrounding their recent visit to Jupiter still played through the Doctor’s head. Tamara nearly risked her life to save him and she would have if he hadn’t snapped out his state of mental exhaustion.

"No, Doctor."

"It's Grae, isn't it? I know you and she grew close. Are you worried about her?"

"Well, of course I'm worried about Grae. But..."

"Tamara, trust me."

"Here, let me show you. Lights." The lights followed Tamara's command as she picked up a strange looking contraption from the bed.

"The viewer doesn't work?" The Doctor frowned at the gadget he had lashed together from a large flashlight, his battery operated beard trimmer, an old fashioned outboard CD-ROM drive and a talking spelling toy. With that combination of Silicon Valley technology, Swiss engineering and Hasbro, how could it not work?

"The viewer works fine."

"Well, good. What's the matter then?" The Doctor looked at his companion quizzically.

"It's the picture disk. I haven't had a viewer to look at it since before I went to work for the government. I had forgotten that a certain picture was on it." Tamara punched a few buttons on the pad.

"VIEWER ON." The voice was a cheesy, mechanical and lifeless one that made Daleks' voices sound friendly and personable. "PRESS START TO BEGIN..."

Tamara pressed start; the machine beeped and came to life casting a three dimensional image in the middle of the room. As the disk was read each of the images flashed before them.

A little girl and a small puppy.

"NEXT" the computer voice intoned.

A little girl and two little boys on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral.

"NEXT"

A little girl and her mother sitting by a Christmas tree opening presents.

"NEXT"

A little girl sitting on her grandmother's lap.

Pause.

"What a kind looking lady," the Doctor smiled at his friend, "is she your grandmother?"

The only answer that he received was a solemn sniff.

"She's passed away, hasn't she?" The Doctor shook his head as he offered his companion a handkerchief.

"Only recently, relatively speaking." Tamara dabbed her eyes with the hanky and balled it up in her hands. "I was on a mission. I wasn't able to come home to see her. With all that's been going on, all my memories of her were pushed aside. I don't regret very much, Doctor, but I regret not being able to say goodbye to my Nana..." The handkerchief was brought up to her face again as her words broke up into sobs. "I would give anything to be able to say goodbye to her properly."

"Would you like to?"

"What?" She couldn't believe her ears. "Isn't there some law of causality or something that says that I shouldn't do that?"

"Visit your ailing grandmother whom you obviously miss very much? I doubt it." The Doctor scratched his head. "There's always the Bilinovich Limitation Effect."

"En Anglais, s'il vous plait, je ne parle pas technobabble."

"Sorry. The Bilinovich Limitation Effect concerns a person from the future running into themselves in the past, or vice versa. It makes quite a mess of the timelines. But since you say you're on a mission at the time, we shouldn't have to worry about that."

A high-pitched chime sounded through the corridors, causing the Doctor to leap to his feet.

"We're landing? I didn't initiate the materialization sequence." He dashed from the room.

"Hey, wait for me!" Tamara leapt to her feet but as she did, her headache returned. "What the hell? I don't get migraines."

* * * *

"You didn't set the controls, did you?"

Tamara arrived in the console room after a stop at the medicine chest for another ibuprofen tablet, her floor-length black skirt swishing behind her as she skidded to a halt at the console. Fishing her hands from the long sleeves of her extra-large off-white cable-knit sweater, she flipped the scanner switch.

"I wouldn't know how to set the controls if I tried." Tamara smirked at her friend as she waited for the picture on the scanner to come into focus, "Why? Where are we?"

"Well, London, England, First July, 2041, actually."

Tamara walked over to confirm the readout. She shook her head and looked up at the Doctor. "The day before my Grandmother died."

"Well it seems that the TARDIS is a sympathetic old girl." The Doctor scratched at the back of his neck. "It seems that I may have set the telepathic circuits too strongly." With that he popped under the console.

"Doctor."

"Not to worry, though. After we pop out and visit your grandmother I'll reset the system and that should..."

"DOCTOR!" Tamara's urgency was finally enough to break the Doctor from his concentration. He sprung up from under the console and followed Tamara's gaze to the scanner. "Where are we? This can *not* be London, 2041."

The Doctor stared out at the desolation and swallowed hard. Wiping a bead of perspiration from his brow, the Doctor simply said, "No, it can't."

The destruction was absolute. Various structures that may have been buildings and homes lay crumbled piles of brick, wood and steel the only reminders. A haze of thick gray smog hung low in the sky. What was once the majestic Thames was now a small trickle, as though poured from a leaky garden hose.

The Doctor shut the scanner. He took a look at the Radiation meter: it had begun to flash wildly.

"The radiation out there could fry an egg in its shell." The Doctor looked at Tamara who couldn't quite take in what she was seeing. In their time together, Tamara and the Doctor had seen many things: this however was wrong.

"How can this been the first of July, 2041?" Tamara reset the chronometer and activated it again. It confirmed the same data.

"It isn't; I mean it can't be." The Doctor shook his head in disbelief.

"Doctor, I was 25 years old in 2041," Tamara moved towards the Doctor, "I was on my first mission for the Government. This is not 2041."

"Of course it isn't, Tamara." The Doctor smiled. "Let me take a look at the horizontal hold, that's probably it. We probably slipped sideways in time onto Earth in a parallel universe and we can soon right that."

"Glad to hear it." Tamara pulled her hands up into her long sleeves and began to twist the cuffs nervously. "I want to get away from here as quickly as possible."

The Doctor adjusted a few controls and read the resultant computation.

"No, that can't be right."

"What's wrong, Doctor?"

"As much as I hate to say this, my dear," the Doctor ran a hand through his hair, "this is not only *not* a parallel Earth, but it is also the Earth you came from."

"What?"

"Well the first thing I did was check this Earth with the other parallel one the TARDIS has on file, when it came up as the original I then checked the data bank to check if *your* Earth is the parallel one, which it isn't. This is London, Tamara. The first of July, 2041."

"No, this can't be poss..." Tamara voice trailed off she brought her hands up to her head and winced in pain.

"Tamara." The Doctor helped Tamara into a chair. "Has any of the medicine help your migraine?"

"Sure, for a little while. But it keeps coming back worse than before."

"Of course!" The Doctor shouted and jumped to his feet, momentarily forgetting his companion's condition.

"Ow...ooo!"

"Sorry, sorry!" The Doctor patted her on the shoulder then continued. "Of course the medicine wouldn't help your headache. It's your mind attempting to cope with the paradox. We better find the nexus point and repair this, otherwise the paradox will continue on and on until..."

"Until everything is changed..."

"Indeed. No one ever completely realizes the consequences of their actions. Everything is related. Every decision leads to other decisions; every action leads to other actions. People compare it to a stone being thrown into a pond, creating ripples that keep reaching out through all of time."

Suddenly a crackle broke through the TARDIS' radio receivers.

"What's that?" Tamara jumped as the noise cracked again.

The Doctor began to move around the console adjusting dials. "It sounds like a radio signal. Someone may be trying to communicate with us."

"Can you tune out the other interference?"

"Yes, should just be a matter of turning this knob here." The Doctor twisted the knob and a voice that was deep and scratchy, but unmistakably female came through.

"... 55 degrees northeast immediately, please respond. Repeat: this is Captain Benton of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce. Doctor if that's you, do not leave your ship: the radiation levels are too high. Please move the TARDIS to a position sixteen kilometers, fifty-five degrees northeast immediately. Please respond..."

"Benton?" The Doctor began to stroke his beard. "That's Captain Benton?"

"That's what she said." Tamara looked at her friend and smiled.

The Doctor opened his eyes and smiled a wide toothy grin that was unlike any expression Tamara had ever seen cross his face before. "*John* Benton was a dear, dear friend. One of the most loyal and trustworthy people I have ever known."

"I hope we can trust *her*."

The Doctor switched on open a communication link. "Ah, Captain Benton, good to hear a familiar name, but the voice isn't as masculine as I remember it."

"Doctor! It is you, thank God! I'm Captain Jessica Benton. You used to work with my grandfather: John Benton," the young woman answered. "As you may have guessed: we need your help."

"Sixteen Kilometers, fifty-five degrees northeast, you said?" The Doctor confirmed, then he turned to Tamara and said, quietly, "I don't seem to recall Benton having any children."

"So?" Tamara questioned. "You probably just lost track of him, that's all."

"True, the last time I actually saw him was in the late nineteen-eighties..."

"The coordinates are correct, Sir." Benton responded.

"I'll be there presently." The Doctor cut the communication link as he threw the dematerialization control.

TWO

"So, what you're telling me is that World War III began and ended over eight years ago?" The Doctor rocked back in his chair while he sipped on a cup of Earl Grey. The room they were in was a modest sized office with a kitchenette. A picture of one Alastair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart shaking hands with Warrant Officer John Benton graced a wall behind a desk. The picture, however, hung forward precociously to give it some semblance of straightness on the curved, tiled wall. The carpeted floor hid any fact that there were once several sets of rails there instead. A young man with blonde, closely cut hair and an immaculately trimmed beard tended the stove. Captain Jessica Benton appeared to be in her early thirties, with short brown hair and freckles and, as the Doctor noticed right away, her grandfather's piercing blue eyes.

"Yes, Sir. We were aware that the attack was going to come, and we were ready for it, but many people didn't leave their homes in time." Captain Jessica Benton offered Tamara and the Doctor a plate of sandwiches as she spoke. "We started closing down sections of the tube the year before, preparing them to be used as makeshift living quarters. I think we did quite well. I mean it's not the Ritz, but when you don't have anything else you learn to appreciate what you have."

"Where does all the food and water come from?" Tamara took a bite of a sandwich and passed the plate to the Doctor.

"No thank you." The Doctor turned back to Benton. "Surely your supplies are limited?"

"Well, we have a water rationing program which has worked so far," Benton capped her canteen and slung it back over her shoulder; "and most of the food is tinned. We also just managed to complete our first hydroponic garden so all our vegetables will be fresh come a few weeks. Would you like to see it?"

"Certainly, but after a little rest. My friend Tamara here hasn't been feeling well and I'd like to have her checked out."

"Certainly." Benton rose. "Corporal Downs."

"Yes, Ma'am!" Downs moved away from the stove and exchanged salutes with Benton.

"Downs, would you please accompany Miss Scott to Dr. Drake's office?"

"Yes Ma'am." Downs exchanged salutes with Benton once again, then opened the door. "If you'd follow me, Miss Scott."

"Doctor?" Tamara grabbed her companion's arm. "You said you knew what caused my migraine. Can a military doctor help?"

The Doctor pulled Tamara down to his level and whispered, "We know your migraines were caused by the paradox, but we don't know where the nexus point lies. Two of us investigating separately should help us figure it out twice as fast."

"Meet you back here in an hour and a half, then." Tamara followed Corporal Downs into the corridor. "Thanks for the tea, Captain."

"Downs is my personal assistant. He'll take good care of your friend." Benton sat back down and leaned forward in her chair.

"Benton," the Doctor leaned in towards the young woman, "if I gave you the name of someone, could you tell me if they're still alive?"

"Military or Civvy?"

"Civilian, Betsy Clarke. She lived at 24 Charring Cross the last I was aware."

"Let me check for you." Benton moved to the desk and dialed the telephone. "Warner, Captain Benton here. Would you mind checking the records for one Betsy Clarke of 24 Charring Cross, please? Thank you; no I'll hold."

"Problem?" The Doctor asked.

"No, it just takes a moment to..." Benton moved the receiver back to her mouth, "Yes, thank you. Have that file brought to my office immediately." Benton hung up the phone and crossed back to the Doctor. "Sergeant Warner will be over shortly with the Clarke file."

"Wonderful, still time for another sandwich."

* * * *

"If you can believe it, there are some children that have never known the sun other than on the television monitors." Downs escorted Tamara through an arch and into an area liberally labeled 'Medical Sector'.

"It seems that you're doing quite well for yourselves down here, all things considered." Tamara looked at Downs who had suddenly stopped walking.

"Yeah, we're doing well, if you don't mind living like a mole," Downs spat out angrily.

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm on your side, remember?"

"Sorry, Miss Scott," Downs took his hat off and ran his hand through his hair nervously; "I'm afraid you touched on a bit of a sore spot for me."

"That's understandable," Tamara nodded. "But when you consider the alternative, you're all very lucky to be alive."

"I know; but sometimes I wonder if, one day, it'll all be worth it."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'd rather have died in the blast. At least it would've been quick. It would've been better than this slow starvation. Why don't you take a seat over there and I'll check you in."

Tamara was quite stunned at the sight of the waiting area. There was a spattering of tables and chairs and the customary out-of-date reading materials, but there were no other people in the room. Downs, after finishing with the receptionist, sat down next to Tamara and began to flip through an old issue of *Time Out*.

"I'm sure you're briefed on the Doctor and the TARDIS, and all?"

"Of course: all UNIT members have heard of the Doctor and know that he's trustworthy and willing to assist whenever he turns up."

"It's nice to see that some people still hold some esteem for him." Tamara laughed to herself.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, usually when we arrive somewhere, we're shot at."

"Well, that's not very sporting, is it?"

"Not in the least." Tamara rocked back on her seat and began to laugh. The laugh can to an abrupt end when her head started pounding. Quickly she brought her hands to her temples.

"Miss Scott, are you all right?" Downs moved in to offer support, if necessary.

"I'm fine," Tamara held her hands out in front of her face. "I think." The pressure in her head was making her eyesight crazy. It looked like her hands were covered in green spots. The same color, she noted, as the carpet below her. She closed her eyes and looked again: they weren't spots on her hands, they were holes *through* them. The green *was* the carpet underneath her. Then as quickly as the pain started, it ceased and her hands were back to normal.

Suddenly the waiting area burst to life. The empty ER had received a patient. A young man was wheeled in on a stretcher surrounded by security troops and a doctor.

"...he slipped and became trapped under a piece of wreckage in the Piccadilly area while trying to escape an attacker," the soldier read from the report. "He appears to have been mugged, his water rations and card were stolen. We are still trying to determine if that happened before his fall."

"Why don't you give me some useful information," the doctor ripped the file from the soldier's hands, "like a name... hmmm. Corporal Shawn Scott, aged 27, sent over from the UNIT-USA."

Tamara leapt to her feet. "Corporal Shawn Scott from UNIT-USA? Let me see him."

"And you are...?" A UNIT trooper blocked her path.

"I'm Tamara Scott; Corporal Scott's sister."

The soldier glanced at the doctor, who nodded his permission. Tamara pushed past to her brother's side. He was in terrible condition, with both legs clearly broken in his fall. He was cold and clammy, in a state of shock.

"Shawn, Shawny? It's me, Tamara." She whispered into his ear. Suddenly his eyes flickered open. "Your sister."

"Tamara?" Shawn's voice was weak, his eyes trying to focus on the female face staring over him. "Am I dead?"

"No, silly," Tamara cracked a smile. "Of course not. Would I be here if you were?"

Shawn's eyes opened with a start, focusing on Tamara's smiling face. Corporal Scott began to shift uneasily, looking back and forth between the soldiers and Tamara.

"Is this some sort of trick?" He barked, "I won't talk! You bastards can't make me talk!"

"What?" Tamara gasped as her brother pushed her to the floor.

"Secure him!" the doctor shouted and at once Shawn was strapped down to the stretcher.

"She's a spy!" He shouted as Tamara got to her feet. "If she's infiltrated this far into the tunnels, who knows how much has she betrayed us already?"

"Shawny, listen I'm Tamara, your sister!" Tamara began to tear up. "Why don't you believe me?"

As the Soldiers began to push the stretcher through the double doors into the Medical area proper, Shawn shouted, "Tamara was killed in the first blast seven years ago with my grandmother and brother!"

Then he was gone.

Corporal Downs helped Tamara to her feet then slammed a pair of handcuff on her wrists. "Miss Scott, I'm afraid you'll have to come with me."

* * * *

"She did what?" The Doctor was confused.

Captain Benton reread the file to the Doctor, "Mrs. Betsy Clarke was killed in the first blast with two of her grandchildren: Ryan and Tamara."

"We have to find Tamara!" He leapt to his feet as the door to the office swung open. Tamara sauntered in, cuffed. "Oh thank Rassilon."

"Corporal Downs: you best have a real good explanation for this. Unlock her immediately." Benton crossed to her assistant who moved to unlock Tamara's handcuffs. They, instead, fell to the floor still locked. "What the hell? Oh yeah, she's an ex-Secret Agent, they learn how to break out of handcuffs on the first day."

"Doctor? Something's happening to me." Tamara fell to the floor in a heap.

The Doctor rushed to Tamara's side. "Quick, Sergeant Benton, Downs, help me get her back to the TARDIS!"

"Captain Benton, if you please." Benton corrected.

"Fine, whatever." The Doctor scooped Tamara into his arms and kicked the door open. "Which way?"

"Hang left at the 'T' junction and then straight on down 4 blocks." Benton drew her weapon. "Consider yourselves under military escort. Downs?"

"Ma'am!" Downs shot to attention then drew his sidearm.

"Let's go!"

* * * *

In the twenty minutes it took to reach the TARDIS, Tamara's condition worsened. While the Doctor carried her, he was able to monitor her heart rate and breathing, both of which were fading rapidly. She, also, began to fade. Upon reaching the TARDIS, the Doctor was able to fish the key from his pocket and tumble through the doors. Benton and Downs followed them in.

"It's bigger on the..." Downs stammered.

"Yes, yes, must everyone say that? I'm glad you're here," the Doctor was abruptly serious, "but don't think you're not going to be put to work. Corporal Downs, in the cupboard just outside the door there is a small rectangular blue box with similar outer dimensions ratios as the TARDIS albeit much smaller. Please fetch it for me. Go!"

"What can I do, Doctor?" Benton moved in closer to Tamara.

"Captain," the Doctor snapped, "please don't touch her!"

"Sorry, sir."

The Doctor softened his tone. "I'm sorry for yelling. If you wouldn't mind hitting the door switch, it's the large red lever."

"Sir!" Benton snapped to attention then pushed the lever down. The doors buzzed closed.

The Doctor, meanwhile, set the TARDIS in motion. With the pumping of the central column, Tamara faded back into view. Downs burst back through the door with the box, it was approximately five inches from top to bottom and it did, indeed resemble the shape of the TARDIS.

"Is this it?"

"Yes," he shouted, "quick, not much time, toss it to me!"

He obliged and a moment later it was in the Doctor's hands. A moment after that, one end was plugged into the console. The Doctor threw a lever and in Tamara's position a small Police Box, standing about three feet high, formed.

"Sorry friends, I'll explain this later. Tamara and I need you to think back on the chain of events that lead the world to nuclear war." The Doctor dove through the doors of the smaller TARDIS. "Don't touch anything!"

* * * *

As the Doctor hit the floor of the TARDIS console room, he ended his dive with a graceful roll and then sprung to his feet. On the other side of the room, Tamara was sitting in a high-backed wooden chair looking quite well.

"Nice of you to drop in." Tamara laughed as the Doctor dusted himself down. "Where am I?"

"I had the TARDIS clone a section of its interior dimension into a smaller TARDIS. It's a closed dimension inside a closed dimension. You should be far enough away from the paradox to feel a bit better." The Doctor smiled and sat in a chair next to her.

"I do feel better." Tamara took a sip from a can of soda. "What the hell happened back there? It felt like I was being pushed through a cheese grater."

"Well, you should remain stabilized as long as you stay here."

"Doctor," Tamara paused, "my brother didn't know me, he said that..." Her voice trailed off, unable to form the words.

"You died seven years ago, in the first attack." The Doctor finished her sentence.

"But I'm thirty-two; I didn't die when I was seventeen."

The Doctor looked at the central column of the console as it rose and fell. "You *did* Tamara, and therein lies our problem."

"I don't understand."

"Listen," the Doctor moved in close; "something happened to affect the timelines and we need to put it right."

"What was it?"

"Well, remember the talk we had earlier about the pond ripples?"

"Yeah." Tamara scratched her head. "But if that's true, the paradox could have been started by the tiniest alteration. It's like searching for a needle in a planet-sized haystack."

"A universe sized one, actually. But..." The Doctor stood up; the stars on his waistcoat seemed to buzz around excitedly.

"You know what caused it..."

"Not exactly." The Doctor began to pace.

"You're not making me feel any better." Tamara slumped back in her chair, frustrated.

"I'm running a scan of the databanks to check for all the divergences in the timelines, but as we've seen, the differences can be astronomical." The Doctor stroked at his beard. "I'm hoping that the split was the result of meddling."

"You're hoping someone changed things on purpose?"

"Well, it should make it easier to track down. If someone goes back in time to, say, change a specific event, it shouldn't be too difficult to locate."

"What can I do to help?" Tamara walked to the console and twisted a blue dial. The scanner buzzed open. Earth looked peaceful from space. So much so it completely obscured the death and destruction on its surface.

"Well, you're going to have to stay here." The Doctor placed his hand on Tamara's shoulder. "I'm sorry, but I don't need you disappearing into the paradox. You're a good friend and I'm going to make sure we straighten this out."

"Thank you." Tamara drew the Doctor in for a hug. "I needed to hear that right now."

They hugged tightly for a few moments, before the hug became awkward. The Doctor pulled back and kissed Tamara on the forehead. "Trust me. I will right this."

THREE

Captain Benton paced nervously back and forth in the console room of the original TARDIS. Downs had taken to circling the console, taking in every detail slowly and carefully, like a child reading his first book.

"This is amazing!" Downs pulled his superior over to one of the monitors. "Look at this hardware! If we had this kind of technology, we could've stopped the nuclear attack!"

"And that's precisely why we don't have technology like this." Benton pulled Downs away from the machine. "The Doctor has been working with UNIT on and off since its inception. To boot, he was a friend of Sir Lethbridge-Stewart's when he was still a Colonel in the regular army. UNIT had access to this technology when he was working as an unofficial advisor."

"Damn! That was back in the seventies. The Doctor sure as hell doesn't look that old!" Downs shook his head.

"Please tell me that you did notice that this technology is alien?"

"Of course, Ma'am."

The door of the mini-TARDIS opened and the Doctor, full-sized, stepped out.

"Right!" The Doctor rubbed his hands together frantically before wiggling his fingers above the console like a magician. He plunged his hand down on a control, and for a split second the TARDIS jumped.

"Sorry about that. Here's the brief: there has been a grave change in the Earth's established timelines. As you may have guessed, Tamara did not die when she was seventeen - but she *did*. There was, in fact, no nuclear war seven years ago - but there *was*."

"Could Tamara be from a parallel Earth?" Benton removed her beret and scratched her head. "Something like that was supposed to have happened went UNIT was sent to supervise Project Inferno, wasn't it?"

"You're exceedingly well informed, Captain Benton." The Doctor reached out and grabbed hold of her hand in both of his and pumped them up and down. "But I've already checked. Your Earth, Tamara's Earth, are one in the same. Look, must I keep calling you Captain Benton?"

"No, Doctor, Jessica's fine," she said, smiling before quickly casting a glance at Downs, "for you. Don't think I'm extending you the same privilege, Downs."

"No, Ma'am."

The Doctor walked Jessica over to a chair and motioned for her to sit down. "I need you to relax. I'm going to hypnotize you."

"Why?"

"Well, seeing that you are in UNIT and you are so well informed about me, I want to see if you have any idea what the event was that caused the split in the time streams."

Jessica leaned forward in the chair. "What kind of thing are we looking for?"

"It could be anything, I'm afraid." The Doctor knelt beside her. "I'll start by asking questions about the cause of the nuclear war, where the discussions in the Reagan-Gorbachev summits took a turn for the worse, you know those type of things..." The Doctor trailed off as he realized Captain Jessica Benton had begun to giggle. "What, may I ask, is so funny?"

"Doctor, I thought you were supposed to be familiar with the history of our planet?"

"I am." The Doctor responded. "At least I thought I was. What did I say that was wrong?"

"Gorbachev and President Patrick White had the summit meetings, not Ronald Reagan." Suddenly Jessica realized what she was saying and abruptly became serious. "Reagan was assassinated in 1981 by John Hinckley."

The Doctor pulled Jessica up from the chair and engulfed her in a huge bear hug.

* * * *

"So Reagan was killed by Hinckley in '81; Bush took over then lost the re-election in 1984 to one Patrick White..." Tamara punched at the alternate TARDIS' console while news broadcasts of the events flashed by.

"Right," the Doctor continued, "White wasn't half the diplomat of either of his two successors. The summits as occurred between Reagan and Gorbachev in your version of history never happened and US – Soviet relations crumbled to the point of nuclear war. What a shame."

"So it's easy, then." Tamara looked up into the Doctor's eyes. "All we need to do is get back to 1981 and stop Hinckley from killing Reagan."

"Well, it's not as easy as that, unfortunately." The Doctor wrapped his arm around Tamara's shoulders and walked her to the scanner. "We've landed in the right place and the right time, approximately twenty-four hours before the event..."

"And..."

"And..." The Doctor released Tamara from his grip and tugged at his beard. The stars in his waistcoat seemed to hold their positions as if they too were waiting with baited breath for the Doctor to continue. "The TARDIS has picked up some residual time disturbance. Like cracks in time."

"Could it be the paradox beginning?"

"I'm afraid not. What I picked up was too weak. I had the TARDIS trace it. Tamara, it goes back one hundred and forty years to 1841."

"What?" Tamara was shocked. "1841? What happened in 1841?"

"It's a period of American History that I actually haven't visited; let's see." The Doctor thought back. "It's pre-American Civil War. William Henry Harrison would have been President. He died before the year was over, though so I don't know if he'd be any help to us."

"William Henry Harrison, huh?" A smile slowly spread across Tamara's face. "Have you ever heard of the presidential curse?"

"The what?"

"U.S. President William Henry Harrison died in 1841, as you well know. But after that, every President who was in office every twenty years after that was either assassinated or died in office. Lincoln in the 1860's"

"Well, James Garfield in 1881." The Doctor added.

"William McKinley in 1901."

"Warren G. Harding died of natural causes in the 1920's"

"Franklin Roosevelt in the Forties."

"Of course, JFK in 1963."

"And Reagan in 1981," Tamara added, "was supposed to have broken the curse when he was shot but survived."

"I think you may be on to something, Tamara." The Doctor turned to look at the console. "But I'm not sure. What I picked up must have been that pattern burning out. That's something I'm going to look into in the future, as it seems too much of a pattern to be natural. But, since it exists in your timeline as well, something else must actually be the cause. I'm going to need your help."

Tamara smiled up at her friend. The Doctor was an amazing creature. He had the knowledge of countless worlds and ages at his fingertips, but he never hesitated to ask Tamara for assistance and she liked that very much. Even as a top agent, the mostly male establishment looked her down upon her. She constantly had to prove her abilities to them and was prepared to have to do so in her new line of work. But the Doctor proved to not only acknowledge her abilities, but to celebrate them. She may not be an equal in terms of wisdom, no one was, but she was equal in terms of ability and for that she was eternally grateful.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Do you still have any of your supplies?"

"As we met at what was supposed to be a social occasion, I really only have what was on me at the time," Tamara counted the items on her fingers, "watch with cutting blade, compass, tripwire, and digital phone; a rather attractive bullet-proof party-dress and of course the... never mind."

"What?" The Doctor was puzzled, "What are you not telling me?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Really, Tamara, as you're aware, if the item is top secret, I probably have the clearance for it." The Doctor began sifting through the contents of his pockets.

"Oh, all right. My sunglasses."

"Why wouldn't you want to tell me about your sunglasses? They very fashionable, I must say, but..."

"I didn't need you worrying about them."

"Why," the Doctor questioned, "what's so special about them?"

"Well, they have a digital camera, infrared sensor and night vision in the lenses."

"Please get me a pair."

"Doctor, save the world from nuclear destruction first; issue 331-C, Level 2 sunglasses afterwards."

"Promise?"

"Of course, you save me and my planet from nuclear war, it's the least I can do."

"Unfortunately even those fascinating sunglasses probably wouldn't be able to help in this specific situation." A thought popped into the Doctor's head. "You wouldn't, by any chance, still have the wristcomm Grae gave you?"

"I haven't taken it off since." Tamara pushed up the sleeve of her sweater revealing the black smooth device. It resembled a plain-faced watch, but its simplicity hid the fact that it was, actually, quite state of the art Time Lord technology.

"Have I told you recently that you're wonderful?"

"No."

"You're wonderful."

* * * *

In the console room of the main TARDIS, the Doctor adjusted the coordinate control to lock onto the time distortion and set the ship in motion. The guests were surprised when the mini-TARDIS faded and Tamara joined them in the console room. She seemed to be doing quite well, although looking slightly monochromatic. The colors of her clothes had faded and the wristcomm was pulsing in a distinct shade of gray.

"I feel like I'm watching 1960's BBC television." Tamara laughed. "Everything is black and white and the soundtrack is kind of hissy..."

"Sorry about the color distortion, Tamara," the Doctor said after checking the time path indicator. "It's the force field. It'll take some getting used to, and no one can touch you save the three of us, but at least you can come along."

"What are we going to do, Doctor?" Jessica asked.

"Since the TARDIS was unable to pick up any evidence of the time distortion," the Doctor said as he opened the scanner, "I can surmise that the divergence has yet to occur. We are going to have to split up and search."

"How do we know what to look for, Sir?" Downs asked. "I don't think I'm one hundred percent sure how we'll find it either."

"I'm sure the Doctor has something in mind," Jessica smiled.

"I do, actually," the Doctor responded, without looking up from the monitor.

"The Doctor is going to suggest that we split up, one of us with one of you." Tamara opened the secondary door and motioned for Downs and Jessica to join her. "That way, one of each group will be able to sense the disturbance. Come on, let's get you into some 1980's civilian clothes." She disappeared with Benton and Downs, into the corridors, leaving the Doctor alone in the humming console room.

"I hope Tamara's right about this, old girl," the Doctor said to no one in particular. "I don't want to lose her."

The Doctor smiled as the TARDIS' hum rose ever so slightly in pitch.

FOUR

“Oi, taxi!” Tamara shouted as a small yellow Chevrolet screeched to a halt at the curb. She opened the door and hopped in. Captain Benton scooted in next to her.

“Where too, Miss?” The driver had a heavy accent that Tamara instantly recognized as Hungarian. Briefly, impulsively, she realized that she had never, actually, met an American cab driver in America. It seemed to fit some kind of universal law. Shaking the thought out of her head, she opened her mouth to reply.

“Local police headquarters, pronto,” Jessica blurted out, as the car jerked away from the curb.

Tamara leaned over. “Why there?” she whispered, tersely. “The Doctor wanted us to check out the site to see if there were any places a sniper could conceal himself.”

“I thought we’d check out the EMT route first, then hit the site after.”

“Why? We know where it’s going to happen.”

“Exactly.” Jessica sat back in the seat, hard, her arms crossed.

“I don’t understand.”

“We know where it’s going to happen. We know *how* it’s going to happen. What’s the use of checking it out ahead of time?”

Tamara scowled. “We know what the history books say happened. The Doctor...”

“The Doctor sent us on a milk run.”

“A what?”

“A fool’s errand. A wild goose chase. Whatever you want to call it, it adds up to the same thing.” Jessica’s voice broke out of a whisper with a little too much force, startling both women. For a long, strained moment neither knew how to continue.

Tamara spared a glance at the driver, who was tactfully minding his own business. Probably used to people fighting in the back. Still, this was not the place and certainly not the time to get into a fight. Especially if words like “President” and “Assassination” made their way to the front of the cab. True, he might not speak much English, but she was not willing to risk

being swarmed with secret service agents when there was so much at stake. Calmly, in what she hoped was her most conciliatory tone, she tried to start over.

"Look, Jessica."

"Captain."

"*Captain*. Didn't you have a class or something in UNIT about trusting the Doctor? He might not always make sense, but he usually knows what he's doing." Somehow that came out sounding a bit more catty than it should have.

Jessica's face reddened. "I didn't get to where I am today by letting someone else think for me. I had to show initiative, and prove I was ten times as good as anyone else. I didn't have the Doctor around to make all of my decisions."

Tamara stopped, caught between understanding and outrage. Anyone else meant 'anyone male'. How often had she fueled her frustrations on those exact thoughts? It was almost a mantra. It was part of the reason she had bonded so well with Grae. Still, it didn't give Jessica the right to be such a...a...

"It's not like that."

"No? Then why are we out here 'looking around' for something we can't possibly find?"

"Because..." Because? She hesitated. There was an accusation on Jessica's face, one that Tamara could read as clearly as if it had been stamped there. "Go ahead."

"What?"

"Say it! I know what you're thinking."

Jessica leaned in close, her words clipped with barely restrained anger. "Because you're next to useless right now. And because the Doctor wanted me to baby-sit you on this little errand, just to make you feel better."

That hit close to home. Close enough that Tamara was tempted to believe it. Surely she had proven her ability to the Doctor by now. He certainly seemed to respect her, but how many times had she seen him pull a con like that on an enemy? That thought sent a chill up her spine.

"Maybe you're right." That was painful to admit. "But I'm not going to sit around the TARDIS drinking tea and feeling sorry for myself just because I can't run around playing hero."

"What if the Doctor wanted you to stay in the TARDIS out of harm's reach? Would you be a good little girl and stay put?"

Would she? Did she trust him that much? In this situation, "Yes."

The word held a surprising amount of conviction, and Tamara saw an immediate change in Jessica's demeanor. Maybe it was frustration, not anger, which had seeped into the Captain's accusations. Tamara could certainly sympathize. If she was still trying to figure out where she stood with the Doctor after all this time, how was a woman who barely knew him supposed to react? She probably had no clue whether or not the Doctor was taking either of them seriously. But if Tamara could remain confident in his judgment, maybe it would be enough to make Jessica feel a little more comfortable. Or at least shut up and go along for the ride.

Jessica was silent for a moment. "Do you really think we're doing any good here?" The words were stiff, almost forced. It was taking a lot for her to back down.

"Yeah."

There was another moment of silence.

"Fine." Jessica leaned forward and tapped the glass behind the driver's seat. "Take us to the Washington Hotel, please." She turned towards Tamara. "Happy?"

"Just peachy."

* * * *

The TARDIS stood incongruously on a street corner in downtown Washington DC, one block south of where the assassination attempt was to take place. Luckily it was quite early in the morning - otherwise the sudden appearance of a British Police Box and its ramshackle crew may have caused more trouble than was necessary.

"And that contraption is supposed to detect local time disturbances, Sir?" Downs frowned at the contraption in the Doctor's hands. It resembled a small hand-held television with a large wire coat hanger stuck to the top.

"Theoretically, Downs, a time disturbance sends out ripples in normal time." The Doctor adjusted a large dial on the front of the contraption. "If the structural integrity factor of the Realspace and the time trace molecules are shaken up to a high enough level to cause a breach, the..."

"With respect, Sir," Downs interrupted, "I didn't understand a word of what you just said."

"My apologies, Corporal Downs, I simply mean that, well, yes. If there is a disturbance to the timelines, this device should be able to locate it."

"Where should we start looking, then?"

"Well, this device should be able to pick things up within a one hundred mile radius and within a two hour time period." The Doctor twisted the dial again. "We should be able to find it..."

"But..."

"But," the Doctor continued, "I'm not finding anything."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, one of two things." The Doctor pocketed the device and pulled the TARDIS key from his pocket. "Either the divergence is yet to occur, or it isn't as obvious as I thought it may be. Let's rescan the area." The Doctor pushed the TARDIS doors open and motioned for Downs to enter first.

* * * *

The Doctor stood above the document reader screens, fixing a cable to one end of each. The cables lead to the databank output junctions on the TARDIS console.

"There," he said with an unashamed congratulatory air, "that should do it."

At that particular moment, the TARDIS doors opened and Jessica entered with Tamara lagging behind.

"Nothing to report, Sir," Jessica stated before disappearing through the inner door.

"What's wrong, my dear?" The Doctor asked as Tamara threw the door switch.

"That woman is so..." Tamara paused for a moment searching for the right word. Frustrated, she threw her hands in the air: "irritating!"

"Really? She seemed perfectly charming to me."

"Everything I said to her she took as me trying to undermine her authority." Tamara flopped into a chair. "I know you like her, and that's she's a 'family friend' but... I don't think I could survive another recce with her."

"Tamara," the Doctor said as he sat down next to her, "Captain Benton is a very strong willed woman. She's a lot like you in many ways. That's why she's a little defensive around you."

"I figured as much." Tamara smiled. "You know she almost had me doubting you."

"Really?" The Doctor tugged at his beard. "You're right, you better stay here with Downs. I'll take the Captain on the next recce."

"What do you want me to do?"

The Doctor walked to the console and the impromptu workstations he had set up. "Well, I've hooked up the document readers to the databanks, it should make them a little more readable. Between you and Downs, you should be able to get through most of the material in the time it takes us to follow up on a hunch of mine."

FIVE

“What, exactly, are we looking for?” Jessica whispered as she and the Doctor entered the Washington Hotel.

“Well, President Reagan is due to speak here in a few hours and I want to make sure everything is in order.” The Doctor approached the Concierge desk and rang the bell.

“May I help you, Sir?” A cheerful looking young woman with long brown hair glided to the desk.

The Doctor looked the girl over. “Yes, Miss Brown. I need to see a guest list and I need to inspect the ballroom where President Reagan will be speaking,” the Doctor spouted out quickly, “please.” He smiled down at the young lady, turning on the charm.

“Sir,” Miss Brown said, as she eyed the Doctor up and down eagerly with her blue eyes, “I’m not really allowed to let you do that unless, of course, you’re with the police.”

Jessica, annoyed by being excluded from the little game, whipped out her UNIT ID. “I’m Captain Jessica Castens Benton of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce and this is our Scientific Advisor, the Doctor. We’re on orders from the Chief of Staff to inspect the premises. Would you please do as the Doctor asks, or would you like me to write you up for impeding a government officer?”

“I’m just doing my job,” the girl huffed in a nasal voice, as she typed a few keys on the computer and the printer whirred to life. “The ballroom is down the hall behind you. I’ll bring the guest list to you when it’s finished printing.”

By the time the girl had finished speaking, Jessica had already disappeared down the hallway.

"Thank you, I really appreciate it." The Doctor looked at the young lady, who smiled back up at him, despite herself.

"You're welcome, Doctor."

The Doctor took one more look at the young woman, nodded, then joined Jessica in the ballroom.

"Have you found anything, Jessica Castens Benton?" The Doctor climbed onto the stage. Jessica popped up from behind. "I'm not an electrician, but everything looks pretty kosher."

"What kind of a middle name is Castens?"

"I was named after my grandmother, Jessica Castens."

"Was she the one that married your grandfather John?"

"Yes, Sir." Jessica peeked under the stage one last time. "He told me that he was upset that you couldn't make it."

"Well, I can be a little hard to reach on occasion. Let's check in the kitchens and then get back to the TARDIS." The Doctor offered his hand to Jessica, which she didn't take. She heaved herself onto the stage then followed the Doctor into the back.

Jessica grabbed the Doctor's waistcoat. "Listen, I may have been a little out of line with your friend earlier."

"You know, Tamara is one of my most talented friends. She has really stood by me through some tough times." The Doctor placed his arm around Jessica's shoulder. "She's a lot like you, actually. Which is why, I imagine, you two are not getting along very well."

"Doctor." Jessica pulled from his grip to face him. "All my life I've had to prove myself to everyone. Here comes a woman that seems to have had everything handed to her..."

"Nonsense," the Doctor interrupted. "That is complete and utter nonsense! Did you know her father disappeared before she was born? Instead of letting that turn into mistrust for men, she used it as a reason to succeed. In her reality, Tamara was the highest-ranking woman in the British Secret Service. A right John Steed. Do you honestly think that she had no opposition from jealous male superiors and fellow agents? I have fought oppression in many worlds across many times, but I never seem to be able to change the human male belief of women being inferior. Human women are much more intricately put together than human males, but so many human males feel so macho and threatened when a human woman shows exceptional skills. Why else do you think men dominated Human literature for so long? Human men always seem to feel the need to push down or hold back their female counterparts regardless of what I've done in the past."

There was a noise from behind. Jessica and the Doctor swung around and came face to face with Miss Brown, carrying an unsightly large printout.

"Here's the guest list you wanted."

"Thank you, my dear." The Doctor took it with a grin. "You've been of a great assistance to us, and we really appreciate it. Your first name wouldn't be Peri, by any chance?"

"How did you know?"

"I just saw your name on the employee of the month plaque out front. Congratulations"

"Thanks." Peri smiled a pretty smile. "Do you want anything? The restaurant is about to open for breakfast."

Jessica took the guest list from the Doctor; "I'll have an orange juice, please."

"Doctor?"

"Just water, Peri, eh?"

Jessica winced at the Doctor's feeble attempt at humor. "Oh, Doctor that was bad."

"Like I haven't heard that before." The girl turned and walked from the ballroom, leaving the Doctor to watch her go.

The Doctor whispered after her: "Don't worry, you'll hear it again."

"What the hell was that about?" Jessica smirked at the Doctor. "She's a little young for you, isn't she?"

"What?" The Doctor looked confused. "No, Jessica, that's my old friend Peri Brown, I'm sure of it. If this is 1981, she's only fifteen. When she is eighteen, her stepfather will take her on an archeological dig in Lanzarote, where I will meet her. Her and I will continue to travel together until we're separated on a planet called Thoros-Beta two years later."

"How do you know this?"

"Well," the Doctor said with a smirk, "that's easy. It's already happened."

When Peri returned to the Ballroom, the Doctor and Jessica had gone.

"Typical," she said aloud.

* * * *

"You're going to burn holes in that screen if you keep staring at it that hard."

Tamara rubbed her temples, feeling an ache that had nothing to do with destabilizing time fields or event paradoxes or anything more exotic than the miles of text she had undoubtedly covered. "Sorry. It's like midterms all over again...I keep reading the same paragraphs over and over, and I swear none of it's sinking in."

Downs cracked a thin smile. He was quite charming when he smiled, in an overgrown schoolboy kind of way. "Nothing like studying all night to make you feel young again."

"Is that what we're feeling?" Tamara groaned.

"Well, I for one would give anything to go back to the days when the worst thing I had to worry about was bad marks on an essay test."

"Anything?"

"I'd even finish 'A Farewell to Arms'."

"What, the novel? Or the film?" Both were, in her opinion, equally hideous.

Downs looked sheepish. "Don't laugh, but when I was younger, I wanted to study literature."

"It's not funny, but I'll admit it is a bit surprising. I guess I never pictured you as anything but a soldier."

"Sometimes it's hard for me to remember what things were like, before." His voice was softer, and for a moment Tamara wondered if the conversation had gone out-of-bounds. But his grin just widened. "Well. If it hadn't been the war, it would have been Hemingway. God, but I hated Hemingway."

That put Downs at around Tamara's age, or older, she realized. Much older than she had initially thought. How had he come through so much looking so young? "When did you join UNIT?" she asked. "If you don't mind."

"No, no. That's okay. It was after the bombing. Captain Benton sort of recruited me in the field, right after we lost London. It was supposed to be temporary... My CO wasn't happy about lending out any of his remaining men...but a few months later I asked for a transfer."

"So you were army?"

"I joined when things started to look bad. With war on the horizon, suddenly school didn't seem so important."

Tamara was quiet for a moment, watching the light of the document reader play across his face. His skin was smooth, and thin, and very, very pale. "I'm sorry," she said suddenly, and softly.

"Pardon?"

"I'm sorry you have to be stuck inside with me. When you went out earlier, that must have been the first time you saw the surface in years."

"Eight years. But I don't mind. Really."

"Really?" Tamara was unconvinced.

"I actually kind of like it." Tamara shot him a disbelieving look, and he smiled back at her. "Or would it be better if I sat here and complained?"

"No. Pretending to enjoy it is just fine."

"Good. Then let's get back to work."

* * * *

Half an hour later, Downs stood, stretching. "Have you had any luck?"

"No."

"Neither have I. Everything looks in order. Everyone involved has impeccable credentials, and all of them stood up to the rigorous investigation after Reagan died. Are you sure all the TARDIS databanks have been converted?"

"The Doctor says everything should have conformed to the data in the new timeline simultaneously. All of the evidence we're looking at is accurate according to the deviant timestream." Tamara looked up. Downs was giving her a strange look, like he was laughing at a private joke. She was way too tired for that kind of look. "What?" She snapped.

"Nothing! I've just never heard anyone accuse me of having a deviant timeline before."

It wasn't funny. Not at all. But suddenly Tamara found herself stifling a giggle. "Stop it! We're supposed to be working here."

"I know, I know! But we've eliminated all the personnel on site as possible suspects. That doesn't leave much of an opportunity for obvious tampering."

"Unless someone showed up last Tuesday and gave Hinckley target lessons. Or cleaned his gun. Or is planning on bumping him in the arm when he's taking the shot. In which case, we're all really, really...."

She stopped. A thought was taking hold.

"What is it?" Downs asked. There was a tinge of...what? Excitement? Concern? That hadn't been in his voice a moment earlier.

"Let's say, for the sake of argument, that it wasn't the shooting itself that changed."

"All right. I'll go for that."

"Then, someone on site would have had to interfere in some way, causing Reagan to die en route to the hospital. Correct?"

"That's the assumption we've been working under." He wasn't following. Not yet.

"But what..." Tamara paused dramatically, "if he wasn't DOA?"

Downs frowned. "I'd always heard he died on site, and all resuscitation efforts failed."

"And the reports all support that. But the reports were written after the fact. Most of what made its way into the newspapers, and, later, the official historical accounts, was written by reporters who never saw what happened after Reagan left the scene. And none of the medical records were ever released to the public, due to 'hospital policy'." She leaned forward, excited. She was on a roll. "I say the only thing that makes sense is that the reports are wrong. Reagan made it to the hospital alive."

"Are you sure?"

"Not at all. But 'History is rarely written by those who witness it'."

"Sounds like something the Doctor would say."

Tamara smiled. "Actually, it was my Grandmother."

SIX

The doors to the TARDIS swung open.

“Doctor!” Tamara shouted as he entered. “Downs and I have been over every record, every police personnel file. It seems that all evidence...”

“Points toward the hospital.” The Doctor completed her sentence.

“What, how did you know?” Downs asked as he plopped into a chair.

“Well,” Jessica began, “Through the help of a friend on the hotel staff, everyone on the guest was roused and accounted for. No one seemed out of the ordinary.”

“As do the local law enforcement.” Downs added.

“Right.” The Doctor closed the doors and set the TARDIS in motion. “According to my readouts, the divergence hasn’t happened yet and with the event only a few hours away, it’s going to be close. The hospital’s the only place we haven’t checked.”

“Doctor.” Tamara pulled him aside. “How can you be positive that our perpetrator is going to be obvious about it? How do you know that the divergence happened as the result of an accident, a minor occurrence? You know, a butterfly may only be flapping his wings so fast somewhere...”

“This is the only time I hope you’re wrong,” The Doctor reached into the force field and grabbed hold of Tamara’s shoulder, “I’m hoping such a catastrophic change was started by a similarly catastrophic event. Something of this magnitude is usually caused by meddling; and since we know this event was the first difference, it should be easy to spot. Look, Reagan is shot in front of the Washington Hotel. He dives back into his motorcade and taken to Georgetown Hospital. It has to be there, but in case it isn’t...”

“We need to check out the motorcade as well.” Tamara interrupted.

“I don’t think so,” the Doctor said, with his fingers crossed behind his back: “the motorcade will never be out of Secret Service sight. It’ll be well guarded.”

“But what if one of the Secret Service men cause the disturbance?” Downs asked.

"Well, then we'll have to deal with that if necessary." With a sweep of his hands, the Doctor plunged the TARDIS out of the vortex and into the basement of Georgetown Hospital. "Okay, Downs and Jessica I want you both to check the supply rooms. Tamara, we're going to search the Emergency Room from top to bottom. We have about an hour - so," the Doctor said as he pulled the door switch, "we need to be quick."

* * * *

Jessica exited the TARDIS first as a volley of staser pulses cut through the air. Downs shoved her out of the way and was struck in the chest. The pulse burst out the other side, exploding blood onto Jessica's sleeve. A man in a black overcoat quickly ran down the hall.

"Agh, Downs!" Jessica cried out as her assistant dropped to the ground.

"Downs!" Tamara shouted as she dropped to his side. "Damn it, he's dead!"

"Stop him!" The Doctor shouted as Jessica fired off a shot from her automatic, hitting the running man squarely between the shoulders. "Tamara, check him out."

Tamara obliged and ran to the assailant's body. When she reached the mess of the coat and blood, she moved the coat to find it empty. The bullet was wrapped in a white handkerchief with a single playing card: the Ace of Spades. In place of the two customary "A's" there were two number "1's". Frantically, Tamara searched through the pockets for any evidence and found a small vial filled with a translucent blue liquid. "Doctor, check this out!"

The Doctor rushed to Tamara's side and grabbed the vile from her. Uncapping it, he held it to his nose and took a sniff. Immediately, his body was wracked by a terrible coughing fit.

"Doctor, are you all right?" Tamara reached up and rubbed his back.

"Gotcha-pike extract," the Doctor spat out between coughs.

"Pardon?"

"It's the nickname of an herb that grows on the mountains of Gallifrey outside the citadel." The Doctor wiped his eyes. "It's incredibly strong and was used in the old days to aid troubled regenerations. Unfortunately, it's lethal to any other bipedal humanoid."

"How on earth did a human get their hands on it?"

"It wasn't a human," the Doctor said as he eased his breathing. "That weapon technology won't be available on this planet for another two hundred years. And this proves it."

"The card?"

"That and the Gotcha-pike." The Doctor twisted the card around in his hands. The back was exactly the same as the front. "I wonder..."

"Doctor did we stop him before or after he used this?"

"Judging by the residue on the sides of the vial," the Doctor said, shaking his head, "he may have already used some."

"What the hell do we have to go on, then?" Jessica walked over to join them. "All this is for nothing? Downs is dead, the assailant's vanished and in less than forty minutes we are going to have a major crisis on our hands that could change the entire fate of our planet and all you have to tell me is that someone *may have* poisoned some supplies!" Suddenly and abruptly,

Jessica broke down. Uncontrollable sobs shook her body as she collapsed to the floor, exhausted.

The Doctor and Tamara exchanged glances. Tamara walked back to the other woman who moved, crying into her lap.

"I'll run this up to pathology and have them analyze all the saline in the emergency room's stock." The Doctor eyed the vial with disgust.

"What about the blood?" Tamara asked as she stroked Jessica's hair. "Could he have deposited it in the blood supply?"

"It's unlikely," the Doctor rubbed Tamara's head affectionately, "Gotcha-pike extract tend to turn human blood a distinct shade of pink. Anyone trying to poison someone with it wouldn't dare risking that kind of exposure. I'll be right back. Take good care of her." The Doctor ran to an elevator and disappeared within its doors.

"Tamara," Jessica looked up at Tamara, her eyes swollen and red from the tears, "I'm sorry. They were right, I can't cut it."

"That's nonsense, Captain Benton." Tamara smiled down at the woman. "You're incredibly brave. If there's one person who understands you, it's me. It's travelling with the Doctor, you see. It's always stressful and sometimes, the rewards aren't immediately obvious."

"Call me Jessica, please." She tried to return Tamara's smile whilst wiping her tears. "I'm sorry I was such a bitch earlier on. I'm not used to other women that have worked as hard as we have to achieve our station in life. It's still a man's world in the twenty-first century."

"Jessica, aren't you the least bit curious what your life is like in my reality?"

"I've thought about it." Jessica sniffed. "When I was a girl, I really wanted to be an actress, but common sense and my family duty came first. I'm a Benton, after all, the next in a long line of military men. I really didn't have a choice. I tore up my application to RADA and joined the army."

"I bet that in my reality you're an award winning actress." Tamara began to tear up. "I didn't recognize you as I've been away from Earth for so long, and you've changed your name of course."

"Of course." Jessica laughed.

"You've actually just finished shooting your newest film, opposite Hugh Jackman, Jr. It's a hot and steamy romance set in Victorian times."

"Oooo, sounds wonderful!" Jessica rose to her feet. "I'd like to thank the academy for this fab honor. And I'd like to thank my friend Tamara Scott for cheering me up when I needed it the..." Jessica stopped talking as she clutched at her stomach. "Tamara, what's happening?"

Tamara leapt to her feet as Jessica faded then reappeared.

"The timelines are straightening themselves out!" Tamara embraced her friend. "The Doctor did it!"

"We did it." Jessica held Tamara tightly then pulled out and looked Tamara oddly in the face. "Tamara, I'm really scared."

Then she was gone.

Tamara stared into the empty room in front of her and noticed that by the TARDIS doors, Downs had vanished as well.

SEVEN

"Thank you Doctor." Tamara climbed from the TARDIS swimming pool wearing a navy blue, Olympics style swimsuit. She took a seat in a deck chair and took a sip from a cool green drink that the Doctor had brought to her.

"Are you feeling better, my dear?" The Doctor sat next to her in his full outfit, despite the fact that Tamara had set the holographic and environmental controls to "Tahiti."

"Yes, a semi-vacation is just what the doc..." Tamara interrupted herself and laughed. "Anyway, it did me a world of good."

"Well taking you to see your grandmother was the least I could do for you, after all the stress you've been through."

A high-pitched tone rang out, echoing through the TARDIS, causing the holographic simulator to shimmer away revealing the familiar rounded walls.

"What's that?" Tamara instinctively sprang to her feet.

"The TARDIS databanks have realigned themselves to the correct reality." The Doctor tossed Tamara a towel, which missed her hands and hit her in the face, wrapping around her head. "We should be able to track down Jessica and Corporal Downs."

"Thanks a bunch." Tamara untangled herself from the towel and put on her T-shirt. By the time Tamara reached the Console room, the doctor was standing behind the databank monitor.

“Check this out.” He opened the scanner and the picture from his monitor blew up onto the larger screen. “I found this on file at the BBC.”

The screen showed scenes of celebration. “The Russian Ambassador was met with excitement today as the PM and President Johnson officially began celebrations marking the anniversary of the first summit meetings between Former President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, ensuring a continued world peace in our new Global Community. This is truly exciting. I’m going to send it back to the studio so I can join the festivities.” The screen flipped back to the young, blond reporter, “This is Connor Downs of BBC 8 reporting from the steps of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. Good Night and God bless.” The transmission stopped.

“Oh, Doctor, he looked terrific!” Tamara applauded Downs’ performance. “I’m glad he’s done well for himself. What about the brave Jessica Benton?”

“Let me see, Jessica Castens Benton,” the Doctor typed Jessica’s name into the databanks and eons of human history passed by on the scanner, “Nothing. Hmm, ‘see Jessica Castens’ all right.”

“Doctor,” Tamara gasped at the site of the newspaper article that appeared on the scanner before her. She brought her hand up to her mouth to stop the flow of acid that had burst from her stomach. She ran from the console room in tears.

“Tamara!” The Doctor called after her. “We’re outside the laws of time and space as you know them. You and I will always remember her. Damnation!”

The Doctor read over the obituary out loud. This couldn’t be right, could it? Surely they weren’t responsible for this?

“Jessica Castens, July 17, 1982: the latest victim of gang violence was gunned down in the street outside her home at 4:30 P.M. A gang dispute broke out and she was struck by a bullet in the crossfire. By the time paramedics were dispatched and arrived, Miss Castens had died from a severe loss of blood. She is survived by both her parents, Jeffrey Castens and Elaine Roth Castens and her fiancé John Benton, a Warrant Officer for the United Nations. A private visitation will be held for family and close friends only, but a reception will follow at Jefferson’s Banquet hall from 7-9 P.M. The family is asking donations to be made to the Foundation that will be set up in her honor.”

The Doctor closed the scanner with a sigh. There were always winners, just as there were always losers. Whether that made anything right, he’d never know. What he did know, was that he was forced to destroy a life. In order to right the precious timelines, Jessica had to be erased from history. At least he still had Tamara. That made him feel better. But he was the Doctor, couldn’t he have worked out some way to have saved them both? Of course he could have, but it was too late now. The timelines had reset themselves and the Doctor set the TARDIS in motion. On to the next destination, with Jessica Benton’s face firmly planted in the back of his mind. The face smiled and a tear trickled down the Doctor’s cheek.



The city of London was destroyed in a nuclear holocaust on February 14, 2033.
The survivors were forced to move below the surface of their planet
and live in a network of mines and railway tunnels.

Happy Valentine's Day.

That, however, is not quite how Tamara Scott remembers it. In February, 2033
she was more concerned about which University she wanted to attend the following autumn.
Where did Earth's history veer off course?
Tamara and the Doctor along with UNIT track the paradox back to a certain
successful assassination of US President Ronald Reagan.
As the Doctor and Tamara will realize, one change to the time lines will affect everything that
follows...the fallout continuing on throughout all eternity.

This story was originally featured in the Season 29 Omnibus

This is another in a series of original fan authored
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