

# The Last Tomb

## A Tale of the Eleventh Doctor

By Alison Winter

Daybreak always found him, even in the deepest sleep, on the darkest morning. It whispered to him like frost slowly flowering across a windowpane. It was still black and blue outside, but life everywhere had already begun to murmur. Here was morning again. The bed, cold. The house, silent. No one to put the kettle on.

Leonard Bailey nimbly buttoned his shirt collar and smoothed out his beige trousers, his 78 years uncoiling into the proud posture of the old soldier. He padded downstairs and whistled sleepily through his seashore home, ready to take Scout for a walk. A cup of tea, and together they would greet the mellow streaks of sunlight outlining the sandy ripples of Nonsuch Beach. The mornings had brought with them a refreshing chill this week, though the late-September afternoons still baked in the warm sun, and hosted tourists with picnics and drinking at dusk.

Leonard liked his footsteps to be the first on the fresh sand. As for Scout, she'd pad along behind him. Or she did until a few months ago, when she'd said a tired goodbye with a quiver of her tail. Good old hound. Instead, Leonard's upgraded metal detector carried her name, and was never far from his side. She graced over the sand in eerie silence.

"Not much today, old girl?" asked Leonard, failing to keep the disappointment out of his raspy voice. Scout had so far helped him find two large jars' worth of pennies, an assortment of foreign coins, two tooth fillings, seven keys or bunches thereof, three wedding rings, one engagement ring with a whopping diamond (returned to its tearful owner), sixteen dress rings, over three-thousand ring-pulls, three cigarette cases and the fragments of an old Viking vase. He never expected to beat that.

He sighed. The morning felt flat, as if something had already been determined for him that day and there was nothing to play for. Nothing grand to be found, nothing new to be seen. The lilac sky had slipped behind wisps of disappointing silvery cloud, and even the waves slopped in with a certain indifference. To make matters worse, there was now another detectorist on the beach every morning. Friendly chap, with a Roman sort of nose, looking for same thing Leonard was: a strange, unidentifiable

alloy, carved in very deliberate shapes. Leonard had found five of them already that month, and more seemed to appear on the beach every day. The Nose had described them as “weird sort of alien Tetris shapes”.

Leonard wasn't sure about this man. He'd appeared when the shapes had, which surely meant he was either a conspiracy nut or a special branch spook. For this reason, Leonard had not revealed to The Nose just how many shapes he'd discovered and stored. The Nose was even earlier this morning and just a few metres away, apparently preoccupied with a suspicious sand dune.

Scout crackled and squealed sweetly. A choppy bleeping told Leonard it was likely just a ring-pull, but he crouched down in any case to investigate, his hand scooping the stone-cold sand out of the way.

“Morning!” called, The Nose.

“Morning,” replied Leonard politely.

“Any luck today?”

“Not as yet. You?”

“No.”

“Yes, well.” Leonard nodded politely, then turned away.

The Nose ignored the hint. “Mr Bailey, don't suppose you've seen any more of those... *things?*”

“I'll be sure to let you know, er...”

“Rory,” said Rory. “Rory Williams.”

“Ah yes, that's it. Rory.”

Leonard turned and continued to sway the Scout across the sand, a touch of the music conductor now in his demeanour.

Rory knelt down to see what he'd found and began brushing sand out of the way. Something moved, and a pinching pain gripped his hand.

“Argh!” yelled Rory. Leonard came running.

“What is it? A crab?”

“Yep,” answered Rory through gritted teeth. “Very much so!”

“Easy,” said Leonard gently as he crouched down beside Rory. The crab was clinging fiercely to the palm of Rory’s hand. “Keep very still,” instructed Leonard. “He’s stressed out. I’m going to distract him.” Leonard lightly tapped the crab’s claws just a few times, and it released the reddened skin, diving back into the sand after its rude awakening and disappearing from view.

Rory shook out his hand and blew on the assaulted flesh.

“Thanks.”

“They’re easily stressed out, hermit crabs.”

“Well, I wasn’t going for the crab, I was going for...” he stopped, watching Leonard run Scout over the sand until she blurted a bleep.

“Well then. Let’s see,” said Leonard. He brushed the sand away to reveal a distinct ‘L’ shape, about four inches in length, looking like iron but light as a feather. “I do believe this is one of your weird Tetris shapes.”

“Yes, it is,” said Rory, pulling out a hanky and picking up the shape. As he stood, it glowed in his hand like an old stone illuminated by an orangey setting sun.

“Doesn’t that worry you?” asked Rory, observing Leonard’s lack of concern. “Could be radioactive.”

“It isn’t. I don’t know what the glowing means, but Scout would tell me if it was dangerous. She has a Geiger counter.” Leonard lightly nudged Scout with his leg and Rory noticed a yellow device strapped to the detector, among various other instruments and digital screens. Scout certainly appeared capable of performing multiple measurements.

The object glowed even brighter.

“That means there are more like it, not far from here,” explained Rory.

“I see. What can you tell me about them?” The old man’s eyes narrowed, and Rory was reminded of numerous occasions during his school days where he’d found himself lying to teachers to cover for his friends. His friends who just so happened to become his wife and daughter.

“Um, nothing?” said Rory with a grimace. It was time to contact the Doctor, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that Mr Bailey might become difficult, and he knew full well the old man was lying about the other shapes.

“Well then.” Leonard walked away.

“I’m sorry, Mr Bailey,” called Rory, his voice authoritative. Leonard stopped in his tracks at the change of tone. Here was the real man. Rory continued, “I can’t tell you what I don’t know myself. Only that the metal is…” he trailed off, wondering how exactly he would describe it.

“An unknown alloy,” said Leonard. “I know. The colouring, the weight, the magnetic quality. All wrong.”

“You know your metals. Impressive.”

“I taught physics and chemistry for thirty-five years.”

Rory smiled weakly. “I know you’ve seen them. Mr Bailey, this is important. They’re not radioactive but they could be toxic.”

“No,” said Leonard sharply, as if correcting a schoolboy. “Nothing toxic about them. That’s just a line you’d feed to the public.” He turned to walk away again.

“All right,” called Rory, stopping Leonard again. “Fine. I’m trying to collect all of them so we can run proper tests. We believe they behave differently when all together.”

“Behave? Interesting word. Not into panpsychism are you?”

“Er, given I don’t know what that means, probably not.”

“The theory that all things possess an element of consciousness, as a fundamental feature of physical matter. Even Scout here.”

“Uh, well. Stranger things have happened.”

“Have they?” said Leonard with disinterest.

“If you have more of these...”

“Follow me,” came the gruff command, and Rory scuttled across the sand to catch up with him.

Leonard led Rory along a private path to a row of colourful beach cottages, the roughcast walls painted baby blues, sunset yellows, petal pinks and mint greens until they came to a lavender-coloured one. Charming place to retire, thought Rory, admiring a nurtured rose bush. Walking inside, Leonard made a beeline for his back room whilst Rory tried to delicately step over stacks of records, CDs and books.

“Having a sort out?” he called, struggling to find a clear spot on the carpet to step in. He came to the living room. Around fifteen pairs of brand-new leather shoes were on the floor, plus more heaps and piles and stacks of everything and nothing, and a thick dust resting on most of it. He hadn’t expected this from the fastidious school teacher he’d met on the beach.

“I like collecting things,” answered Leonard, brusquely. “You sound like my daughter.”

“Sorry,” said Rory. He tried to get better at crossing the room, as if there were no problem at all. He didn’t want to be rude, and somehow landed with relative grace in the doorway of another room. It was clearly once a double bedroom. White, fitted over-bed wardrobes remained, but it was now like a giant stockroom for odds and ends. It reminded Rory of a hardware store – even smelt like one. A tall wooden bookshelf had labels stuck on its shelves and corresponding baskets, like post-room pigeon holes. Every shelf, drawer, basket, bowl, tin, plus countless cardboard boxes was filled with a collection of coins, buttons, keyrings, flipflops, dog toys, mobile phone cases, and Tupperware. Another pair of leather shoes, still with a tag, sat on an old writing desk next to a microscope, which was clearly getting regular use.

“Nice,” said Rory, finding something to be positive about and waving at the microscope. “That looks properly pro.”

“Retirement present. Like me, a little out of date, but does the job.”

The ‘L’ shape glowed more fiercely in Rory’s hands.

“Here,” said Leonard, pulling out a drawer from the writing desk.

The instant he did, half a dozen chunks of metal, each a different shape, flew upwards and out of the drawer in a tumultuous fury, and were joined at once by the new and seventh piece, which forced itself out of Rory’s grip. They shot towards one another like pins flying to an invisible magnet, paused for a moment, swiftly re-arranged their respective positions, then locked together in mid-air. Now a complete shape, the 3D object glowed a fierce red. It rotated with an unnerving presence. The rise and fall of its edges reminded Rory of a mountain range, the coppery glinting lines and curves within the shape were more deliberate, even artistic, and intensely and frighteningly beautiful.

Leonard was most puzzled by the deep wheezing noise it was making, until he realised it wasn’t coming from the shape, and a wind was kicking up in the centre of his room.

“Here he comes,” said Rory. “Back up a bit.” He encouraged Leonard to flatten himself against the wall.

“Here *who* comes?” asked Leonard, irritated.

“Excellent question.”

A vintage blue police box, at first ghostly, was now standing in the middle of the room. This was the second time in Leonard’s life where he had genuinely questioned his sanity. The other time was on his wedding day, when Helen had walked down the aisle, a vision so stunning he couldn’t believe this was really happening to him. He’d only come to his senses because she muttered something very personal to him under her breath as soon as they were side by side, and he knew his own mind wouldn’t have dared come up with that.

The police box door creaked swiftly open, and out dashed a thin, floppy-haired young man, clad in a tweed jacket and purple bowtie. He was cradling a pair of Leonard’s leather shoes.

“Good job, Rory!” he said, joyously. “Sorry about these, didn’t want to crush them in the landing. Nice shoes by the way, uh...?”

“Mr Bailey,” explained Rory.

“How do you do, Mr Bailey,” asked the young man, rhetorically, thrusting the shoes into Leonard’s arms.

“Leonard, please,” said Leonard, numbly accepting the footwear. He nodded at the blue box in incomprehension. “Nice box.”

“Thank you, Leonard,” said the odd young man, proudly. “She’s a TARDIS, and she’s beautiful. I’m the Doctor, by the way”.

The Doctor twirled around in circles taking in the busy room before him with some concern, before turning his attention to the ominous shape hanging in mid-air. He clapped his hands and rubbed them together with delight. “Right. Look at that. Magnificent.”

“What is it, Doctor?” asked Rory, stepping behind him. “How come it’s glowing?”

“It’s a distress call,” answered the Doctor, running a purring, tubular device across the hovering mass. “It’s designed to get your attention. High-tech message in a bottle.”

The device gave an uneasy whir, and the Doctor became very still. There was a palpable weight in the room. “And now it’s got my attention,” he said, gravely.

“What’s wrong?”

“If I’m right about where it’s come from, it’s been waiting a very long time. Too long. Impossibly old. Should have burnt out by now.” He looked at it sadly. “I’m sorry.”

Leonard gave a gruff chuckle. “Old? This is space age stuff, surely?”

“Oh, it was very advanced,” explained the Doctor, changing a setting on the the device and scanning again. “A civilisation way ahead of yours.”

Leonard blinked. It wasn’t an altogether unreasonable point.

There was a chaotic chirp, and the Doctor stepped towards the gleaming shape to give it a tap. He yelped.

“Hot!” he shouted, blowing on his fingers. “Far too hot. Been on too long. The screwdriver says so, too.”

“Sorry,” began Leonard, his brow furrowed in confusion, “what screwdriver?”

“His sonic, whirry-chirpy thing,” Rory clarified, almost apologetically. “Doctor, we’ve been trying to put this together for weeks now. Does someone need our help or not?”

“No. Too late. But possibly,” answered the Doctor. “We need to get the real expert.”

“How is that not you?” asked Rory.

“I can’t be sure it’s safe and I can’t get the TARDIS near it to check. We need an archaeologist, Rory. A preeminent scholar of interstellar antiquity. One Doctor Song.”

Leonard watched the colour drain from Rory’s face. “No, Doctor,” said Rory, with a dry swallow. “They said under no uncertain terms not to interrupt them. Mother and daughter time, they said.”

“I know. Brace yourself.” The Doctor pointed his sonic screwdriver at the shape and activated it. As he moved his hand, the metal message moved as if caught in a micro tractor beam and shifted through the air, floating into the TARDIS. The Doctor walked in after it, and Rory after him, and Leonard, still holding his shoes, followed after Rory. The doors closed behind them.

Leonard’s disbelief continued. The information entering his mind didn’t match what his body was expecting. The room he was in seemed to stretch in every direction far beyond the confines of the wooden police box he had just stepped into. He knew he was physically *somewhere*, but it didn’t feel like he was really anywhere at all. His knees tingled. He considered this all might be a dream, or possibly a stroke. The sounds were alien to him. Nothing made sense. He held his shoes tightly to his chest and waited silently for anything to clarify his position.

The Doctor settled the fiery metal shape at a safe distance from anything else, popped his screwdriver back in his top pocket, and flung himself to the many-sided console of dials and switches in the centre of the impossibly large space. He reached for a prominent lever and yanked it hard.

“Off we go,” he crowed. “Planet of primordial joy, get ready.”

“Doctor, Amy will kill me,” complained Rory, his shoulders sloping in defeat. Which was when he turned and noticed Leonard had followed them in.

“It’s a risk we have to take, Rory,” said the Doctor, tapping a few buttons. “Trust me, River won’t want to miss this.”



Leonard listened. The bombastic wheezing of the machine throbbed around him, like broken waves. As if the sea were electronic, perhaps. He also heard his breath quiver.

“Um, Doctor,” said Rory softly.

“Rory, I won’t tell you again. This is important!”

“Yes, but Mr Bailey is also here.”

The Doctor looked up to see a terrified old man holding a pair of leather shoes.

“Oh,” he said. He walked carefully up to Leonard.

“We’re in a hurry,” explained the Doctor as gently as he was capable. “So I have to rush this, but: spaceship, also a time machine, also bigger on the inside because dimensional engineering, also now collecting my wife and her mother from another planet before dashing off to help someone in need in another galaxy, yes you guessed it, far, far away, in a binary solar system, which is strictly speaking closed to visitors due to a supernova that went sideways which I’m assuming is the reason for the distress call, but I can’t be sure. Sorry.”

The Doctor looked to Rory for support and didn’t get any, then looked back to Leonard. “Would you like to sit down?” he asked quickly.

Rory went over to Leonard and guided him to a chair. “Over here. I know it’s a shock. Take a seat.”

Leonard gingerly sat down, unable to speak or make eye contact. His shock was palpable. A deep frown sat on his face.

Rory looked at the Doctor, and the Doctor grimaced.

“Any questions?” asked the Doctor weakly.

“Will this take long?” asked Leonard, watching the ghostly-green time rotor go up and down and wondering what on earth it was.

The Doctor shrugged. “Shouldn’t think so.”

There was a bleep, for which the Doctor was extremely grateful.

“Ha!” he exclaimed. Picking up the girls in three, two, one... all hands brace for impact!”

Leonard squinted into nothing as the outline of two people appeared next to the console. He thought it might be a hologram at first, but the image became increasingly clear. It seemed the Doctor had no intention of landing to pick up the ‘girls’, but instead the spaceship was absorbing them, like it had done his shoes. And now, two women were standing in front of him. One of them had very big hair. The other, younger, ginger, and presumably the daughter, was pointing a gun at his head. Her focused gaze turned to one of horror. She screamed and so did Leonard.

The Doctor grabbed the weapon from Amy and flung it towards the TARDIS doors, which obligingly opened so the gun could hurtle out and spin indefinitely into the vacuum of space. The doors then promptly closed with an air of satisfaction.

“A gun! On my TARDIS!” scolded the Doctor. “Amelia Pond!”

“I was on holiday!” came an angry Scottish voice. Amelia Pond glared at the Doctor until Rory stood in front of her. “Amy, you said it was a girly weekend! Why are you firing guns?”

She folded her arms. “Because that’s what girls like, moron. It was the ‘Martinis, Girls and Guns’ package deal. And I was winning!”

“She wasn’t,” said the older woman slyly, sidling up to the Doctor. “Dearest,” she said with a dark note of warning. “I hope you have a good reason for interrupting our special mother and daughter time.”

“Yes. Look at that,” said the Doctor, indicating the glowing metal.

“Oh, that is beautiful,” she said, taking it in. “Encrypted interdimensional SOS.”

“Even the TARDIS couldn’t translate it. But I’m sure Dr. River Song can.” He swaggered his hips a little as he said it, and Leonard registered the intimacy between them, despite the age difference. River gave the Doctor a wry smile in return.

“Of course, sweetie.” She stepped closer to the smouldering message.

“Careful, it’s hot.” The Doctor watched her study it, seeing the same concern on her face as he was feeling. He saw her initial excitement dissipate, just as his had. “Too late do you think?”

River looked sad. “Probably,” she said. “But it might have just got caught up. Perhaps a vortex delayed it. Touch of time dilation.”

“Is that floating graffiti?” asked Amy.

“So Scottish,” sighed the Doctor. “No, Amy. It’s not floating graffiti.”

She shrugged, a touch petulant, Leonard thought. “Well, what does it say?”

River, very solemn now, read out the message.

“Zia is dying. Please hear her last words.”

Amy frowned. “Who’s Zia, Doctor? Do you know her?”

“Yes,” answered the Doctor, still watching River.

“Who is she?” asked Rory.

River turned to Amy and Rory. “Zia isn’t a person. She’s a planet. The people of that world died centuries ago. Her last words must be whatever is left of that civilization. Writings, possessions.”

“So, are we going?” asked Amy. A strange silence filled the console room.

Slight problem, or two,” said the Doctor.

“We can’t,” explained River. “Zia is, or was, a small planet in a binary solar system.”

“Binary solar system? Two suns?” asked Amy.

“Two suns,” confirmed River. “The suns, between them, once gave life to eighty-seven planets throughout that vast system. Conditions for life were optimal for eons. Many of those planets were earth-like worlds, but almost all evolved to host intelligent and peaceful species. Empires blinked in and out of existence, but they eventually prospered, developing interplanetary communications throughout the system. Until the day one of the suns turned red and expanded, gradually engulfing its nearest satellites; moons, planets, people. The planets further away were still warmed by the second star, but they watched as the red giant burned in the distant sky. They

understood the gravitational pull of the red star would eventually destroy all life in the system.

“Planet Zia was closer to the warmer yellow star, but she too was being slowly pulled away from her habitable zone. The worlds compared notes with their celestial neighbours and helped one another. A race to sustain life artificially, underground, with no water and no sun, began throughout the system, which was all drifting towards the greater red mass.

“Centuries past. Millennia past. The Zians created and developed technology that was the envy of space-age civilizations across the galaxy. They moved underground, knowing what was to come, having watched as their neighbours were engulfed and incinerated, one by one, by the red giant. They could only save so many. Now, Zia’s own sun reddened and expanded, an opposing gravitational force. The two dying stars fought to engulf the planets they had sustained for billions of years, but Zia’s unique position kept her at arm’s length from both. Eventually, Zia was the only planet left in the system, sandwiched between two red giants in a terrible tug-of-war.”

Amy brightened up. “So, the planet might still be there? The people might have survived underground? Doctor, we could save them.”

The Doctor waved his hand impatiently. “Even then, Zia would be tidally locked at the null point where the gravitational fields of the two dying suns add to zero, being slowly torn in half. I can’t fly the TARDIS into that.”

“I don’t understand,” said Amy. “Why can’t we just go back in time to before the stars expanded?”

“The Zians were clever,” said the Doctor. “They time-locked the planet to prevent their technology falling into the wrong hands. It’s sealed off like a tomb.”

“But someone sent a message,” said Rory. “Someone wants us to go there.”

“Legacy,” said the Doctor. “Someone couldn’t bear for it all to come to dust. The past is sealed off, but not the present. Presumably because they wouldn’t expect anyone to be insane enough to visit after both suns have collapsed. Like stealing a diamond from a museum that’s rigged with explosives, during an earthquake.”

“Sounds like something you would do for kicks,” said Amy. “So, what’s the other problem?”

“We have a stowaway,” said the Doctor gravely. He looked at Leonard. “Meet Mr. Leonard Bailey, who stole on board.”

“Excuse me, *you* stole *me*,” Leonard objected. He stood. His body had finally caught up with everything else, and he was about done with it all. He finally put down his shoes, placing them in the chair. “I’m the one who collected those things that are now a distress call. Apparently, I’m on a spaceship. And in a time machine. I don’t appear to be waking up from this weird dream any time soon, so I say we take a look.”

The Doctor clapped and grinned. “Good man, Leonard!” he said, dashing to the console.

River went after him, exasperated. “Doctor, it’s too dangerous!” she admonished. “The whole system is off limits. It’s gone. Stop showing off!”

The Doctor ignored her and danced around the controls. He flicked a switch and pulled the monitor close.

“We can materialise in the nearest stable region, which appears to be this convenient little nebula just on the left.” He tapped the screen and grinned, ignoring River’s disapproving look. “It’s not in the orbit of either sun, but it’s close enough to take a better look and see if Zia’s still there. Hold tight.”

The lever went down with a clunk again and the TARDIS shook and shrieked in protest. The Doctor tried not to enjoy it too much whilst everyone else held on for dear life. “Sorry,” he called. Two red giants at war! We can expect a touch of turbulence!” The TARDIS shuddered and Leonard clung to a rail.

“Sorry about him,” River said, pressing the blue buttons which stabilised the TARDIS. She went to Leonard, helped him straighten up, and shook his hand. “I’m River Song. Pleasure to meet you.” Her eyes twinkled so much Leonard had to take a step back.

“Sorry about her,” said the Doctor.

Leonard cleared his throat and smiled warmly. “And that young woman is your beautiful daughter?”

Amy and Rory looked at one another awkwardly.

River chuckled. “Oh, she’s not my daughter. She’s my mother. And he’s my father. And this one’s my husband.”

Leonard felt he was starting to get a headache. He massaged his temple.

“Sorry, Leonard,” said the Doctor. “We’re a bit dysfunctional.”

There was an ominous bang and a shudder. The TARDIS breathed quietly. River dashed to the doors, pulling them open, and they all gathered to see what was left.

Above them, and millions of miles away, was an immense swirl of what looked like glittering rubies, this ancient behemoth of a galaxy now a graveyard of mostly red giants. Closest to the TARDIS was the once thriving binary solar system. The two dying stars burned like flaming red roses, a pinprick of white gold at the centre of each. They gave the impression of blazing eyes staring out from the colossal coil of crimson, as if a scarlet dragon had curled up against the blackness of Space itself.

Leonard’s headache disappeared. He no longer cared if he was dead or alive or something in between. He wanted nothing more than to float into this scene of merciless beauty, to feel the deathly cold and the scorching heat, to laugh with the light of a hundred thousand million stars in his eyes.

“There!” cried River, pointing uselessly into the dark.

Leonard squinted. Much planetary debris remained, ice and rock collecting, turning and twisting in vast asteroid belts, which circled ever closer to the greater mass. From the TARDIS, they looked like clouds of speckled silver and resembled a murmuration being pulled across the sky by a high wind. Right in the centre, between the debris, one little burnt-orange planet was hanging like a discarded cricket ball, caught directly between the two formidable forces, and illuminated by fiery death.

“Zia,” breathed the Doctor, feeling some pride at the sight of this little survivor. “She’s still there.”

“Not for long,” said River, reading her scanner. “No life signs at all. Not surprising. But breathable atmosphere below the surface.” River’s voice trembled. “Doctor, they did it! Some kind of immense oxygen garden the size of France. And miles of low oxygen beyond that.”

“Low-oxygen archive,” said the Doctor morosely. He hated to think of the riches they couldn’t possibly save.

River continued to scan. “Multiple tremors all over the planet. She’s in her death throes.”

The Doctor ran back to the main console. “There’s time. Not much, but the planet should hold, as long as the quakes aren’t too deep.”

“You can’t be serious!” challenged River.

“If I fly her directly into that oxygen garden, we’ll be safe.”

“For how long!?”

“A bit! I don’t know. Few hours. Long enough to see something. Anything. I can set the failsafe to transport us directly back here at the first sign of planetary collapse. The cloister bell will give us enough notice.”

While the Doctor adjusted various settings, Leonard looked at the monitor and the magnified view of Zia. Even in the darkness, the planet looked like the arid surface of Mars. Across Zia’s vast continents were many glinting structures, appearing like scattered broken glass. The Doctor explained this would have been solar panels harvesting the available solar energy: fields of them, pyramids of them, and it was under one such pyramid that River had found the very last breathable space in this world.

The TARDIS landed deep within the trembling earth. Together, they stepped into a cavernous underground of high ceilings, marble obelisks, walls of sea-green coral and corridors of complex digital panels. River headed to the main computer, sonic screwdriver in hand, while the others explored. First, they saw the plants, then they saw the tunnels, then they saw the miles of computers, then they saw the vaults – teeming with objects and treasured possessions. It was less than an hour, but to Leonard it was a lifetime.

Rory stuck close to Amy as they explored the chambers. She had the distinct feeling she’d been there before. A familiar layout, even being so alien. “So, we’re inside a pyramid?” she asked, while the Doctor examined a jade sarcophagus. “How far down?”

“The pyramid visible on the surface is like the tip of the iceberg,” explained the Doctor, tapping the jade and looking around. “This pyramid goes down for miles.”

Leonard could have sworn the walls were breathing. The curved carvings resembled bronchial tubes. He watched as they swelled rhythmically, slowly, and the sounds were so similar to the TARDIS. It had a lulling effect.

Amy rubbed her arms as she also watched the tubes. “The Pyramid’s alive. How is it alive?” she murmured. Rory peered closer, then with a shudder, put his arms around her.

The Doctor placed his hand on a wall. It was so much like his ship. He understood.

“They found a way to replicate photosynthesis, even without their sun. This entire underworld is breathing like a giant plant, feeding off carbon dioxide from outside, transforming it, and filling the chambers with oxygen. It’s very low now, but they figured out how to preserve it for centuries.”

“Then why’d they die?” asked Amy, instantly regretting the question.

“Food,” said River sadly, appearing from a corridor. “And their cryogenic technology failed some time ago.” A terrible quiet engulfed them, and the laboured breathing of the remarkable structure was the only sound.

Leonard heard ringing in his ears. “Were they human?” he asked anyone. “I’m assuming they were like us, at least.”

“Homo Reptilia,” answered the Doctor. “Humanoids of the reptilian variety.”

“Silurian?” asked Rory.

“Not quite,” said River. “The Zians were a sister race. More telepathic.” She was deeply affected. As an archaeologist she knew what was about to be lost better than any of them.

The Doctor went to her side and squeezed her hand, continuing to explain to his companions. “What the Silurians might have been if they’d had the Earth to themselves, plus a thousand other factors, genetic and environmental, and luck. Terrible, terrible luck.”

Leonard shook his head, trying to take it all in. “But you said this was a golden civilisation.”



The Doctor smiled. “It was. They learned how to live sustainably, brilliantly, because they had to. Their bad luck made them this. This triumphant world, born out of adversity. They bested the universe, corralled the conditions for life. But nothing beats entropy. Their own stars deserted them.”

Leonard listened to the Doctor. His words were like something out of a heart-breaking lullaby that told stories from long ago with dark forewarnings. And this man was looking at him now, scrutinising him. Those were the eyes of much older man. Leonard bristled. “Can we save anything? Anything at all?” he asked.

Amy and Rory looked hopefully to River and the Doctor.

“I scanned the datacore,” said River. “It’s five yottabytes of data. Even to transfer one yottabyte to the TARDIS would take weeks.”

“What’s a yodabyte?” asked Rory, frowning deeply.

“Yottabyte,” corrected the Doctor. “Just one yottabyte is more data than will exist on planet Earth for centuries. In your time it would take over eighty trillion years to download.”

Leonard walked up to him, finding a spark of fight. “But you said the TARDIS houses whole other dimensions. Surely there’s space.”

“It’s not that,” explained River. “If you think of the TARDIS as an external hard drive, she’s big enough. It’s the speed of transferring it from a computer the size of a city that’s the issue.”

The Doctor held out his hand for the sonic, which River placed in his palm. He scanned the machine and checked the sonic screwdriver for indications. He stared at it, but instead of wonder, his face filled with pain. “We’re too late,” he confirmed softly.

A deep rumble and moderate tremor shook the chamber, dust falling from the ceiling.

“We’re leaving,” he said, in a tone that made Leonard shoulders fall back. The team began to reluctantly return to the TARDIS, but Leonard stayed rooted where he was.

“We’re leaving it behind?” rasped Leonard. “All this knowledge? All this science?”

“We have to,” said the Doctor firmly. “Come on.”

“Surely we can take something with us!” The Doctor felt the pain in Leonard’s voice as if it were coursing through his own veins. He turned and looked at the old man. He was like a child that had been brought to a funfair only to find it closed.

River saw it too. “Doctor, there’s still time. I can try to get something with the sonic. Anything. And perhaps we can at least salvage something from the vaults.”

There was another light tremble.

“River, this planet is about to die and take us with it,” said the Doctor.

“Not yet. You said the TARDIS would give us due warning. Fifteen minutes. Please.”

“All right!” the Doctor replied. “Have it your way, tourists. Grab something that speaks to you and do it quickly.” He looked very seriously at all of them. “If you’re not back in the TARDIS when the failsafe is triggered, you’ll be left behind on a planet that’s about to be torn apart like a bread roll. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Amy, Rory and Leonard went in and out of various caverns and chambers as the walls quivered and wheezed, while River and the Doctor quarrelled over the settings on the sonic. The screwdriver blurted out high-pitched warbling before settling contentedly on a buzzing frequency. It was unclear what it was downloading or how long it would take, but something was happening. The Doctor gave River a grave look, which she returned, and he put his hand on hers.

Like a great museum, there were floors and floors of artefacts. Ground-breaking inventions, photographs of special events, all kinds of art, children’s toys, tools of skilful craft and detailed workmanship, stacks of film and literature, instruments, clothing through the ages, handmade crockery and jewels. Amy picked up what looked like a vase, but was given a vision of dead flowers and a sense of grief. It wasn’t her grief. It was someone else’s. She looked at Rory who was holding a scroll.

He blinked at the alien calligraphy. Gradually, the golden lettering was being rearranged by the TARDIS translation matrix, but the English words that appeared were nonsensical.

Rory shivered. “I’m thinking in an alien language,” he said, as Amy put a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t know how, but...” he put the scroll down experiencing an unusual clarity. “Amy, these things aren’t ours, and they never could be.”

“I know,” said Amy, who had felt this too. “It’s not for us. We should go.”

“Doctor,” said Amy as they returned. River was still transferring files to the sonic while the Doctor paced. “It’s like these things don’t want us to take anything,” said Amy. “They made us feel like we shouldn’t be touching them.”

“Psychic lock,” said the Doctor, working it out and finding it rather sweet. “A telepathic race protecting their personal effects.” He looked pleased with himself for a moment, until he realised someone was missing.

“Leonard?” The Doctor looked at the Ponds darkly. “Where is he?” he asked with a note of threat.

“We thought he came back here,” said Amy, grimacing.

“Have you lost my guest on a planet that’s about to break in half?”

Amy and Rory looked at each other, then back at the Doctor, who stalked past them. As he did, he gestured to the jade coffin.

“Sit,” he ordered. “Naughty step. Don’t move.”

“Doctor, it’s a sarcophagus,” said Amy weakly, but the Doctor was already tearing down a tunnel.

Looking at it all, Leonard realised it was impossible. Here was a planet of possessions, but no one to tell the stories or pass on the lessons. He stood, paralysed by it all. *Just one thing*, he thought. He found himself wandering along a smaller network of tunnels to a more intimate space, and went into a cavern that might have been a bedroom. There was a mirror on a stand, a vanity mirror ornately adorned with amber and exquisite carvings. Every atom of it was full of love and attention. It hummed with life, and he thought he heard it whisper.

He was reminded of Helen, sitting there in the mornings. Make-up, cup of coffee, radio on. He’d stand in the bedroom doorway watching her and sipping his tea. He’d watch her make herself presentable. She didn’t know he was watching. She was singing to herself, ignoring the time. He would get restless about how long she was taking. He hadn’t realised how much he loved those moments until she was gone.

A tremor rattled the chamber. He quickly dashed forward to get the mirror that was on the brink of toppling over, and for a moment, an alien face looked back at him -

an expression he couldn't read, a whole world beyond his understanding. He realised, then, that it wasn't his to take.

Another quake, this time frighteningly loud, and deep within the earth. The TARDIS cloister bell echoed throughout the tunnels. The floor rumbled and didn't stop rumbling. He heard the Doctor bellowing his name, plus rushed footsteps. The floor jerked and mirror fell from the table. As it did, he was sure he saw Helen's face just before the glass shattered. His heart broke with it.

"Leonard!" The Doctor was now in the doorway. "We have to go!"

But Leonard didn't move. He was rigid with fury. "You can't take it with you," he spat, turning to shout at the Doctor. "Was that the lesson? For this silly old man?!"

The Doctor paled. "What? No! Leonard this wasn't deliberate! It's not personal."

Leonard trembled. "Tell me what you know, child, of age, of illness, of death."

The Doctor came further into the room, the cloister bell still sounding. "Trust me, I am not as young as I look."

Leonard faced him. Both the same height, they were eye to eye and the Doctor saw the tears that had been stuck there for so very long.

"My age is all I have left of me," said Leonard his voice strained. "An eccentric old man, hoarding any old rubbish, lining my own tomb!"

When the Doctor clasped Leonard's elbows and spoke slowly, kindly, dangerously. "That's not what I saw, Leonard. I saw a treasured collection. I saw what those things meant to you. This is not some sort of exposure therapy. This is not correctional. I didn't know what we would find. *Please*, we need to go."

"My daughter won't visit. She's embarrassed by me, the house. I don't see my grandson. They don't understand. They don't understand why I need to fill the house. It's because they're not there that I need to fill it!"

"Then tell them," said the Doctor sharply. "Come back with me, and we'll explain what this is."

"But what is it?" asked Leonard, bewildered. The rumbling was getting louder.

“Grief,” the Doctor answered, the word resonating powerfully. Leonard’s mind finally fell still. Was that all?

A strong quake jolted them together with a terrible boom as the ceiling caved and Leonard found himself dashing out of the way.

“There,” said the Doctor, sensing a new compliance and pulling Leonard into the corridor. “Instinct. Bet you’ve missed that. Now. When was the last time you ran?”

The TARDIS cloister bell vibrated through the collapsing pyramid. The caverns shook hard.

“Inside!” shouted the Doctor at Amy and Rory, practically pushing them and Leonard into the TARDIS. He turned. River was still tampering with the sonic which was inserted into a panel.

“River, now!” boomed the Doctor.

“It’s almost done!”

“There isn’t time!” The Doctor ran over to River, fully prepared to drag her away, but the sonic chirped.

“Transfer complete!” cried River. They sprinted inside a moment before the doors automatically locked and emergency protocols put them in flight.

As the TARDIS de-materialised, the underworld collapsed. The jade sarcophagus sank into the stone and the soil. The electrical hum fell silent as the panels shorted and shattered, and the coral walls fell silent. Darkness tumbled into darkness.

They were returned to the safety of the nebula. From the old blue doors, they watched. The planet surrendered. Her ancient crust cracked open and the stories of countless dead worlds and continents spilled from her. She broke apart, her fiery core exposed and instantly extinguished, her mantle lost. Her billion fragments twirled like spiralling seeds in one last act of rebellious joy as they flew into the unforgiving black. The dancing debris was now all that remained of the eighty-seven planets.

Amy cried quietly while Rory held her tight. River was lost in thought, but her hand reached for the Doctor’s. Leonard felt warm tears roll down his thin cheeks. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he said. “And the worst.”

The Doctor shrugged, though he hid his face as he did so. “Often the way. Birth. Death. Brutal stuff.”

“Such a waste,” said Amy.

“Nothing is wasted,” said the Doctor. “It had its time. The instinct to hold onto things is universal, but in the end, always futile.” He went to Leonard and put a warm hand on his shoulder. “You thought I was trying to shame you. I wasn’t. I just thought a little trip might lift your spirits.”

River sighed and gave Leonard an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry my husband took you to see the death of a planet,” she said. “He can’t always read the room.”

Leonard chuckled. “It’s quite all right,” he said to her. “I’m glad he did.”

River moved with purpose to the console. “We do have this,” she said, jamming the sonic into its corresponding dock. “The connection kept dropping. All I could get in the end was a single music file. One song to sum up a civilisation.”

The TARDIS filled with so much sound, an all-embracing tune and resonant base that felt so familiar. Memories of a perfect summer day, a youthful misadventure, a night talking with friends, flooded their senses. Freedom throbbed in their hearts. They listened, each hearing an unfettered happiness from long ago, or possibly tomorrow.

“Psychic music?” murmured Amy to Rory. “It’s making me feel something I never felt.”

“Me too,” whispered Rory. “Plenty of our music does the same thing, to be fair.”

“What is this, Doctor?” asked Leonard. “How can I be nostalgic for a song I’ve never heard, from a world I never knew?”

“Same universe,” mused the Doctor with a shrug. “All vibrations in the end. Same tones and rhythms. Same highs and lows. Same ecstasies and agonies. Same concept behind a melody, or a name. Isn’t that so, Ponds? River Song?”

“Sentimental old fool,” replied River fondly. She was more moved by the music than she cared to admit and was refusing to look at him. The Doctor smirked.

The TARDIS materialised on Nonsuch beach mid-afternoon in the warm sun. In the end it was Rory who suggested that Leonard clear one room in the house to make it

visitor friendly, and that he and his dad would come by to help get some things to charity shops, or specialist collectors. Leonard had blushed, sincerely grateful, but feeling like an admonished teen over an untidy bedroom.

The Doctor sat with him quietly on the sand. “You’ve not done anything wrong, Leonard,” he said gently. “We’re all dysfunctional in some way, especially in grief. It’s not your dysfunction, but your shame around it, that’s keeping you disconnected from the world. Your grandson won’t care. He’ll just want to see you. As for your daughter, she’s probably just worried.”

Leonard felt the irascibility rise in him at the frustrating wisdom of the younger man. “How old are you?” he asked. “You have the confidence of an emperor and the face of a boy.”

“Haven’t you worked that out yet?” the Doctor asked him.

Leonard gave a wry smile. “The youngest among you are somehow the elder.”

“Sort of,” the Doctor agreed.

“Well, I suppose that makes me a kind of infant.”

“We all are, at the end of the day.”

“But you’re in charge for some reason?”

“For some reason, yes.”

“I can see how it weighs on you.”

At that, the Doctor stood, grateful to see Amy and Rory approaching barefoot and carrying their shoes. “Ponds?” he ventured. They looked like they were going somewhere, and he didn’t like it.

“River’s waiting for you in the TARDIS,” said Amy. “But we’re going to enjoy the seaside, Doctor. Walk up the coast. Have a normal weekend for a few hours.”

“Oh,” said the Doctor, more disappointed than he let on. “If that’s your sort of thing.”

Leonard stayed seated on the sand and tried to observe the curious interaction while feigning interest in a seashell. His feet throbbed inside the hot confines of his leather shoes, and he wiggled his toes with difficulty.

Rory looked at the Doctor soulfully. “You can come with us.”

“No,” said the Doctor with a grimace. “I don’t see the point of this boring beach. There aren’t even any donkey rides. You two pop along and do what couples do.” He waved them off dramatically, and only Leonard saw a colder light gleam in his eye.

Amy giggled as she stumbled in the sand. “We’ll build you a sandcastle. A sand TARDIS, even.”

The Doctor pointed his finger at her sternly. “No, you won’t, Pond. No more messages in the sand or in cornfields. Stay discreet. I know where to find you.”

Amy pulled a face at him, then grinned. Rory gave both the Doctor and Leonard a respectful nod, and the Ponds began wending their way up the beach.

“Just another old man,” mumbled the Doctor to himself, watching them go. “Unable to prevent the sands of time falling away.”

Leonard stood. He placed his hand firmly on the Doctor’s shoulder. The disarmed Time Lord met Leonard’s sincere gaze, and a broken sorrow danced between them. Seawater rushed in over the sand and frothed and bubbled back out again. They listened to it, together, for a few century-long seconds. Leonard smiled and took them both to a new moment.

“Thank you for that hair-raising adventure, Doctor,” he said, with a half-smile. “I shall enjoy my boring beach all the more now, and every peaceful morning when the world isn’t ending.”

The Doctor snorted. He patted Leonard on the arm. “I know you will,” he rasped, before making his way across the sand to the TARDIS and opening the door. He turned and gave Leonard the warmest smile he could find. “Enjoy all your future chapters, Leonard.”

Leonard watched as the Doctor disappeared into the blue box. He watched as the blue box disappeared from the beach. He thought of all the things in his life that had come in and out of existence. The strong sun cupped his face, the last days of summer vying for attention. Suddenly, his shoes felt far too small.



Abruptly sitting back down, he unlaced them impatiently, and tugged off the unforgiving leather. Next came the clinging, navy socks. He allowed his toes to spread in the cool, gritty sand, his reddened, patterned skin glad for the fresh air. He chuckled to himself, feeling boyish for the first time in so very long. Gracelessly, he stood once more. Shoes and socks in one hand, and with one hand in his pocket, he ambled home to make a long, overdue phone call.