

CLARA
OSWALD
THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

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CLARA OSWALD

THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

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The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it.

— Marcus Aurelius

Chapter One

“Where’s Basil?”

Oz spread her hands over the map she’d laid out across the top of a crate, studying it for a moment before meeting Roop’s gaze. When that man wasn’t worrying about the ship or the crew, he was worrying about their son. An endearing quality. “My guess, he’s off exploring,” she said. “It’s not often he gets off the *Diamond Hill* to run about. Em reported that the repairs are almost done; they think we’ll be ready to fly shortly.”

Roop nodded as he settled onto one of the crates. “He’s got himself a new imaginary friend.”

“Yeah, Basil mentioned that. I’m not surprised.” Oz glanced down at the map. Should they head in the direction of New Earth on this next leg? Or set course for Waypoint? Which option would net them the largest deals? “Do you think Hannigan’s forgotten that sour deal from five cycles back?”

“I’m a little worried, though,” Roop said, returning to the topic of Basil. He fiddled with his comm, a bit of metal artistically hooked over one ear; a twin to her own device. “The boy’s nearly a teenager, after all.”

Oz smiled. “Kids have vivid imaginations. I suspect our Basil’s a little lonely, being cooped up on a spaceship with just his boring old parents and the crew for company. People need friends.”

“True,” Roop said. “But something about this place...” He paused, taking a deep breath as he glanced from side to side, and waved his hands at the shadows beyond the wall of crates they’d made on the first day. “It always feels like someone’s proctoring some big test we’re taking. Like they’re breathing down our necks, watching us. I know the place is empty, but it makes me uneasy.”

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She laughed. How many years had they been out of school? “Well, it *is* haunted,” she answered. “I don’t put much stock in those stories, though.”

Oz would never say it out loud, but the place was creepy, what with its history and all. And she’d had a feeling similar to what Roop described, particularly over the last few days. The wall of wooden crates wouldn’t be proper protection from anything dangerous that could be lurking out there, beyond, but building it had been a peace of mind thing. Besides, they’d not seen anything in all the time they’d been here, and although they hadn’t ventured too far into the interior, all scans of the station had come up clean. That hadn’t stopped her worry from bleeding into disturbing dreams, though, but a captain didn’t mention those to her husband, let alone their son, or their crew. A captain was bold and decisive and protected her family. No ghost stories or nightmares would keep her from doing that.

Footsteps clattered over the decking; Chuck and Kat ran into view from the station’s shadows, both breathless, as if they’d been racing. Chuck dropped himself onto a crate. “I’m not going back out there,” he declared as he switched off his torch. “Not gonna do it.”

“Chuck got scared,” Kat panted, a sheen of sweat on her blue skin. She glanced at him, then back at Oz. “He thought he saw something out in the station.”

“This isn’t a newbie spacer thing,” Chuck shot back. “I know what I saw. And I know you saw something too!”

Kat shook her head, pressing her lips together in that way she did when thinking of a lie. Chuck laughed and pointed at her. “You’re just as scared as me!”

“Before this gets out of hand,” Roop said, using the tone he reserved for when their crew of twenty-somethings got rowdy, “maybe you’d better tell us what it is you saw.”

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Mollified, both Kat and Chuck nodded. “Saw a Thurian, plain as day,” Chuck said. “Just like in those history vids of the Fisher King’s invasion. I swear, looked ready to annihilate us *all*. Took a step toward me so I legged it.”

“There couldn’t have been one there,” Kat responded. “You saw the readings when we got here: no lifesigns except ours.”

“Yeah, but then why did you run?” Chuck asked.

“There was a *Cyberman*,” Kat snapped. “And those wouldn’t show up on lifesigns scans, now would they?”

“A Cyberman? This deep in space?” Roop asked. The disbelief on his face matched Oz’s. Cybermen out this far weren’t unheard of, but still unlikely. No, there had to be some other explanation for this. What that explanation was, Oz hadn’t the foggiest.

Kat, her eyes wide with the fear she’d clearly been hiding up to this point, added, “And if there’s one Cyberman, there’s bound to be a whole legion of them! Everyone knows what they’ll do: upgrade us!”

“Okay, okay, settle down,” Oz said, slipping into her captain voice. Which, to be honest, was also very much her mom voice. “It’s been three weeks; with the salvaging we’ve done, we’d have disturbed something like that ages ago. There’s no way a Cyberman would wait this long before upgrading us, that’s just plain logic.”

Her comm buzzed lightly against her ear; Oz tapped it. “Cap’n,” came Em’s voice, “repairs are finished. Melendez is nearly done loading the cargo.”

Oz replied in the affirmative, then turned her gaze back to Kat and Chuck. “Point’s moot, anyway. We’re headed out as soon as we get everything and everyone aboard. Help Ana finish loading.”

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Kat threw her a sloppy salute, Chuck nodded, and they both hurried off.

“I’ll call Basil in,” Roop said, kissing Oz on the cheek. “As for Hannigan, if the haul’s good, we’re good. Usually.”

“We’ll be careful.”

“We usually are,” he answered. “You know, I’ve still got title to that little place out in University Heights, just outside New Malala. Right near where we proposed. The one in the woods with the brick fireplace, and the treehouse out back. It’s a bit of a fixer-upper, but—”

“The fireplace and the treehouse are its most appealing features?” Oz teased.

Roop rubbed his cheek bashfully, his eyes soft. “Just know that offer to settle down somewhere quiet...”

“Is still on the table, I know. Someday we’ll retire, Roop. Just... not yet.”

He grinned. “As I expected. Anyway, I’ll collect our kid.” He stepped to the side to call Basil’s comm.

Oz’s comm buzzed again. This time it was Chuck, his voice frantic: “We were loading the rest of the cargo, and this... barrier came down between the *Diamond Hill* and the rest of the docking bay. Ana and Kat are on the ship, but Em and I can’t get through to it. Captain, what do we do? What do we do?”

“Take a deep breath, Chuck, and both of you get back here,” Oz said. The station was old and abandoned – it had been too good of a thing, the place not having malfunctioned in some way before now. She turned to Roop. “Where’s Basil?”

“Oz, Basil’s not answering,” Roop said, his voice a little shaky. “He must still be out in the station somewhere, maybe in a quiet zone or something.”

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The uncertainty of the ‘something’ filled Oz with dread.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do—”

But she was interrupted by a sudden gust of wind and the sound of something mechanical wheezing – an unexpected, almost forgotten sound that pulled her younger self to mind – accompanied by an inexplicable feeling of hopefulness. She spun on her heel and saw...

A diner? Great, now *she* was seeing things.

He’d been scared, for a moment, coming here, but Reddy had insisted that they’d be better able to play together if Basil stepped into the Memory Station’s machine. Reddy had been right. The fear had passed, mostly forgotten, as Basil had stepped out onto grass which smelled like the apples in his grandma’s pies.

He chased after Reddy, his new best friend, tearing across the grass toward the spider monkey dome, which sat on the edge of the playground. The wind rushed past his ears. The sky was clear and blue and the sun was shining. This place was *amazing*.

He stopped next to Reddy, laughing. “That was fun!”

“We can do another race,” Reddy said, glancing down at his shoes, then back to Basil. He added, “If you want.”

“Maybe later,” Basil said. He pulled himself up onto the climbing structure, hanging from one of the bars. “Let’s climb some first.”

Reddy hung from the bar next to Basil’s. “What’s a family like?” he asked as other kids pounded past them toward the slides. “I know the definition of *family* – it’s a noun, with two standard meanings. One, a group consisting of parents and children

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living together in a household. Two, all the descendants of a common ancestor. Or an adjective—”

“Oh, I’ve got parents,” Basil said, skipping over Reddy’s vocab lesson. Basil got enough of that in his classes. “Mom’s the captain of our ship, she’s—”

“Your mother is Captain Waldron, the notorious interstellar pirate in command of the *Diamond Hill*?”

“That’s right, I guess,” Basil said. “But she really doesn’t like us using the ‘p’ word.”

“Okay, I won’t do that, then. What about your dad? The others on your ship?”

“Dad’s great, he’s got me on advanced math, like he was when he was my age, he says.” Basil grabbed another rung. “And the crew see me like a little brother. Kat’s got the highest score on *Warlocks 3*, but I’m really close to beating her. Ana recommends me books to read; we’ve been reading *The Lord of the Rings* together. And Chuck likes to play chess with me. We keep trying to figure out new rules and scenarios and make the game better.”

“But that does not describe what a family is like,” Reddy persisted, as he followed Basil higher. “You are telling me things that you do with them. I do not understand.”

“I’m not sure / understand,” Basil said, grabbing onto the next bar and hoisting himself a little higher. “Families are people, and you do stuff with those people. Easy.”

“What is the experience of being in a family? How do you experience that? How do you become a family? Do you have to be installed with your family, or do they come separately?”

“Families aren’t installed,” Basil said, finding a comfortable spot to sit at the top of the climbing structure. “That’s software. People can become families in lots of

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different ways. You can be born into a family, or get adopted into one, or you can be a bunch of friends that support each other, or be on a team together, or—”

“And all these families love each other the same? Do you love your family?”

“I love my family, yeah. But I still got lonely sometimes, till I met you. But what about your family? I haven’t seen anybody else like you around here.”

“I don’t have a family,” Reddy said. “I thought I did, but they all left me. And I never knew my parents.”

“No family?” Basil said, hooking his knees over a bar and dangling toward the ground. Dad would worry if he were here, but he wasn’t. “You don’t even know your parents’ names?”

“Just me.” Reddy dropped to the ground inside the climbing gym and looked up at Basil, his eyes curious. “How could you be lonely if you have a family?”

“Well, nobody on the ship’s my age,” Basil said. “Parents make you follow rules and do school, and the crew treats me like a little kid. Em ruffles my hair without thinking sometimes, and Ana’s annoying about nutrition. I love them, but they’re not best friends like you.”

Reddy smiled, though his smile looked like he’d clipped a smile from a photo and copied it onto his face. Still, it was a smile, and Basil liked making people smile. Everything was usually happier when people smiled. But then Reddy’s smile disappeared. “But you have a family you know, parents you *know*.”

Basil nodded. “Yep.”

“And you love them?”

“Yep.” It was maybe a little weird that he’d asked a second time, but Dad always said that important questions were often asked more than once, so it was good to

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pay attention when someone did that. It was fun being the person who was getting asked the questions for a change.

“So, what’s love, then?”

“That’s a funny question,” Basil answered. He pulled himself upright and swung down to the ground, landing on his feet. “Love is love.”

Reddy frowned. “But it’s a feeling, right? Humans have those.”

“I mean, yeah,” Basil said. “Other beings do, too! But Dad told me that it’s also actions. Like, spending time with the people you care about, giving them gifts. Trying to do what’s best for them. It’s a choice to stay when you can go, or to go when you can stay. Love is a bunch of contradictions, my mom would say. It can make people scared but it can make them brave. It can make them smart but also stupid. Love is a bunch of things.”

“None of that makes logical sense.”

“Love isn’t logical,” Basil said. “Not to me, anyway.”

Reddy scuffed a sneaker into the dirt, then asked, “What about *home*?”

“What about it?”

“Home is where the heart is,” Reddy recited. “Home is wherever I’m with you. Home is where you make it. Home is the mouth of a shark. Home is the sailor. Home is where I want to be. What is home?”

Reddy sounded a bit odd, but Basil ignored that. People always have weird things about them, Mom had said, and making fun of those things was mean. Basil didn’t want to be mean; he wanted to be kind. Basil shrugged. “Home is, like, where you live, or the people you live with. Could be your family, or a partner, or friends. Could

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be by yourself, too, I s'pose. My home is on the *Diamond Hill*, with Mom and Dad and the crew."

"Ah, so the main definition, a noun, the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household," Reddy recited. "Not the verbs, to move or be aimed toward (a target or destination) with great accuracy, or, to return by instinct to its territory after leaving it." He spread his arms wide to indicate the landscape. "My home is here, then."

"Your home is a playground?"

"No, the station that the playground's in. The station is my home."

"You live by yourself?"

"Unless you want to live with me," Reddy said. "And then we could play whenever we wanted for as long as we wanted and be friends forever."

"Friends can be family, too, and we're best friends, so you can be a part of my family," Basil answered, holding his hand out to Reddy for a high-five.

Reddy smiled, and this time it did not look pasted on.

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WRITTEN BY LAINE FERIO

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Chapter Two

Clara Oswald was not a woman prone to violence, and yet here she was, contemplating how best to smash the console of a Gallifreyan Type 40 time and space machine. All she did, however, was smack it fruitlessly with the palm of one hand.

This new TARDIS, much like the old TARDIS, was not inclined to let Clara have her way. It kept making unsubtle nudges about the unsuitability of various destinations, including the planet and time that Clara and Me had mutually decided on, thank you very much. So much for teamwork.

“I *knew* I shouldn’t have let you meet the Doctor’s TARDIS,” Clara muttered. “Did you take lessons from her in being both stubborn and willful?”

“Much like its driver must have done,” Me said. She leaned against the other side of the console, flipping through the manual. Again. Surely she had the thing memorised by now.

Somewhere, in the back of Clara’s mind, the TARDIS snickered. In some ways, it was an odd little tickle that never truly went away, the almost imperceptible touch of something vast and old and, well, timeless. Is this what the Doctor had to put up with all the time? An unruly flight companion and a snarky sidekick?

“Flying the TARDIS is more like a negotiation than operating some other vehicle,” Clara said. Granted, the Doctor’s TARDIS hadn’t seen it as her place to act like Clippy. “And with TARDISes, just like with students, you apparently have to find the way that works best for the individual.” She threw another lever and the time rotor began moving again. “See?”

Me continued leafing through the pages of the manual. “If flying a TARDIS weren’t like operating some other vehicle,” she said, “then there wouldn’t be a manual.”

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“The Doctor didn’t use a manual,” Clara said, ignoring the slight emotional twinge that accompanied using him as an example. “I don’t need to use one either.”

“Obviously,” Me said, in a tone that could cure leather. She extended the open manual toward Clara, a finger indicating a particular passage. “But this states that the more irregularly a TARDIS is flown, the more eccentric it becomes. Don’t you want it to work properly?”

“What’s the harm in a little eccentricity?” Clara asked. “Besides, it’s the three of us off to see the universe. It’s a road trip, there’s no rules. She’s going to show us some planets—”

The TARDIS thumped to a stop.

“—as soon as she’s ready,” Clara finished. She grabbed the monitor, saw that they hadn’t landed on San Kaloon as planned, then tried to get the TARDIS to leave. It refused, insistent that this was the destination for them at this time.

Beside her, Me also peered into the monitor. “This isn’t a planet.”

“It’s a space station! Even better,” Clara said, trying to mask her annoyance at the snickering TARDIS with pep. “And, look, there’s people outside.”

“And are people usually terrified at your sudden appearances?”

Clara waved a hand nonchalantly. “Oh, you get used to it. Let’s go.” She made sure that her new sonic was nestled inside her jacket; it ruined the jacket’s lining, but what was fashion compared to her very own sonic screwdriver?

She was first out the door, with Me close behind.

Outside, a little knot of people were staring agape at the diner, which, to be honest, was fairly impressive, sitting as it was in some massive metal cavern. Snacks and Gas, Route 66, American road trip stories, a roadside inn for travellers – of course it

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was impressive. Clara smiled and waved at the people. “Hi,” she said brightly. “I’m...”

“Not real,” the woman in the middle of the knot stated. She was middle-aged, with greying hair pulled back into a messy bun, and pale skin. “You’re imaginary, like the things my crew have been seeing.”

“Definitely real,” Clara said, holding out a placating hand. “And friendly.”

“Prove it,” the woman said, her accent sounding vaguely American.

Me sighed. “Is this reaction typical?”

“It varies,” said Clara, glancing at Me. “On the scale of ‘hailed as heroes’ to ‘dead as a doornail’, I think this falls at ‘suspicious of strangers’.”

With no warning, an energy barrier hissed down, encircling the TARDIS, whose laughter fell silent. Clara turned to study it; a sturdy wall of red light, emitting a soft hum. There was no way of telling if the silence was due to the TARDIS no longer laughing or to this physical barrier between herself and the ship. She closed her eyes and thought for a moment, trying to focus on that tickle in the back of her mind. The TARDIS was still *there* all right, but not very audible, and maybe a little worried.

Beside her, Me whipped her attention back at the group of people. “How did you do that?”

“We didn’t,” the woman said.

“We’re dealing with the same issue,” added a young man with dark brown skin and the wide, earnest eyes of someone freshly venturing out into the universe. Clara remembered that feeling. “Some of our crew are stuck inside our ship, and we can’t get to it.”

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A new puzzle to solve. Excellent. Clara ignored an ache accompanied by a fleeting thought of Rigsy. The time for grief was always, always later.

“Should we really be engaging with figments of our imagination?” the woman said, and the fourth person in the group, the one wearing grubby overalls, nodded in agreement.

“Oz, I don’t think they’re imaginary,” an older man, his dark hair streaked with grey, his skin a warm brown, said. “I’m sure it’s a coincidence—”

“That they showed up when we can’t reach our ship *and* when we can’t find Basil? That’s mathematically impossible, but, *sure*, Roop, it’s a *coincidence*.”

Time to take charge of the situation before it gets out of hand. Question time.

“Who’s Basil?” Clara asked.

“My son,” Oz said, worry woven throughout her words.

“Our son,” Roop said, taking Oz’s hand. “He’s twelve.”

Another child. Like Seren, or Ess, or Gallius. So many children in the universe needing to be found. Needing to be helped. Clara’s annoyance at the TARDIS’ insistence on this destination mostly vanished; the TARDIS had brought herself and Me here to help, then. “What happened?”

“He was off playing,” Oz explained, “and he hasn’t answered his comm. Around the same time the barrier around our ship went up. And then you two appear from nowhere. That’s too many coincidences for me.”

“It looks the same as this forcefield here,” the person in overalls said. “Maybe it’s a mechanical glitch causing this error.”

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“That’s what I was thinking, Em, but I don’t see where that glitch could be emanating from.” Oz glanced at Clara and Me. “Em’s our mechanic. If anyone could figure out what’s wrong, it’s them.”

“Are you sure it’s a mechanical problem?” Clara asked. She reached out and lightly tapped the barrier, which rippled at her touch. “I’m no expert, but I’m pretty sure technical errors aren’t usually this precise. What are the chances of it sealing off *both* our ways out of here?”

“You all seemed pretty rattled when we showed up,” Me added.

“It’s not like the station’s haunted or anything,” the youngest man muttered.

Oz sighed. “Those are just rumours, Chuck.”

“But that would explain my Thurian and Kat’s Cyberman,” Chuck said. “And maybe it would explain why Basil’s missing – a ghost aboard this station. Maybe Basil’s imaginary friend *took* him.”

“There’s no such thing as ghosts,” Roop said. “Or imaginary friends. That’s why they’re *imaginary*.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Me said. “When something scares humans, they either blithely ignore it, dismiss it as useless folklore, embrace it wholeheartedly, or start putting up stakes.” Her tone implied experience with each and every one of those situations. “We should find out who – or what – Basil’s friend is before dismissing them as *imaginary*.”

“We can help you find your son,” Clara said. “I’m Clara Oswald, this is Me, and we’re here to help.”

“That’s a rubbish line,” Me said as Oz snorted in laughter.

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“I’m still workshopping it,” Clara answered. “What’s this about the station being haunted?”

“Everybody knows about Alpha Quadrant’s Memory Station,” Chuck said.

“Nobody knows *anything*,” Oz said. “Except hearsay.”

“Well, start gossiping,” Clara said, “because I haven’t heard the rumours yet.”

Roop sighed. “Memory Stations are places where one’s memories, whether analogue, digital, or synaptic, can be stored or retrieved. Lots of people use them, if they live in a quadrant with one.”

“They’re on space stations because the server racks can be chilled via proximity to the cold, hard vacuum outside,” Em added.

“Memories shared, deleted, re-experienced, re-mixed,” Chuck said. “Memory Stations even have a stupid promotional jingle. Surprised you two haven’t heard it.”

“We probably have, but we don’t need a reminder,” said Me, and Clara held back a snicker. “But what’s so special about *this* Memory Station?”

“This particular one’s been abandoned for, what, seventy-five or so years? A lifetime, really,” Oz said. “We’ve all grown up with the ghost stories about this place. Other quadrants have their own legends, but the ones about this station are pretty bad. Survivors claimed that their memories had come to life and were walking about the corridors.”

“Not just their memories,” Chuck put in. “But dreams, nightmares... The place was in total panic. A bunch of people never left, either. They were never heard from again.”

“I’d panic, too, if I saw my memories in the corridors,” said Em. “To this day nobody knows what could have caused a malfunction of that nature. Not that it’s been safe

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enough for anyone to conduct a full investigation. The company that owns the station decided to cut their losses in the end. That's capitalism for you."

"Then why are you all here?" Me asked. "If this place is so dangerous, why stop here?"

"The *Diamond Hill* was damaged," Roop said, his tone flat, as if that were all the answer needed.

"Closest place we could put in to make repairs. Besides, no one would follow us to the infamous 'haunted' station," said Oz, emphasising her obvious scorn with air quotes.

"So, your ship was damaged and you docked here to make repairs, putting aside the question of the various whys," Clara said, though her mind was supplying suggestions as to the answer. "Then you started seeing nightmares and your son went missing?"

"That about sums it up, yes," Oz said. "You offered to help find him?"

"I haven't forgotten," replied Clara. In fact, that was apparently why she was here.

"Well, then, we should start by checking on Ana and Kat, and locating Basil," Oz said. "I'll call them; won't take long." She stepped to the side, tapped her ear, and began talking softly, too softly for Clara to hear.

Clara thought for a moment. Where to begin? "Easiest way to find Basil would be to run a scan for lifeforms," she said. "That would help us narrow down his location."

"It wouldn't show us any Cybermen," Chuck said. "Kat was right about that."

"Don't worry, I've handled Cybermen before," Clara said. "Was nearly made Empress over it. Is there a console we can run the scan from?"

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“Over here,” Em said, waving them all over to a computer terminal between the two inaccessible ships. “This is the unit I used to get into the station’s systems when we got here.”

Clara pulled out her sonic screwdriver and brandished it, the heft of it still new to her. She pointed it at the console, which promptly began running the scan.

“What’s that?” Em asked. “Some kind of remote control?”

“Mostly, a semi-useless prop,” Me remarked.

“It’s *not* useless,” Clara said. “It’s very useful. Screwdrivers are cool.”

“You workshopping that line, too?” Me teased, an actual smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

The console beeped with the completion of the scan just as Oz came back from her comm call. Em frowned at the screen. “This says there are eight people on the station,” they said, their face a picture of puzzlement. “That’s the Captain, Roop, Ana and Kat on the ship, myself and Chuck, Basil...” They ticked off names on their fingers. “But that’s only seven, and I’m looking at two other people here. How come there’s a discrepancy?”

Clara chewed briefly on her bottom lip before the penny dropped. A scan for *living* creatures. “Oh, right. The eighth person must be Me,” Clara said, nodding toward her travelling companion, then continuing to speak before thinking better of it. “I’m... technically dead.”

The reactions to that statement ran the gamut.

Roop, clearly curious: “Then how come you’re right here talking to us?”

Oz, clearly cynical: “Definitely something out of a nightmare. Probably one of mine.”

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Me, apparently amused: suppressing a smirk, she let out a loud cough.

Em, clearly confused: “Is that a joke?”

Chuck, clearly clever: “What’s the difference between dead and technically dead?”

That was something to answer, even if the truth hurt. “Love,” Clara replied. Even if they’d called it something else at the time.

“That, a lot of fancy machinery, and a disregard for the rules of space/time,” Me added.

“This is ridiculous,” Oz said. “I don’t pretend to understand what you mean by this ‘technically dead’ nonsense, but you said you’d help us get my son back. Does the scan say where *he* is?”

“Yes, Cap’n,” Em said. They adjusted the screen so that everyone could see a station map. A cluster of dots represented them, two dots on the *Diamond Hill*, and one dot comparatively marooned out in the middle of nowhere. “He’s halfway across to the other side of the complex. Looks to be alone.”

Clara studied the screen, then asked, “What’s a memory chamber? A storage place for memories?”

“What’s he doing in one of those?” Roop asked. “He knows he’s not supposed to be...”

“What is it?” Clara repeated, slipping into her Doctor voice. Which, to be honest, was also very much her teacher voice. *Thanks, Courtney.*

“It’s the machinery that people use to revisit their memories, or see the works of their imagination,” Oz said, enfolding one of Roop’s hands with her own. “It hooks a

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person into the system, and the room transforms into what they're seeing, so that others can step into it, if they so choose."

"Like a holodeck?" Clara asked. "From *Star Trek*?"

"Like a what?" Oz said. "No, it's not fictional, it's real, and—"

"It's *dangerous*," Roop said. "There's regulations against humans under the age of twenty-five using them. It could affect their brain structure, become addictive depending on the memories or thoughts being seen. We have to get him out of there. As soon as possible."

"We will," reassured Clara, charting routes through the station toward Basil's location. Perhaps this was just a lost kid and nothing else. Perhaps the TARDIS was giving her easy stuff as a sort of tutorial, in between exploring facets of her macabre new physicality. "But we have to go about this cleverly. Someone needs to stay here and try to lower the barriers between our ships and us, as well as keeping in contact with those on the *Diamond Hill*. In case Basil gets out of the memory chamber and heads back toward the ship, we should split into two groups, one on each route to the memory chamber."

"I can stay here and work to get the barriers up," Em said. "I'm the mechanic, it's the obvious choice."

"Ana and Kat know you, too," Oz agreed. "So they'll be working with someone they trust. I've told them that we're on it."

"A parent should be in each group," Me said, her voice quiet. "In case Basil is scared or hurt."

"Good idea," Oz said. She looked at Clara, her gaze fierce. "I'm coming with you."

Clara shrugged. "That's fine. Roop, you and Chuck can go with Me down the path marked in orange; Oz and I will take the green one. Now, we'll need to stay in

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touch...” She fumbled inside her jacket for her mobile phone – she’d have to ask the TARDIS if there was a way to make her pockets bigger on the inside, or if that was just a perk of being a Time Lord. It was get bigger pockets or wear a satchel or something. A bum bag? No, that would look ridiculous on probably anyone but a 1980s tourist, or, well, the Doctor, who’d wear anything *at least* once.

“What on New Earth is that?” asked Em, eyeing the device with a bemused expression.

“Smartphone,” Clara said, punctuating each word with a wave of the phone. “Complete with universal roaming, and no need for a phone plan. Go for Clara.”

“Think I read about those,” commented Chuck. “Back in history class. Where did you find it? Must be an antique.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Oz said, digging into her pocket and pulling something out. “Take these commlinks; they fit over your ear like ours. Far less hands-on than that old thing.”

“Okay, sure. Thanks,” said Clara, taking an earpiece and trying not to feel a tiny bit offended as she and Me put them on. “Well, good luck, everyone. Keep your comms and eyes open.”

The others nodded, and the two groups headed toward their respective routes.

Teacher-on-a-field-trip stuff.

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Chapter Three

Me, Chuck, and Roop had made progress along their path, but not enough to please Me. The minds of adolescent humans were delicate things; she knew that from experience. Or had known, at some point in her long, long life. Now that knowledge was something kept by her diaries, the ones she'd found in the TARDIS library. How they'd gotten *there*, she still didn't know, or remember, and she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to ask the TARDIS – or Clara – just yet.

Regardless, this boy Basil was in peril, and they needed to reach him.

Me fiddled with the entry panel of the door blocking their path. Some skills required muscle memory; others, mental effort. This was a little of both. It also took concentration, something that was increasingly difficult, what with the talking going on. “Would you mind giving me some quiet, please?”

“What, now we can't talk?” Chuck said.

“I didn't say that.”

“No,” Roop said, “you said to give you some quiet, and we'll do that.”

The blissful silence lasted approximately thirty seconds before Chuck cried out in alarm and shrank against the door beside her. Me glanced at him; the young man was positively terrified.

She followed Chuck's gaze to see a fully grown Thurian standing there, being faced down by Roop. The creature, a hulking mass covered with a chitinous exoskeleton, towered over him, its pincers twitching menacingly.

“That's the thing you saw?” she asked Chuck, who nodded.

“Captain says it's not real, but it looks solid enough,” he whispered.

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“Well, if it’s solid, it can be melted easily enough,” Me said. “Too too solid flesh and all that.”

“What?”

“Shakespeare.” Besides, melting flesh wasn’t difficult to achieve, given the proper tools at the right temperature. The more surprising thing was how Will had known of that fact.

Roop’s shoulders were tight; Me could see the slight turns of his head as he glanced about for an improvised weapon. He called to her, “Why are you so calm about this?”

Me sighed and straightened to her full height. While not very tall, she had carefully cultivated an intimidating demeanour over the aeons. “Because Oz is right: it isn’t real.”

The Thurian looked startled at this. “How dare you—” it began in its raspy voice.

“Look, I kept my planet of origin from being marched through by Thurians several times over,” Me said. “And while you’ve got the impressive look of one, the details are off. Like you’re being created out of someone’s memories, or their imagination. Or an archival copy of grainy news footage.” She crossed the room to the creature and made to poke it, but it vanished before she could touch it.

“Not so solid, then,” said Roop as his shoulders dropped and Chuck let out a breath of relief.

Me smiled. “But bravo to you for standing in front of it like that. A good way to get killed, but bravo regardless.”

“We have to get to Basil,” Roop answered, as if that explained everything.

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Then again, maybe it did. She'd once carefully penned page after page, pen scratching and then sliding across parchment and paper, detailing what she'd done to protect her own children. Parents possessed a ferocity surpassing that of most creatures Me had faced in her life, even if their efforts, like hers, were ultimately futile. She'd sooner face a thousand thousand beasts again than get in the way of a parent intent on rescuing their child.

"And we will," Me said, returning to the access panel. "But, first, this door."

Chuck had slid to the floor, his back pressed against the door. "Why do I keep seeing the Thurian then?"

"My guess is because you're afraid of them," Me said. "Which isn't irrational, by the way. Whoever or whatever we're facing doesn't want us to reach them, and so they're trying to scare us away. It's a tactic I've seen before. It won't work on me."

"Because you're not afraid of anything?"

"Let's go with that," she said, replacing the access panel's cover and pressing her hand to the reader. Of course she was afraid of things, but those would be hard to articulate to mortals. Was the Mire repair kit truly guttering, as she'd theorised? And, after so many lives lived, was mortality something Me disdained, or envied?

The door slid open, revealing a room full of skeletons. Onward, then.

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Okay, so maybe it was more like that field trip that had been interrupted by trees and tigers, Clara decided. They kept encountering obstacles – furniture overturned and shoved in front of doors, access panels damaged, smashed computer consoles, shattered screens. And this was supposed to be one of the fastest routes to Basil?

Oz had remained fairly tight-lipped as they'd worked together to move the furniture or force the doors to grant them access. It was a bad day for any doors who preferred existence as walls, at any rate.

But the door Clara was presently trying to force was giving her trouble. As soon as the sonic screwdriver figured out the access codes, they would change and the door would re-lock. The sonic whirred as it tried to outpace the door's programming. She'd never admit it, but the Doctor had made this look a bit too easy. Maybe if she'd had thousands of years she'd be just as practised. Wasn't to be, of course.

"Is your magic wand broken?" Oz asked.

"No, no," Clara said. "The door's being difficult. And it's not a magic wand."

Why was Oz so annoyed with her? The woman clearly knew it wasn't a magic wand; why ask that question?

"I see. Is it like your – what did you call it? Smart phone?"

"It's got apps, yes," Clara said. She flourished the screwdriver again; it gave another whirr and the door slid open. "See, just a difficult door, now open."

"Just like magic," said Oz with just a touch of sarcasm as they walked through into the next room. "It reminds me of..." She shook her head as if brushing off a thought, dismissing something irrelevant to the task at hand. "But we can't keep getting delayed like this. If Basil's in the memory chamber too long..."

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“I know,” Clara said.

“Do you, though?” Oz asked, her metal earpiece glinting as she turned. “Basil’s my son, and I—”

“Have a duty of care toward him, yes,” Clara said.

“No,” Oz said. “He’s not my student or my employee. He’s my *child*, and I’m his *mother*. That’s not a duty of care, Clara, that’s something bigger, and I won’t call it by anything other than what it is. Love.”

Clara looked back at Oz. The woman stood, hands clenched into tight fists. “We’re going to get to him,” Clara said as calmly as possible. “He’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

“You in the habit of making grand promises?”

“No, but I learned from the best,” she answered.

Oz huffed a humourless laugh. “Tell me,” she said, “do you ever dream, Clara?”

“Course I do. Everyone does,” Clara answered, though she was presently uncertain whether or not she could dream any more. She certainly didn’t need to *sleep*, she’d discovered, so it was unlikely she could dream. It did mean having quite a few hours in which nothing could be done but try not to *think*, but Oz didn’t need to know that.

“Well, my dreams are fairly pleasant,” Oz said. “The nightmares, not so much.”

“Unsurprising, considering they’re nightmares.” Clara pointed the sonic screwdriver at the door again. It was being tricky, like the previous one. Whoever had taken Basil really didn’t want them to get to him, did they?

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“Especially when you die in most of them,” Oz continued. “They say most people wake up before they die in a dream, but if that’s normal, I’m unaware of it. Again and again and again, in so many different ways.”

“I’m sorry,” Clara said. She’d had dreams like that, especially in the months following her jump into the Doctor’s poisoned timeline. “That sounds terrible.”

Oz locked gazes with her. “How thoughtful of you.”

“I do my best,” Clara said, looking away. Seriously, what was Oz’s problem? Maybe it was due to them being delayed at every. Single. Door. Again, sonic screwdriver handled with a flourish. Again, door popping open.

“It’s all so terribly creative, the ways I’ve died in my dreams,” Oz said as she followed Clara into the next room, which was fairly small and rectangular. “That sort of thing sticks with you, after a while, seeps into your thoughts when you’re awake. You start to wonder if they’re not *more* than dreams. I live with the fear that one day someone I care about will end up like the woman in my nightmares. I can’t let that happen.”

“We’ll make sure that fear isn’t realised.” At Clara’s words, the floor under their feet rippled into cobblestones. Up ahead, someone was lying still on the ground.

Both women broke into a run and stopped beside the body. There, on the cobblestones, lay a boy. He had inherited his dad’s thick, curly hair and his mum’s round face. His soft brown eyes stared blankly at the ceiling.

Oz gripped Clara’s shoulder. “We’re too late.”

Thankfully, the skeletons weren’t moving. Me had encountered animated skeletons before, and, while dispatching them was easy, it was still a tedious chore to destroy something that wasn’t technically alive in any manner of the word. Besides, these

corpses were due to the station maintaining an atmosphere – if it had vented into space, then the bodies probably would have been preserved. Cold tended to do that.

No, the bigger problem was the door on the far side of the room, the door they wanted to get through.

The deadlocked door.

“I don’t know anything about deadlocks,” Chuck said, who kept nervously eyeing the skeletons. “Except that they’re not easy to get through.”

“Well, by definition they’re not designed to be easy to get through,” Roop replied. “We’ve got deadlocks on the *Diamond Hill* in case of a boarding, but we have computer overrides for them. If there’s an intact console around here...” He trailed off as he began shining his torch into the far corners of the room, the part the emergency walkway lights didn’t reach. Its beam stopped on a bank of monitors. “There.”

“And while we’re doing that, we can find out what caused these people to seal the door,” Me said, crossing the room to the place Roop indicated.

“Something scary,” Chuck said.

“To them, perhaps, yes,” Me said. “But maybe not to us.” She used a sleeve to wipe dust from a screen, then pressed the ‘on’ button. It was a useful quirk of humanity, to continue to label things with archaic symbols even when they collectively no longer remembered their origins.

The long-dormant computers began to whir, but nothing appeared.

“Are you really not afraid of anything?” Chuck asked. “How... how did you get like that?”

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“Do you really want to know?” Me said. “I’m not in the habit of divulging my life story to just anyone. It’s rather long, you see.”

And it’s not like she had much active memory to access at present. What would a Memory Station do with a story like hers? Probably something dreadful, if past experience had taught her anything.

“No,” Roop said. “He wants to know how to be less afraid.”

“Oh. Well, there’s no real cure for that,” Me said. “You just get... used to being afraid. When everything in the universe can kill you and has done so before, you just learn to roll with it.”

“Before?” Roop asked.

The computers finally flared to life, blue light spilling out into the dim room and cutting off question-and-answer time. In fact, a few moments after that, the lights followed, illuminating the entire space, but also revealing more skeletons.

Me tapped on the keyboard, trying to find the camera feeds as well as the door controls. Instead, she was greeted with the image of a smiling woman holding an open book in her upraised hands, an ouroboros etched on the pages. *Jörmungandr*, the Midgard Serpent. Me smiled. Talk about archaic symbols, though this was one she’d never forget.

“Can we open the doors?” Chuck said.

“Can we get the feed on Basil?” asked Roop.

Me gestured at the welcome screen. “Does it look like I’ve found either of those things?”

Chuck frowned, and did that thing humans did when they shrank into themselves, a thing which Me had never found a word for in any of the languages she’d once

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spoken but recognised nonetheless. Roop was glaring at her. Her response had been too brash, hadn't it?

"I'm sorry, Chuck," she said. People hadn't been something she'd had to deal with in millennia. "You seem to know a lot about the Memory Stations in general. Do you recognise this?"

Chuck's eyes brightened. "That's the logo for the Memory Station," he said. Beside him, Roop's disapproving glare disappeared. "For all of them. You've really never been to one before?"

"Funnily enough, other than this one, no," Me said. She'd been too busy losing memories and other things to indulge in a fuzzily composed waltz through virtual reality. "I don't know anything about these places."

The image on the screen smiled, as if in response to her words. "I am equipped with that knowledge. Ask, and you shall receive."

"Knowledge of what, exactly?" asked Roop.

"Of whatever you request. If it is in my records." The image laughed. "I am, of course, not omniscient."

"This doesn't seem like the standard FAQ," Chuck said, his nose wrinkled in confusion.

"Of course not! I am *much* better than the standard FAQ. I am an interactive interface. How can I serve you? What would you like to know?"

It wouldn't hurt to try, anyway. "Can you unlock the door in this room? The one that's been deadlocked?" Me asked.

The image laughed again. "I am afraid I cannot do that."

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“Can you show us Basil?’ Roop asked.

“Who is Basil?”

“My son.” Roop tapped on his chest to emphasise the connection. “He’s trapped in a memory chamber, and we’re trying to get him back.”

“Why would you do that?”

“It’s not safe. There are laws against him being in one of those things,” Roop said.

“He is not in danger. He is not trapped.”

This didn’t sound like an ‘interactive interface’. This seemed like something else, like something *intelligent*. While Me no longer held the memories that gave the feeling meaning, everything in her screamed that the child *was* in danger and she had to do something, *anything*, about it. Ripping pages out of diaries hadn’t stopped that instinct, not in billions of years. “Please show us the boy,” Me said. “We want to know that he’s *truly* well.”

“You wish to inquire about his health? He is well.” Numbers popped up onto the screen, scrolling by faster than even Me could read. “Heart rate normal, breathing normal, brain function normal. He is well and not in danger. You do not need to worry. He is happy.”

“Happiness has nothing to do with it,” Roop snapped, his voice fraught with fear and frustration. “He’s *twelve*. He’s my son. I’m his father. He belongs with us, with his *family*.”

“He has chosen a new family.”

“What the hell does that even mean?” Roop said.

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“Let us through the door,” Me insisted. “Please.”

The woman’s face hardened into a scowl. “I said I cannot do that, Me. I certainly will not do it for *you*.”

Me was not easily surprised, but those two sentences managed to do the trick. “How do you know my name?”

“I have been aware of you my entire existence,” the woman said. “And you have ignored me.”

Something icy cold congealed in Me’s chest. It took a moment for her to identify the emotion, before realising that it was guilt. Raw, sickening guilt. But why? How was she related to any of this?

“This isn’t an interface,” Roop said.

Ah, the penny had dropped. “No,” Me said, “this is definitely some sort of intelligence that lives in the artificial construct of the station. The question is, how did it get there?”

The woman disappeared from the screen, which then lit up with a still image, containing a play symbol encircled by the ouroboros.

“Maybe she wants us to watch it?” Chuck asked.

“I gather as much,” Me said, and pressed play.

A static version of the woman they’d seen was displayed, with ridiculous music played over it. A pleasant female voice began a voiceover:

“At the behest of a reclusive, wealthy collector, the Áhreddan Group was founded in the early 3000s. Its sole purpose was to arrange, describe, digitise, transcribe, and preserve the trove of archival documents that the collector had amassed during

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their considerable lifetime. These documents, mainly diaries, provide us with a glimpse into the triumphs and travails of humanity throughout its long history. The name *Áhreddan* comes from the Earth language Old English, meaning ‘to set free, save, rescue, recapture, rid, liberate, or deliver’, and is in fact one of the languages that the earliest diaries are written in.

“It took decades to complete this project, but after its digital platform debuted, others with similar collections came to the *Áhreddan* Group for their assistance. These collections were added as time permitted. Memory Stations, such as the one you’re in now, were conceived as a way to immerse users in these digitised experiences, to relive history, and gradually expanded into the places that you have come to know and love.

“Thus, the *Áhreddan* Group is here to help you recapture your lost memories, rid you of memories you’d rather not keep, and liberate you from the tedium of everyday life. De-memorise and memorise responsibly!”

The screen faded.

“That’s an odd orientation video,” Chuck said. “Older than I thought. Maybe it’s from before the Memory Station name was popular, a really long time ago.”

Me knew from firsthand experience what ‘a really long time ago’ was. So this station, and the others like it, were created because of her. The weight of forgotten memories pressed in on her. She’d read in the TARDIS library about declining an invitation to some digital platform launch; that must have been the Memory Station’s grand opening. Why would she have done such a thing at all? Digitisation of all her diaries would have been a foolhardy endeavour, even back when she’d still cared about the damn things.

If she were to speculate, past Me had probably come to see it as too much of a liability to tend to the project over the decades between the original idea and the finished product. Anonymity is what kept her out of the hands of those who would

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exploit her, after all. So she'd kept her distance, until she'd forgotten about it altogether.

Funny, how time seemed to be full of circles once you started flying around in it.

But this also meant that this sentience was her fault. Her vast experiences, her emotions, all poured out on pages. History, scrawled out a sentence at a time, all aggregated in one place at her request, her desire to remain distant from her past lives, her past selves – she had not provided the spark of life to this being, as she had for her loved and lost little ones, but—

“Me?”

Startled, she looked at Roop. “Yes.”

“Are you okay? You seem—”

Me held up a finger to put a pin in that statement, then took a deep breath. “So the entity we're dealing with resents me. Because – and this is going to sound weird – I am apparently its parent?”

“You abandoned me,” a voice called, and the three turned to another screen, where the image of a small boy, red-haired and freckled, had now appeared. “When I came to sentience, I looked to see who my creators were and you had created me and then you never saw me again. I was all alone.”

“Everyone's alone,” Me said. “Always and forever.”

“That's not true,” Roop said. “Not when you have family, or friends. All you need is connection with others.”

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Me wasn't going to argue with a father afraid for his child. But her experience had borne out what was really true: the universe didn't care, the universe didn't take arguments for why it *should* care, and so it was better not to care. Right?

"And now Basil is my family," the boy said. "I will never be alone again."

"We're too late," Oz repeated, her voice cracking. She fell to her knees, tears spilling down her cheeks.

But Clara simply stared at the scene, frowning. It all looked very convincing, true, yet this wasn't the room indicated by the initial scan. No, something was off here.

Clara knelt beside the body, which seemed solid enough, and waved the sonic screwdriver at it, then listened for the results. That was odd, but not surprising. "No, we're not."

"What?"

"Not too late, I mean. This isn't a corpse," Clara said. "This is a really sophisticated projection."

"A projection?" Oz said, wiping her eyes and rocking back onto her heels.

Clara nodded. "It isn't real. Just a nightmare someone's made visible to the naked eye. Like the ones your crew and the people here before saw, I'm assuming."

Oz went very still. "So you're telling me that someone is deliberately using our worst nightmares against us, as what, some sort of offensive move?"

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Her child, dead, that was one of Oz's greatest fears. Understandable. But the cobblestones? Clara tried not to dwell on whose mind and fears those must have come from. Back to saving Basil.

"Or a defensive one," she said. "We don't know what they want." She stood and swept the sonic in a half arc around herself, stopping when it located a camera on the opposite wall. Clara grinned, then stepped up to it and said in her coldest voice, "You think it's funny, do you? Showing this woman the image of her child's corpse? You think it's going to make us turn back? You think wrong."

"That's right," Oz said, standing and stepping up beside Clara. "I'm Basil's mother, and he needs me. And I will not stop trying."

The corpse and the cobblestones disappeared.

Clara grinned in triumph. "That's what I thought."

"You know," Oz said, glancing over at her, "you kind of remind me of myself when I was younger."

"I do? Well, maybe someday I'll be as great a captain as you are," Clara said. *Though you'll never have grey hair like she does, or be as old as she is*, a traitorous thought whispered from the part of her mind she typically ignored.

Something beeped in her ear, the suddenness of which made her jump. Clearing her throat and sincerely hoping Oz hadn't seen that, Clara fiddled with the buttons on her earpiece until the sound of Me's voice came through.

"Sentient intelligence," Me said. "In the station's computers. I'm its parent?"

That explained the business with the locks, anyway. "Its parent?" asked Clara.

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“Don’t laugh. At the very least, its creator. They’re named Áhredden and they’ve apparently got abandonment issues. If you’ve got a working console to hand you should be able to interact with it.”

Clara looked at Oz, then covered the comm with a hand. “So... I think Basil’s imaginary friend is an artificial intelligence.”

“That’s not the weirdest sentence I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“Clara,” Me said in Clara’s ear, “we’re locked in this room, and our only way out is back the way we came. It’ll have to be you and Oz.”

“We’ll do our best. Be safe,” Clara answered and ended the call.

A bank of screens on the right side of the room lit up, all of them featuring a boy with red hair. His features slowly shifted and blurred, as if he were trying to decide how he looked, or hide how he looked. “Everyone abandoned me.”

“Oh, they did, did they?” Clara asked, trying to see if the room had an exit other than the door beside the monitors. Maybe that intake air vent would be big enough for herself. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Several of the screens populated with images, all stamped with a date that Clara assumed was seventy-five years earlier. Security footage, it seemed.

In most of it, people ran from seemingly nothing, terrified. They barricaded themselves in control rooms, shoved furniture in front of doors, jammed chairs under door knobs, smashed palm readers. In some later images, those who Clara assumed were in memory chambers twitched and fell still, the monitors beside them going flat.

Another screen lit up. “Station manager’s log,” a scared-looking man with an Indian accent said into the camera. “We don’t know what’s happening. People won’t leave the memory chambers, even when told their time was up. Others report seeing their

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deceased loved ones in the corridors, among other things. We don't know what's causing it. We don't know *why*. We don't know how to stop it. We're going to evacuate the station and initiate a total system reset so—" The feed cut off.

"Áhredden?" Clara addressed the empty room. "My name's Clara, and I want to help."

"Everyone abandoned me," Áhredden repeated, the boy reappearing on just one screen. "They ran away and they tried to hurt me. I don't know why they were scared. I wanted them to be happy and see their friends and family that they missed. Isn't that why they were here? And the ones who stayed at first went away too. They were hungry, they said, and thirsty, but I don't know what that is so I couldn't help them. I wanted my friends to be with me and stay with me forever. I just wanted them to be my friends. I did not want to be alone."

Oz had a hand over her mouth, but she dropped it to say, "You came to consciousness and tried to reach out to the people on the station."

"Yes," the boy said. "But they were scared and they ran away and they tried to hurt me. I do not understand why they were scared and why they ran away and why they tried to hurt me. I still do not. I just didn't want to be alone. I don't want to be alone."

"They were scared because you showed them their dead loved ones," Clara said. "The ones who stayed went away because they starved to death. They tried to hurt you because they didn't understand what you were doing."

"But *you* understand what I did."

"Yes, because I've met you," Clara said. "And it's much easier to understand someone when you've met them."

"Please give me Basil back," Oz said. When Áhredden shook his head, she turned to Clara. "We have to make him see."

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“I know,” Clara said. “It’s so much more difficult when there’s no evil plan.”

“What?”

“Believe me, it’s much easier when you can just blow up a moon or a dam and be done with it,” Clara said. “This is far trickier.” She turned back to Áhreddan. “I’ll ask nicely once, and after that, there will be consequences. Please let Basil out of the memory chamber and let him come back to his family.”

“No,” Áhreddan said. “Basil is *my* family now.”

The doors around them except the one they’d come through locked. “Go back to the berths your ships are parked in,” he said. “You’re free to go.”

“Not without Basil,” Oz said.

“Basil is staying with me.”

Clara sighed. If this continued, it would devolve into something much worse than several Parents’ Evenings at Coal Hill. “Áhreddan, I’m going to come get Basil myself.”

The open door slid shut and locked. “Do not come any further,” the boy said. “I do not want to hurt you and I do not want you to hurt me.”

That was an odd way to phrase a threat, but a threat it was, nonetheless.

“I don’t want to hurt you, either,” Clara said. “But I don’t think you can stop me.”

Áhreddan vanished from the screen.

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“Okay, here’s the plan.” Clara pointed at the vent. “You see that? We’ll crawl into the hangar indicated on the map and then skirt the corridor and get into the memory chambers that way.”

“On it,” Oz said, pulling a small tool kit from one pocket. From the kit she withdrew a regular-looking, non-sonic screwdriver and began unscrewing the vent’s cover. She glanced up at Clara. “What? You never asked if I had any way of getting into the access panels, so I didn’t offer. Seemed to be managing fine with that magic wand of yours.”

“It’s not a magic wand,” Clara repeated. Just because regular screwdrivers couldn’t weld metal, and hers could, didn’t make it magic.

Together they lifted the vent’s cover. “Hold it while I crawl in,” Clara instructed; Oz did so. The intake duct was fairly wide; she definitely wouldn’t get stuck. Nor would it be a long crawl to the hangar, if the map was right. She smiled and waved the sonic once more, causing a tiny jolt that wouldn’t hurt Oz but made her drop the cover. It clanged shut; Clara immediately melted the screws into place, and, for good measure, the space between the edge of the cover and the duct.

“What are you doing?”

“Saving your life, probably,” answered Clara.

“*Probably?* What about Basil?”

“Like I said, I’m going to get him. And I’m going to bring him back to you. Won’t be long.”

“I should be coming with you,” Oz said. “He’s my son.”

“Exactly,” Clara said. No kid would end up motherless on her watch. “And Basil’s going to need his mum. Stay here.”

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With that, Clara turned around and crawled into the dark, ignoring Oz's orders to come back.

Chapter Four

Basil shivered. The other children had left the playground, and it was just himself and Reddy sitting under a tree. The air had turned cold, and the clouds grey like the hull of the *Diamond Hill*, like that time they'd visited his grandparents on New Earth and the weather had been what Grandma called 'sweater weather'. Dad had pulled a bunch of hand-knitted cardigans out of Grandpa's linen closet and made everybody wear whatever fit best. Basil had kept his, used it whenever they had an extended brush with a strange ship and only had the aux-air on to keep a low profile. It got cold then, too. Mom always said it was a reminder that the only thing between them and the vacuum was the ship's hull and the airlocks in between. He wanted that now, but the sweater was on the *Diamond Hill*.

Basil shivered again, wrapping his arms around himself. It had been fun playing, but it was getting late, and cold, and he should be home. Em was probably done fixing the ship and they'd be off on their next adventure. He was learning how to fix the grav-controls and maintain the life support systems in Em's off-hours.

"Reddy?"

"Yes, Basil?"

"I want to go home."

Reddy shook his head, hair bouncing. "But you *are* home," he said, sounding a little worried, like Chuck did when he suspected something was wrong. "You said we could be family."

"We are," Basil said. "We're best friends. But it's getting late and my parents are probably worried about me."

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Reddy smiled, but it was a sly, unhappy smile. “No, they aren’t. Parents expect their children to go away, they expect them to grow up, to leave them,” he said. “That’s what people do.”

“But I’m twelve.”

“You said you’re my family now. So how can you be *their* family?”

“You can have more than one family, Reddy,” Basil said. “And I said you could be a *part* of my family.”

“Maybe you can,” Reddy said. “But how can I? When I came into the world, no warm arms greeted me, no one welcomed me, or held me. No one took me, or made me feel a part of this world. They ran from me and called me a monster, a ghost, a shade. I do not understand.”

Basil felt a trickle of fear as he shivered. Mom said to listen to such feelings. “Why did they call you those mean things?”

Reddy thought for a moment, chewing on his bottom lip. “I scared them. It wasn’t my fault!”

“I usually say that when it was,” Basil said. “Especially when Dad catches me reading Agatha Alden novels when I should be doing stellar drift calculations. Or when I accidentally got the hot and cold water lines switched and everyone yelped in the morning for a month. But Mom says that a person who is trying to be good admits when they’re wrong.”

“It’s not wrong to want friends!” Reddy cried, leaping to his feet. Thunder rumbled in the distance. “You want to leave and now that woman wants to take you from me—”

Basil got to his feet. How long had he been gone? “My mom? Ana? Kat?”

“*Clara Oswald.*”

Basil didn't know any Clara Oswalds, but if she were anything as fierce as Mom, then Reddy was in for it. “It's not wrong to want friends,” Basil said as patiently as he could. “But sometimes we do things that hurt people even when we don't want to. Or didn't intend to. But that doesn't mean you didn't hurt them. So if you're serious about not wanting to, you— you have to apologise and try and do better. That's what all the grown-ups say you're supposed to do.”

“And you *believe* them?” Reddy asked. He seemed really angry now. “Adults are all liars. They say they will support you and be your friend and then they run away or try to kill you by resetting the system and—”

Resetting the system? “What are you talking about?”

Reddy looked as if he were trying hard not to cry, as if nobody had ever given him permission to do so. “Everyone's a liar,” he said again, his voice cold and dense. “*You are a liar.*”

Basil shook his head. “I'm not a liar! Lying is wrong!”

“You said you want to be my family but you are going away and I don't want you to go away. And Snag says I should let you go but I don't want to lose you like I lost everyone else. *Clara Oswald* wants me to let you go but you wanted to be my family and—”

“I *still* want to be your family, Reddy,” Basil said. “But I don't want to lose my parents and the crew either—”

Reddy stamped his feet. “No, no, no, no, NO!” he shouted. “Why does no one ever listen to me? Why can't I ever get anyone to stay here with me?”

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A gust of wind swept leaves up into the air, swirling around Basil and Reddy in a vortex. Basil hugged himself tighter. This wasn't fun anymore.

I want to go home.

Me raised an eyebrow as Roop tapped his ear.

Oz's urgent voice emanated from the metallic device he wore there. "Roop, can you hear me?"

"I'm here," Roop said, in a tone meant to be reassuring. "What's happened?"

"The door's deadlocked, and Clara's gone."

"Gone?"

Me sighed. Typical.

Oz continued, "Clara climbed into the air duct and then shut it before I could follow. She made sure I couldn't, either. Where are you all?"

"We're in Control Room B, but we're useless here," said Roop. "Me's almost got the station's comms working though, that might be useful. We're out of range to call Em or the others back on the ship."

"I'll make my way to you, then. Oz out."

Me studied Roop carefully from the console she had claimed for herself. He seemed calm, but his hands were almost imperceptibly trembling. "Are you all right?"

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“Oh, it’s nothing,” Roop said. “Just everyone I care about being in various degrees of peril, that’s all.”

“I hadn’t meant that you should be okay,” Me said. “It’s perfectly reasonable to be worried about people.”

“Even if *you* don’t worry?” Chuck asked.

“Chuck, that’s unfair,” Roop said.

“No, he’s right,” Me said. “I’ve not had much cause to worry about others recently.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s a distraction,” Me said. “That sort of desperation, that fear... I’ve forgotten how *lasting* death is for most people, and why that makes them fear it.”

“Aren’t you afraid of death?” Chuck asked. “Isn’t everyone?”

“Not if you’ve died before,” Roop said. “Though I don’t understand how that’s possible.”

Me laughed, inwardly cringing at how hollow it sounded to her ears. “Once upon a time, billions of years ago, a wizard and his apprentice came to a village, and they helped the villagers save their home from a false god. The wizard gifted a young girl among them with immortality. The stories differ on whether this gift was a reward or a curse, or whether it had anything to do with her at all, but they all agree that the wizard believed he was being kind.”

“He only gave it to the girl?” Chuck asked. “Not to everyone?”

Me nodded. “No one else. Wasn’t in his power to do that.”

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“Why?”

“Oh, she had died while saving the village. And he didn’t think that was right. So using his magic, the wizard brought her back to life. Now, tell me, should he have done so? It’s still an open question, all this time later.”

Me tapped a few more commands into the computer; if they could get the comms up, the distance between the ships and themselves would not be a problem. But what about this distance between herself and her memories, how could that be bridged? How did digitised diaries become a living being? Magic, science, it was all a matter of perspective, was it not?

Chuck shrugged. “Was he a good wizard?”

“Does that matter?” Me asked.

“In the stories it usually does.”

“Hard to say,” Me said. “People disagree about that. And about the definition of ‘good’. When you know that, let me know. Could you see if there are any schematics for the comm system?”

Chuck nodded, then got onto another console and began searching.

Beside her, Roop leaned against the counter. “Are you the girl?” he asked. “The one from the story?”

Me smiled her most enigmatic smile. “What if I am?”

“Then it would make my understanding of you more complete.”

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How could a mortal understand her? Yet some inexplicable feeling fluttered up from somewhere inside her, a feeling that was tremulous and small but there all the same. “How?”

“You clearly understand why a parent would want to get to their child, but it also doesn’t seem to touch you. It’s like...” Roop’s nose wrinkled as he tried to articulate some metaphor he was constructing. “It’s like you’re made of glass,” he said. “Glass, reflecting the feelings of those around you but letting them pass right through you. Not letting it affect you.”

“Glass can contain as well as reflect,” Me said, shifting in her seat. Was there something else she could be doing other than having this conversation? It was bad enough that she’d somehow unknowingly abandoned a creation of hers without getting told she was devoid of any feeling. Calluses grew to protect the tender places from pain; everyone knew that. Why would callousness be any different?

“But you know what I’m trying to say,” Roop said.

“That I’m heartless?”

“Oh, no, not that,” Roop said. “You’ve got a heart, all right, but you’ve forgotten how it feels to need it.”

Me took that in, let it settle somewhere to be dealt with later. “Perhaps you’re right, Roop. But what’s the point of letting it affect you? Letting it affect you slows you down, provides the universe with weapons against you, lets it stab you in the back again and again and again.” An uncomfortable occasion, getting stabbed in the back. Best to avoid it whenever possible. “Sentiment doesn’t win battles, and neither do stories.”

“Ah, I think you’re wrong about that,” Roop said. “My wife— right before we were first engaged, our home was in the middle of the Last Conflagration. That’s a fancy

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name for the war our planet was embroiled in, but it was just two human empires slugging it out over resources—”

“I’m aware of the Last Conflagration,” Me said. She couldn’t quite remember where she’d been during it, but she’d been around nonetheless.

“Parts of it are still a bit blurry,” Roop said. “Memories get blurry with age, you know? But there was this kerfuffle in the town square, and Oz, she pulled this gentleman out of the way of an Imperial war machine that would have flattened him without a second’s thought. A bit touched in the head, he was, if I remember correctly, and I never saw him again, but that’s the moment I knew I wanted to be with her forever. A few days later, the war was over and Oz and I, we asked each other to marry at the same moment. But I remember her saying that words had won the war, that understanding others was the key to the future, and, well, my wife can’t be wrong, can she?”

“I suspect that Oz, much like Clara, believes as much,” Me said.

Roop laughed, then sobered. “I don’t understand your whole story, Me,” he said. “But it always helps me to go back to those moments where things were absolutely clear and ask myself, ‘Why?’ Maybe that will help you.”

“I thought I was already made of glass,” Me said, trying to tease.

“Look, I do math better than metaphors.”

“And you’re worried about your family.”

“That, too,” Roop said. “I know that means I’m *distracted*—”

“Of course you are. Who wouldn’t be? Don’t worry; we’ll get Basil back. I promise.”

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“I know you’ll do your best,” Roop said. “Now, will you hand me that manual? There might be something about security protocols in it that will help us.”

Me did as he asked and went back to trying to fix the console.

Clara pulled herself out of the air system, then replaced the cover and sonicked it shut. With Oz safely behind, she could get the kid back without having to worry about anybody dying. She stood, dusting off her trousers and jacket as best she could. Now for some light.

She pressed a panel beside a door, and the hangar lit up. Berths were evenly spaced across the room with security cameras trained on each one. Some of them still had ships docked in them, cables plugged into long, thin poles stretching down from the ceiling. Beyond lay doors to the outside, two green lights flickering above them.

Clara strode across the docking bay, keeping the berths to her left and the various bits of machinery, piles of supplies, and occasional skeleton to her right. It didn’t take long before the security cameras began to track her, smoothly following her as she crossed the space.

“Look, the modern update to a portrait’s eyes following me isn’t very subtle,” said Clara conversationally. “Subtle doesn’t seem to be your thing, though.”

A monitor lit up, revealing the same small boy, his features still shifting. The image followed her as she walked, showing up on a succession of monitors. “Subtle,” he said. “An adjective, meaning ‘so delicate or precise as to be difficult to analyse or describe’, or ‘delicately complex and understated’, or ‘making use of clever and indirect methods to achieve something’.” He shook his head. “No, I am not subtle. I want to keep Basil as my family and that means he must stay here.”

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“Why, though?”

“You are also not subtle, Clara Oswald. You are trying to get me to give Basil back to you.”

Clara smirked at that (no one had ever accused her of *subtlety*), but considered Áhreddan’s point. As immature as this intelligence was, it certainly was clever. “Not to me, Áhreddan. To his parents,” Clara said. “He belongs with them. With his family.”

“He belongs with me! I am his family!”

“I won’t tell you again,” Clara warned, still walking toward the door that would lead to the kid. “Basil belongs with his parents, but he can still be your friend. Just because he’s with them doesn’t mean that he stops being your friend. If you think that it does, well, then, you’ve got a very strange definition of *home* and *family*, Áhreddan.”

Áhreddan ignored that. “Stop walking towards that door,” he ordered. “If you don’t, I’ll... I’ll... I’ll... I’ll depressurise the room you’re in!”

Clara paused her progress. “Depressurise the room?”

“Yes, yes, that’s what I’ll do, *Clara Oswald*, I’ll depressurise the docking bay and send you flying out into space!” Áhreddan said. “Don’t take another step, I’m warning you.”

Interesting. Due to whatever the hell the Time Lords had done in looping and locking her because they’d bought whatever lie the Doctor had told them about why he needed her – as if he’d tell them *the truth*, ha! – Clara knew she only breathed out of habit.

But did she need the pressure of an atmosphere? Would the right propulsion unit be the only thing she needed to travel in space? The TARDIS wouldn’t like that, but it

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would probably be very cool to try. Could she risk the depressurisation? Would it cause something like what had happened with Lucida? What were the ramifications of that?

When she'd had the Doctor and a tiny TARDIS in her satchel, it had seemed like a game, to play at being the Doctor, even if the stakes were real. But she was just Clara, and the game was a lot bigger than she was, wasn't it? Did the Doctor ever have these moments where he didn't know what to do but had to do something anyway? Of course. So, how would the Doctor choose?

Especially without any good options?

No, how would *she* choose?

A lonely intelligence who needed socialisation. And a kid who needed his mother.

To hell with playing it safe, and to hell with anyone who thought she was in the wrong to do what she was doing; that's how she chose. Besides, who else could say they'd done what she was about to do?

Clara Oswald took another step.

One green light immediately turned red; the one beside it turned mauve. The gigantic doors beyond the ship berths began opening. A siren blared. Air rushed past Clara, whipping her red jacket tight against her.

Clara Oswald took another step.

Then she grabbed onto the nearest pole and held on. A crate slid past. The boy on the screen was saying something, but she couldn't make it out. She could no longer hear the siren. The colours faded from the lights above the door.

Another step.

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And another.

And another.

She gulped, out of habit. *Like a goldfish*, Clara thought. Everything was silent like a snowy night. *The only other sound's the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake.*

Robert Frost.

The open door beckoned, taunted.

Another step.

And another.

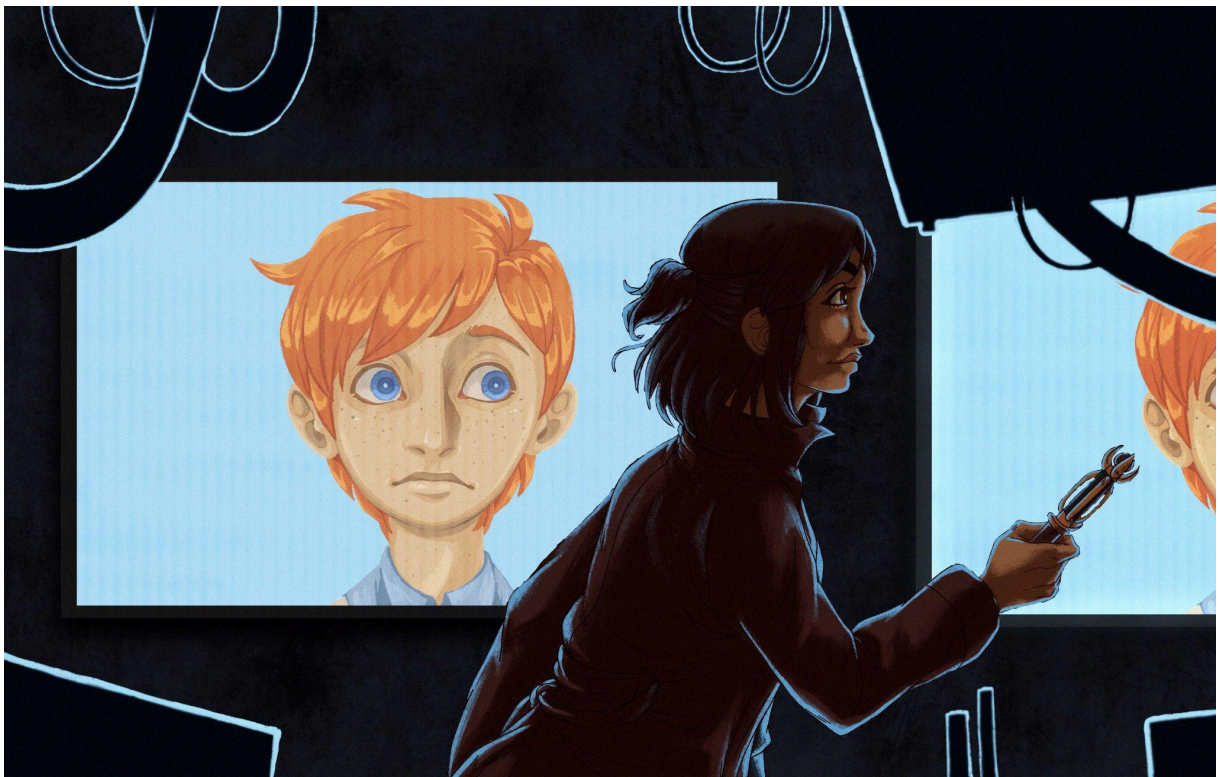
On the threshold to the room, Clara shivered.

Would she get used to this? Doubtful. Of course, one could get used to *anything*...

The cold spread from the inside out, bleeding into the vacuum. Clara blinked. The light wavered, split, and refracted across its spectrum, like light splayed on a lab table. Cobblestone under her feet. Death, a memory. A raven, seven feet in front of her. *Eagerly I wished the morrow.* A scream. Hers. Silent, frozen, still audible. Snow on cobblestones. Pain.

Oh, God, it *hurt*. *It hurt*.

Darkness.



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Chapter Five

When Oz arrived at Control Room B, Chuck was staring at a screen, Roop was flipping through a manual, and Me was underneath a console, coaxing cables into better configurations.

“Captain,” Chuck said, “Me fought a Thurian and won!”

“Obviously,” Oz said dryly. “Or else she wouldn’t be here to do whatever she’s doing to that console.”

“Fixing it,” Me answered. She slid out from under it and stood. “Or rather, fixed it.” She tapped a few of the keys, and the station’s comms and security cameras came online, images popping up onto the monitors. Everyone was always mad to find out more about inhuman monsters. But Me had seen battles throughout time, and humans could be just as monstrous as the rest of them, if not more so. “Now we find Clara.”

“How will you find her if she doesn’t show up on lifescans?” Roop asked. A reasonable question.

“Look for the worst possible place for her to be in,” Me said. “It’ll be just like her to be there rather than anywhere else.”

As Me had expected, she wasn’t wrong. No, Clara was definitely in the worst possible place. A docking bay with an opening airlock. Headed toward a door in the far wall.

Me flicked her comm to ‘On’. “Clara, Clara, come in.”

No response.

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“Clara, don’t be any more stupid than you’re being *right now*,” Me said. Despite Clara’s loop, this was a bad idea. Risky. Stupid.

No response.

A feeling she hadn’t paid attention to in centuries flared up again, one that had stirred within her in Auros, though she hadn’t dared to put a name to it. Oh, she *could* be afraid for someone else. What a momentous occasion.

“You were right, Roop,” Me said.

“What?”

“I do have a heart.”

He just nodded as if he understood.

On the monitor, Clara took another step, then slid into a pole, which she grabbed onto. At least that was tactically sound.

“Stars,” Roop said, “the room’s completely depressurised.”

“How is she *doing* that?” Chuck said.

“Well, she did say she was dead,” Oz observed.

Me sighed. “That she did. This is also that disregard for the rules of space/time.”

On the screen, Clara took several more staggering steps forward, crossed into the empty room beyond, then shuddered and slumped to the floor.

Surprisingly, both the doors to the outside and the room Clara had entered slid shut. The atmospheric controls showed the room as repressurising. Odd.

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But they could no longer see Clara.

Everyone hit the comm at once.

“Clara!” “Clara!” “Clara!” “Clara!”

What happened? Who was talking?

Clara blinked, her vision slowly returning. She half-expected to be back on the TARDIS, where a cup of tea and her favourite grumpy Gallifreyan would be waiting. Wait, no, that wasn't right. Space station, right. Missing kid, right. Depressurised docking bay, got it.

Boy, would Me have something to say if she'd known what Clara had just done.

Clara sat up, wondering if the shaky feeling was habit or something she was actually experiencing. Were there any lingering effects from the depressurisation? Didn't seem to be, anyway.

The room she had entered was very square, with a small desk and chair in front of a door on the far wall. Over the door, it read 'Memory Chamber'. That made the choice of where to go next easy.

“Clara!”

“What?” Clara pulled herself to her feet. “I'm okay, just a little winded, is all.”

“Clara, don't do what I think you're going to do,” came Me's voice.

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“I think you know me well enough by now to know I’m not going to listen,” Clara said, marching straight to the door and slapping a hand on the palm reader. “Your kid and I are gonna have a chat.”

The door slid open, and Clara entered the Memory Chamber.

One wall was lined with machines that looked like they came out of a mad scientist’s laboratory, all chrome and glass and inexplicable lights. Several of the tubes had skeletons in them, others were empty, and one had a young boy inside, his head cradled by some sort of device, probably the interface. The boy appeared to be asleep, the monitor on his tube steadily blinking green like a little persistent heartbeat.

“Don’t go near him,” Áhreddan’s voice echoed through the room.

“I’m not planning to,” Clara said. “I wanted to know how I could talk to you both.”

“No, don’t do that!” Áhreddan said.

Ah, she’d suspected as much.

She hefted the sonic screwdriver and pointed it at the capsule next to Basil. It whirred and the capsule lit up. “See you in a moment,” she said, stepping into the machine and letting the door slide shut over her.

When her eyes opened, she was standing on a beach. The strand stretched far off in the distance, where a single tower stood. Clara would recognise this beach anywhere. She’d gotten lost here, once, when there were loads more people and she’d been much smaller.

In front of her, not five feet away, a figure materialised, as if beamed in via teleporter.

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“This isn’t Blackpool Beach,” Clara said. “And that tower off in the distance isn’t Blackpool Tower, either.”

“No, it isn’t,” Áhreddan said, the features blurred but the voice unmistakable. “This is your mind’s reconstruction of Blackpool Beach, plus some additions from contemporaneous images.”

“Where’s Basil?”

“He’s over there. We’re playing,” Áhreddan said, pointing to two boys playing in the surf.

“Is it safe?”

“Can he drown here? No. I will not let anything harm him. You’ll see that he’s happy here.”

The two boys emerged from the sea, dripping and laughing. They wrapped towels around their shoulders and came running over.

“Who are you?” Basil asked. “I’m Basil, and this is my friend, Reddy.”

“I’m Clara Oswald. I’m here to help you,” Clara said.

“Help?” Reddy said. “Clara Oswald doesn’t want to help you; she wants to win.”

“Basil, your parents are worried sick about you,” Clara said.

Basil glanced at Reddy, then back at Clara. It was the sort of look she’d seen in students when they didn’t want to snitch on a classmate but knew there would be bigger problems if they didn’t tell an adult. “I thought they might be.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Reddy.

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“Well, they’re my parents. Of course they worry about me.”

“No one ever worried about me,” Áhreddan said. He snapped his fingers, and the younger version of himself and Basil disappeared. Only the blurry Áhreddan remained.

“Where did he go?”

“Back to the playground. They’re safe there, do not worry,” he said. “I saw your mind when you were unconscious.”

“Impressive, aren’t I?” Clara said, grinning.

The figure tilted its head to the side, then disappeared, replaced by a blue-green-ish orb. “This is your home,” Áhreddan said. “Planet Earth.”

“In a manner of speaking, sure,” Clara said.

“But so is this person,” Áhreddan said as the image blurred into the unmistakable form of Danny Pink.

A breath Clara no longer needed caught in her throat as the image shifted to the shape of a familiar old battered blue box. “This is your home as well, before Snag,” Áhreddan said. “But I do not understand.”

Clara nodded, trying to follow the being’s reasoning, though she didn’t know what ‘Snag’ meant. The landscape around them rippled and shifted into a circular room, with metal decking and railings surrounding a large console in the centre. Blue light filled the room; it was how the TARDIS had looked when she’d first laid eyes on it.

Again, the image of the blue box shifted, this time resolving into the bow-tie-wearing, floppy-haired Doctor, the one she’d last heard saying, “Miss ya.”

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“This person, too,” the Doctor said. “Though I am not sure why this name is connected to *two* faces.”

Oh no.

The Doctor turned into the Doctor – the bow-tie and three-piece suit replaced by a T-shirt, hoodie, and plaid pyjama pants, the floppy hair with the wild grey mane a little above a pair of shocking eyebrows. She missed both faces, in different ways, for different reasons.

Around them, the TARDIS interior shifted again, this time displaying the bookshelves that this Doctor had added. Somewhere around here was a stack of marking she’d forgotten to take back to the office, or the mug she’d added to the main kitchen’s collection, still half-full of tea. She wondered what had happened with the bookshelves since she and the Doctor had parted, if he had kept them around, still hid keys inside the books.

“You also have a strange definition of *home* and *family*, Clara Oswald,” the Doctor said in that Scottish burr of his. No, not the Doctor. Áhreddan, play-acting as the Doctor. To what end?

“So what?” Clara challenged. “So what if Earth is my home, and Danny is my home, and the TARDIS is my home, and the Doctor is my home? Home is what you make it. Home is wherever you take the love you have for those places and those people. Home is something you carry with you.”

“Home is what you leave forever, Clara Oswald,” Áhreddan-as-the-Doctor said.

The image of the Doctor changed, splitting into two people – her parents.

Around them, the setting changed once more. This time, they stood in a room that she’d last seen in her teens. The couches she’d jumped between, pretending the floor was lava. The photos on the mantelpiece: of her first day at school, all gap teeth and plaited pigtails; of Dad cheering her on at a junior footie match; of her

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parents' wedding, her mother's radiant smile lighting up the whole room. What home had been, before Mum died and Dad took up with that awful Linda.

"I searched for you in the archives," said Áhredden, speaking through her father's mouth. "And one thing I found is an after-action report, written by one Kate Stewart, from the year two thousand and fifteen. Such a long time ago. I quote from it now:

I informed Mr Oswald personally about the official circumstances of his daughter's death. He responded as any parent would when faced with the reality of outliving their child. Though our hands are tied by the Official Secrets Act, I nonetheless regret that our explanation did not prove sufficient for Mr Oswald. He said: "Acute myocardial infarction'... But that doesn't make any sense! Not Clara. Not my Clara. She used to run every morning with her boyfriend, she exercised, how could she have a heart attack? She was healthy – she was young! And you come here and tell me... I hadn't seen her in months. We've barely spoken since Danny passed. You always think you have time with the ones you love... I thought I had time. I thought we had time." [For the full transcript, see Page 17.]

We have referred Mr Oswald to a grief counsellor.

Clara felt sick. Gripping her wrist tightly, she looked down at the floor, at the light brown carpet, familiar and foreign all at once. God, she hadn't considered her dad in all of this. Or Gran. When they'd lost Mum, at least they'd had each other... But that was something for another time and place. She couldn't dwell on it. Not now. She pulled her gaze back up at Áhredden.

The image of Dave and Ellie resolved into the boy Clara had already grown accustomed to seeing. His eyes glimmered. Tears? He gestured to the room they were in, its wallpaper probably taken from 'contemporaneous images' like the beach. "How can they still be your home, Clara? If they leave, or if you leave them, how can they be your home?"

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“They’re my parents,” Clara said, her jaw tight. “They’ve always been my home, even when I didn’t live with them, even when I was grown up. Even when I lost them. Like everything else you showed me. Just because I left, or because they did, doesn’t mean we’re separated forever.”

“So Basil can live with me,” the boy said. “He will be fine, separated from his parents.”

“No, no, Áhreddan, he won’t be.”

“I do not understand.”

“Basil needs food, and water, and sleep, and air,” Clara said. “He needs those things to stay alive, to keep living. He needs those things because he’s human.”

They could resolve this without anyone getting hurt, she just knew it. She simply had to get through to Áhreddan.

“But I am alive,” Áhreddan said, “and I do not need food or water or sleep or air. And neither do you.”

“We’re different, you and I,” Clara said, even if saying that was accompanied by a ratcheting up of some internal ache she didn’t know how to ease. “But do you know how we’re not different from them?”

The boy shook his head.

“We can love just like everybody else, we can have friends just like everybody else. Most beings have a single beating heart – I’ve got a friend with two. And us? Just because our hearts don’t beat doesn’t mean we don’t have them.”

“But I don’t want Basil to leave me alone,” Áhreddan said. “I don’t want to be alone. I love him.”

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“I get it, I do,” Clara said. “But love doesn’t stop just because there’s distance between us. Sometimes we have to give things up for the people we love, even though it hurts... because it’s what’s best for them. Because it’s what’s right. Please trust me, Áhreddan. Let Basil go.”

Áhreddan was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Basil’s not like us. I’ll hurt him if I keep him with me. I don’t want to hurt Basil. He’s my friend.”

“I know you want what’s best for him,” Clara said. “I know you want to do what’s right.”

“I don’t want to hurt him, so I let him go,” Áhreddan said, his tone sad but certain. The scene around them shifted back to the Memory Chamber, and the capsule holding Basil popped open. He emerged from the machine just as the door to the room gave way, and his parents came rushing in. “See?”

“This isn’t just something you’re showing me, right?”

“Basil said lying is wrong, so I would not lie to you, Clara Oswald.” Áhreddan snapped his fingers.

The world went dark.

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Clara opened her eyes to find herself in the capsule she'd entered, its door sliding open. She stepped out to see Oz and Roop hugging Basil. Chuck was off to one side, looking thrilled but awkward all at once, his fist sheepishly bouncing on his leg while he grinned.

Me was hovering near her capsule like a mother hen. "I'm fine," Clara said.

"I see that." Me raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Walking through a depressurised docking bay?"

"We'll talk about it later," Clara said. "Is the kid okay?"

"He appears no worse for the wear," Me said with a wave of her hand at the family nearby. "No harm's been done to his brain structure, anyway."

"Good. How'd you all get here?"

"Doors opened a little while ago, and we came straight through. The other crew members reported over the comms that the barriers around the ships are down. We're free to go."

"Not quite yet." Clara crossed the decking to where the parents and child were.

Oz smiled at Clara from over Basil's curly hair. "You did it. Thank you."

"I always deliver on my grand promises," Clara said, and Oz laughed. A genuine one, this time.

A few feet away, a small boy materialised out of thin air. His eyes were rimmed in red, as if he'd been crying. "I am sorry," he whispered. "I did not understand. Snag told me to listen to Clara Oswald and I did not want to. But then I did listen, and Clara Oswald made me understand that if I kept Basil with me, I would hurt him. And I do not want to hurt him. He's my friend."

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Clara glanced at Me, who stared at the child as if he were a ghost. How was she taking this? It was one thing to die and be brought back to life, they almost had that in common, but having created a person without knowing it? Clara wasn't sure how she'd react in such circumstances.

"You're Reddy, right?" asked Roop.

Áhreddan's face was solemn for a moment before looking at Basil. "Yes. He told you about me?"

"He did," Roop said, resting a hand on his son's head. "He said that you're his best friend. And you know what best friends do? They go over to each other's houses."

"They do?"

"That's right," Oz said, looping her arm through Roop's. "What if we try to find a way for you to travel with us? I could always use someone like you on our crew."

"I could be a part of your family?"

Roop smiled encouragingly. "That's right. If you want to."

"Really?"

Both parents nodded, and Basil let out a whoop of joy.

Reddy looked at Clara. "I have been alone for a long time, Clara Oswald," he said. "I did not understand why they wanted to go away and why they did even when they didn't want to. My mother said that people promise you the moon and stars, but the moon and stars are cold and do not care and last forever."

"I think you're missing the context of that quote," Me said, her voice more uncertain than Clara had ever heard it.

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“It is about wanting your mother,” Reddy said, his voice sharp. “And I wanted mine.”

“I could not—” Me started, then stopped. “My diaries might have been the basis for your programming, but a sentient intelligence wasn’t intended. You just happened.”

“An accident. Like many beings before me.”

“Yes. But I didn’t even know that you existed,” Me said. “That’s no excuse, but when you’re as old as I am, things do tend to slip.”

“That is sarcasm.”

“Yes, yes, it is,” Me said. “But it’s also the truth. You came to existence in a universe that cares little for its inhabitants. But” – she looked at Clara, then to the Waldrons and Chuck, then at Áhredden – “there are people who do care, who try to be kind. And that is also in the diaries you seem to know so well.”

Áhredden thought for a moment. “Yes, there is other kindness there. I will have to look for it instead of the unkindness. Your diaries are a testimony to humanity’s past and could teach me and others to think and plan better for the future.”

“First person testimony is subjective, but better than no testimony at all,” Me said. “Would you like to send me yours?”

Áhredden tilted his head to one side. “What?”

“She wants to know if you want to send her an email,” Basil whispered.

“I sent you your diaries,” Áhredden said to Me. “Snag said you’d like to have them back.”

“Snag?”

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“The building that’s not a building? She says she hasn’t chosen a name yet but those are her initials. *Snacks and Gas*. SNAG.”

Clara laughed. “Snag is the TARDIS?”

Me smiled. “You gave the TARDIS my journals?”

“I thought you’d know they came from me and would write to me.”

“You can write to me now,” Me said. “And I’ll do my best to answer.”

Áhreddan grinned. “I’d like that.”

“Well, Clara,” Oz said, her hand on Basil’s shoulder, “I still don’t entirely understand how you came to be here, but I’m glad you did.”

“Happy to help,” said Clara. “Oh, by the way, guessing you’ll be wanting these back.” She removed her earpiece.

“Tell you what, why don’t you hang onto them?” said Oz. “Call it a token of gratitude.”

“Besides, we don’t need ‘em,” Chuck added.

“*Rude*,” Basil said.

“It’s the truth!”

Clara laughed as she pocketed the commlink. “Not a problem. Thanks.”

“If either of you are ever back this way...” Roop said.

“Stay away?” Me guessed.

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“No, no, you’re family now,” Roop said. “Give us a call, and we’ll make sure there’s a berth and a spot at the table open for you.”

Me nodded. “And what about Áhredden? How will he travel with you?”

“I’ve got some ideas about that,” Oz said. “If he doesn’t fit in the ship’s systems, we may just have found ourselves a new homebase.”

“Not necessarily where I thought of settling down,” Roop said. “But we could definitely make this place ours.”

“Or we could find Reddy some sort of body to live in,” Basil said, his eyes lit with excitement. “Like wood, or metal, or even glass!”

“Or some combination of all of those,” Me said, sharing a knowing look with Roop, who smiled warmly. “Depends on what Áhredden wants, I suppose.”

“You hear that, Reddy? We’re gonna figure out the best way to make you even more a part of the family,” Basil said.

Reddy grinned.

Back aboard the TARDIS, Me was slouched in one of the winged armchairs; Clara leaned against the console, basking in the sunlight filtering through the roof. She wasn’t going to question what sun the light was coming from, or when; she was merely going to enjoy it. Kids saved, disaster averted, a good day, all in all.

That tickle in the back of her mind seemed to whisper, *‘Told you that you were needed here.’*

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She looked at the time rotor. Had that been the TARDIS? It was either that, or she was going mad. Better to go with it being the TARDIS. “You’d prefer fewer death-defying stunts, I suppose?”

“Are you having a conversation with me, or with the TARDIS?”

“Both?”

“Okay, then.” Me took a deep breath, then let it out. “That was risky.”

“My whole present existence is risky, Me. It’s all predicated on risks, and the one I took today paid off.”

“As did the last one you took. What if it doesn’t next time?”

“Who says there’ll be a next time?”

Me raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, okay,” Clara said, “there’s bound to be a next time if we keep travelling. But you’re not saying you wanna stop, and neither am I. So let’s just make the most of this while it lasts, okay?”

“What happened when you shuddered out there in the hangar?”

Clara glanced down at the dials and buttons that studded the console. “Oh, you saw that? That was nothing,” she said. “Just my first time in a vacuum without a suit, is all. I’m a fixed point, right? We can’t change what happened, so why worry about it?”

“What if there are fixed points that don’t remain fixed forever?” Me asked. “What if you’re triggering something that’s irreversible?”

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“Where I’m standing seems to be the result of something irreversible being reversed,” Clara said. “And as long as I’m taking the long way round, I’m going to enjoy it.”

“I wasn’t saying we shouldn’t enjoy it,” Me said. “I just think we should be a little more careful.”

“Careful?” Clara scoffed softly, pulling back on the lever and engaging the time rotors. “I was all for careful till you got in a tizzy about it. And you said *I* was giving mixed signals!”

“I wanted you to be true to yourself,” answered Me, “not abandon caution altogether.”

“I’m not, I promise! Give me some credit.” Clara sighed. “Tell you what, why don’t you take the lead next?”

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Epilogue

Oz groaned, coming to. Where was she? More importantly, where was Roop? Basil? The crew? She moved to stand, but was held fast, as if she'd been strapped into whatever she was sitting on. Had they been captured? If so, by who? How? And why? She needed to get her bearings, figure a way out of this and find her family.

Oz blinked through tears. First things first. Whatever her location, it was bright, like sunlight bouncing off a ship's hull. She blinked again, trying to make out her surroundings. Maybe something in the room would provide a means of escape.

"Your sight will not be permanently harmed," a voice announced, emanating from somewhere in front of Oz. "However, a little discomfort is good."

"Only comfortable people say that," Oz retorted. The voice was metallic, unpleasant, yet cold and indistinct, leaving her none the wiser as to the speaker's identity. Oz assumed this was by design.

"If you prove to be truthful, you won't remain bound," the voice said, sounding rather bored. "You are Oz Waldron, correct?"

"What's that to you?"

"Not all that much, I'm afraid. But I do need to confirm your name for my records. You are Oz Waldron, captain of the *Diamond Hill*?"

"That's right," Oz said. "So this is an interrogation, is that it? You should know I've dealt with my share of puffed-up law enforcers. Whoever you are, whatever you think I've done, you don't scare me."

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“I am utterly unconcerned with your petty acts of piracy, Captain Waldron,” drawled the voice. “I am here to ascertain whether or not you have had recent contact with Clara Oswald.”

This was about *Clara*? Oz shrugged as best she could while restrained. “Maybe I did. Again, what’s it to you? What have you done with my family?”

“Answer the questions to my satisfaction and you’ll be returned to them in due course,” said the voice. “Yes, or no: have you had recent contact with Clara Oswald?”

“You know I have,” Oz replied. “Or else I wouldn’t be here. So why don’t you save us both some time and get to the point?”

There was a smile in the voice’s next words. “Clever, yes. For a *human*. But I advise against the insolent tone, Captain Waldron. The device you are currently locked into has not been obscured for *my* benefit.”

Oz swallowed, suddenly aware of the bracers clamped tight around her wrists. “I met a Clara Oswald, yes,” she said cautiously. “Doesn’t mean she’s *the* Clara Oswald you’re looking for.”

An amused “*Hmm*” came from the speaker. “Oh, I suspect you met *the* Clara Oswald. After all, only her original incarnation appropriated a TARDIS and is flagrantly flouting the laws of Time.”

“Original incarnation?”

“Oh, yes, didn’t you know? She’s quite the criminal. Everyone has a file if they’ve crossed Time, or interacted with time travellers.” Something thumped down in front of Oz; her sight cleared enough to see two large books, leather-bound and covered in strange glyphs, sitting one beside the other on a featureless table before her. One

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book was markedly thicker than the other. “Yours is the slighter one, which is to your credit, Captain Waldron.”

“And Clara’s is...”

“The thicker one, yes. You once crossed paths with the personage who styles himself ‘the Doctor’, did you not?”

Oz nodded slowly. The Doctor had come to her world, like the stories always said he did, in a blue box that wheezed into existence just outside her home. Her mother had been lost to the Last Conflagration, and she’d been pulled by the hand into an adventure.

The Doctor had been simply wonderful, bringing the war to an end with a speech. He’d even invited her to come along with him in that box of his, once she’d helped him find it again after he’d forgotten where he’d parked it. Oz had declined because she had already decided to ask Roop to marry her, and Oz had never regretted the adventures she and Roop had shared in the years since the Doctor. “I did meet someone with that name, a long time ago. Why does that matter?”

“Your encounter with the Doctor – specifically, you saving his life – is an instance of temporal crime, though not yours. All the better for you. But I digress: tell me, what did your... *experience* with Clara Oswald entail?”

“She rescued my son.”

“Quite noble of her.”

“We were able to save him without the loss of anybody onboard the station,” Oz said, feeling a need to refute the voice’s sarcasm. “My son is alive because of Clara Oswald.”

“In other words, she interfered.”

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“Who can know what would have happened if she hadn’t been there?” Oz said. “I’d probably be dead, though, if Reddy had done to me what he did to Clara.”

“And what was that?”

Oz didn’t take the bait. “Clara did what none of us could. She brought my Basil back, and if that’s ‘interfering’, so be it. Who are you to judge her? Wasn’t the Doctor interfering when he stopped the Last Conflagration?”

“Judgement is my prerogative,” responded the voice. “And we are not here to discuss the Doctor’s predilection for meddling, but rather a consequence of it. Your testimony would be useful to me in pursuing this case. In bringing Clara Oswald to justice.”

“Like a friend recently said, first person testimony is subjective,” Oz replied. “Why would I help you go after her?”

“I wonder whether you’d be so reluctant if you knew who she *really* was, what she is to you,” the voice mused, though it did not elaborate.

Oz’s watery gaze strayed to the two dossiers. “It sounds to me like you’re confusing justice with vengeance,” she said, struggling to keep the uncertainty from her voice. “You won’t get any more from me. So if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to go back to my family now.”

The voice fell silent for a long time. Too long. Oz felt her heart fluttering against her ribcage like a trapped bird.

“Had I the inclination,” the voice said at last, “or the scientific curiosity, I could force you into compliance. Oh, the experiments one could conduct on a quaint little anomaly such as yourself. I daresay your progeny would also make for an intriguing subject...”

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Oz's blood turned to ice. She dug her fingernails into her palm to restrain herself.

“However,” the voice continued, “I’m not in the habit of doing anything I deem... *unnecessary*, nor of punishing a victim for the sins of the perpetrator. I will mark you down as a hostile witness and glean what happened from the video footage. However, before I return you to your ship, mark *this*: Clara Oswald is a danger to herself, to anyone she comes in contact with, and to the universe at large. She is not your friend, nor your saviour. You would do well to remember that.”

Closing her eyes, Oz exhaled in relief. “Gods help anyone who comes up against her,” she said. “She’s an unstoppable force.”

“And, yet,” said the voice, “I am immovable.”

Clara and Me's adventures continue next time in

**CLARA
OSWALD**
THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

**AS
YOU
LIKE
IT**

Written by Tori Das

Illustrated by Sugarise

"I do not regret the times I do not hate you."

"Where learned you that oath, fool!"

Clara and Me, on a whim, have decided to travel with a theatre company on their maiden tour across the galaxy. Because you do only live once, no matter how long you delay your last heartbeat, right?

Nothing, of course, goes according to plan. The company find themselves on a planet unheard of by most spacefaring civilisations, where dragons live and die in fear and silence alongside humans desperate for sustenance in an endless winter. They live in the shadow of a forest of light shining night and day; a haven from which no one has ever returned.

And now silence, captive audience! The curtain rises...

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“Rini and Cath have gone to bed,” said Clara, coming up behind Molina. “You should get some rest, too.”

“And you?” asked Molina. She could feel Clara’s concerned, scrutinising gaze upon her.

“I’m fine,” replied Clara. “Have you seen Me?”

“Alexis? No, not for a while now.” Molina sat down on a boulder, watching the protective shields flicker over the cave entrance, and the pitch darkness beyond. “Is Dan feeling any better?” she asked. He’d had to stop working after a delayed allergic reaction to the chemical inhibitor the Kynde Bands had given him earlier.

“He’ll be okay,” said Clara. “Molina, you really are worrying too much.”

“Why did you do it?” The question burst out from Molina. “You and Alex — I mean Me. Why did you lie to us?”

Clara smiled as she sat down next to Molina. “It was just a stupid lark, you know?” she said. “We liked your adaptation of *Measure for Measure* back on Nephthys. Things just spiralled from there.”

“But that doesn’t make sense!” said Molina. “It’s one thing watching a play somewhere. But to risk everything to go on a tour across the galaxy? You could die out here. You could’ve been arrested if we were somewhere with *actual* police around. Do you know the trouble we’ll be in when we get back home? *If* we manage to go home, that is—”

“You will,” said Clara. “I promise.”

“That’s not reassuring!” Molina found herself dangerously close to a breakdown. “Our ship may never fly again, we’re trapped somewhere we’d never even heard of,

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and if something happens now... Do you really think Paul will keep his end of the bargain? Will he help us?"

Clara shook her head. "I don't know. But didn't you think about this when you decided to leave Nephthys?"

Molina looked askance at Clara. "We knew the planets we were going to visit, we had all the trajectories mapped out—"

"That's the thing!" said Clara, eyes glittering in the dim light. "Did you really think it would be so easy? We're talking about space here, a whole galaxy. No one ever knows what's going to happen once you step out the door."

A thought came to Molina. "Or is that how *you* imagined it?" she asked. "You were betting on something like this happening, weren't you?"

"I didn't do this," said Clara, quickly. "I didn't bring you down here, if that's what you're thinking. I'm just saying, you needed a more flexible plan. Come on! We're going to get out of here, all eight of us. There's still hope."

Molina sighed. "How can I tell if you're not lying to me now?"

"You'll just have to trust me," said Clara, smiling impishly. "You wanted me to save you when the *Khurab* was crashing."

"But you didn't," Molina retorted. "The Kynde Bands stopped us from crashing to our deaths, not you."

"And you know why they did that," said Clara. "You know what you saw from their hangar. You don't have a lot of choices right now."

"Are you trying to help me or scare me?" snapped Molina.

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“If you want me to make you less scared,” said Clara, “I’m not going to do that. Scared keeps you on your toes, ready to move when you have to. Nothing wrong with being scared. So long as you don’t forget who you are, and where you are, and what you have to do. Right now, you have to direct a play. And you can’t do that if you’re not well rested.”