

DOCTOR · WHO

Too Young to Die

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Bong.

The Doctor had walked the length of his TARDIS. This was no mean feat, and had required some tinkering with the internal dimensions.

Bong.

There had, in any case, been a fair bit of tinkering recently.

Bong.

The cloisters, for example, were now located somewhat further away from the console room and living quarters.

Bong.

This wasn't for any particular technical reason. It was simply that the Doctor was sick of hearing the cloister bell, and wanted it to be quieter.

Bong.

It hadn't worked, of course. The bell had just made itself louder to ensure it could be heard.

Bong.

The Doctor concentrated, blocking out the noise. He knew the Ship was in trouble, there was no use in its continually reminding him.

He sat in his bedroom. The bed was immaculately made, and had been for some time now. The Doctor slept rarely as it was, and had had very little time for it recently. He looked at the walls, ultra white, sporting roundels, the only part of the TARDIS to sport a remnant of its original structure. The walls had limited zero room properties — something he'd installed a while back to allow true recuperation when sleeping. A painting hung on one wall — a rainbow, reflected in a lake, the surface rippling under the tiny pressure of pond-skaters. The colours twisted under the distortion. Red to indigo — violet was, for some reason, absent from the image. There was a reason why, but the Doctor couldn't quite remember it. Certain

memories of his earlier life were still vague, especially under the weight of those that had come recently.

He looked in the mirror on the adjacent wall. The man who looked back at him was at once familiar and strange. The face he had worn for so many years, reshaped by age and anxiety. The hair, cropped short now, the curls tight, the brown almost subsumed by grey. Bags under his eyes, wrinkles in his skin, the smile gone from his face.

Somewhere below, in the bowels of the Ship, his wardrobe stretched into infinity — or at least it had seemed like it. He had stood there, some time earlier, on his ship-wide trek. He had stood looking at his collection of velvet frock coats. Chocolate brown, bottle green, midnight blue. Black, for when he was in a sombre mood. Cream for cricketing. Pink for that night in the Big Boys' Bar — not his finest hour. The scarlet one was a bit swish, he thought. Most of them were now very tattered; the elbows had almost worn through on the green one.

He had stood there in his simple black suit, the Nehru-style collar smartly fastened. He had walked along the rails, ignoring the moth-eaten outfits of his earlier incarnations. He'd spent a fair while looking at the few things his friends had left behind, when they had gone on their ways. Trix had left a fair number of outfits behind — mostly very expensive designer numbers. Fitz had left behind one of his jackets — his most battered one, from the looks of it. He hoped that they had been okay together. Destrii had left a few of her leotard-type outfits behind — the sort of thing she had worn when she was still a little wet around the gills. He hadn't been

able to look at what Charlie had left — it still hurt, after all this time. Sam, he was thankful for, had taken everything with her. There was a very ornate ball gown on a mannequin, which he'd originally bought for Mina Harker, and that was it.

He had turned, and slowly walked out of the room.

The console room was, like much of the TARDIS, a very different place to what it had once been.

Gone were the gothic trappings that he had installed shortly prior to his last regeneration. Gone was the simple, stark white look that he had frequently employed. In their place were supports strewn from a material not unlike coral; rich amber walls, their roundels vestigial; and a central console that glowed cyan with the energy of the Time Vortex.

The Doctor breathed out slowly and heavily. It was this very energy that he was going to have to exploit on this decisive day.

He activated the scanner, now located on the console itself — one of the changes to his upgraded TARDIS that he wasn't fond of. The Lady Romana, former President of Gallifrey, looked back at him grimly. Now in her fourth incarnation, she was once again young, slender and blonde, her face narrow and aristocratic.

'Hello, Doctor. How's the upgrade?'

He looked around the console room, made a face.

'It'll pass,' he said.

'I do wish you'd let us perform the procedure earlier. It could have made a significant difference.'

'I doubt that very much. Today, however, is another matter.'

'Perhaps. You always were stubborn, Doctor. In all the lives in which I've known you.'

The ghost of a smile played on her lips, and the Doctor found himself echoing the motion.

'We did have some fun, didn't we, Romana?'

The search for the Key, fleeing the Guardian to beyond space/time, meeting Salyavin, adrift in E-Space, finding each other again, the invasion of Gallifrey — she smiled fully now.

'We did, Doctor. Some very good times.'

Chocolates at the end of Time, flying down from the Eiffel Tower, wine in the ruins of Minos, a week on Woman Wept, that night on Forlornis — he smiled back.

'Good times. I guess it could never last.'

The War in Heaven, Faction Paradox, the destruction of Gallifrey, amnesia, a century on Earth, the creation of a new homeworld, regaining his memories, Romana's triumphant return, imprisonment by the Daleks, freedom a decade later, the declaration of war, the Nestene affair, the invasion —

'I'm afraid it's time, Doctor.'

'I'm afraid, too.'

She looked at him, in a way she hadn't in centuries.

'Don't worry,' he said, trying to reassure them both. 'We'll survive. We're too young to die.'

'Doctor?'

'Yes?'

'When this is over, will you...?' She trailed off.

'Yes?'

'Will you... meet me on the Titanic? We never did that. Never got round to it, somehow.'

He smiled again.

'See you in 1912.'

He switched off the screen, turned away. It activated again immediately. He swung round.

The fleet had arrived. The warsaucers.

'How many?'

A number popped up on the screen: **ONE MILLION (□ PPROX).**

'Gods help us...'

The Doctor awoke on the floor of the console room. He staggered to his feet, activated the scanner, demanded to know the results of the battle. The TARDIS took a moment — battle worn, surveying the carnage, or just trying to brace him for it? It didn't matter. He knew the result.

NO SURVIVORS B□RRING THIS UNIT.

The Doctor checked, and rechecked. The answer didn't change.

He walked back to his room, slowly. Tears welled up in his eyes. It was an hour before he noticed that his face had changed.

* * *

Some time later, the Doctor returned to his Ship. He set the column in motion, the time engines groaning as the TARDIS dematerialised. He winced, his hands sore from ice burn.

'Should've left a bit earlier, Doctor,' he said to himself, still unused to his Mancunian accent.

He turned, wandering into the depths of his machine. He had stayed onboard the liner for as long as possible, but she had not been there. It hadn't been a surprise.

Eventually, he reached the wardrobe again. He stared at himself in the full-length mirror. His hair was shorter than ever; his face, hawk-like (apart from the ears.) He was wearing an ankle-length black overcoat. He removed it, dropping it to the floor. He swept off his top hat, unfurled his red cravat, and took off his crisp, white dress shirt. This just wasn't him any more, he realised.

'No point dressing like one of the lords any more, mate.'

He opened a drawer — floral shirts. No. Another — bow-ties. No. Another — v-necked sweaters. No idea whose they were. Hmmm...

He let his gaze wander back to the rails. Fitz's jacket still hung there, the black leather worn brown.

'Now, there's a thought...'