

## A Blink of Time The End

The vibration started as a deep rumble, coming from deep within the heart of the ship. It seemed to erupt from the depths in waves, each one stronger and louder than the last. The rumbles were peppered with groans and creaks; the sounds of metal and wood walls and structures being twisted and bent beyond their capacity to remain whole. In the background of the cacophony, a deep, throbbing sound reverberated at regular intervals – like the combination of a metallic gong and church bell, but something that also sounded eerily artificial and mechanical in origin. The Cloister Bell. It was the death knell of the ship.

“Professor, hurry!” The sound of the woman’s voice echoed down the corridor and through the open doorway to a twenty foot square room where a man lay prone next to an unmoving, giant crank shaft that took up the bulk of the space in the center of the room. Her voice was nearly drowned out by the sounds of the ship tearing itself apart, but the panic creeping into her voice was clear.

The man known as the Professor was lying next to an open panel at the base of the crank shaft. The dark steel machine was in stark contrast to the plain white walls that surrounded it, and looked to be something that would have been more at home in an 19<sup>th</sup> Century industrial factory. However, the form it took belied its true nature, and was only one of many forms it could, and had taken. Such was the nature of one of the engine components to the ship that was known as the TARDIS - an acronym for Time and Relative Dimensions in Space. The interior workings revealed by the open panel showed more of the true nature of the ship – electronic wires and micro-computer components. The Professor cursed in some obscure alien language and reached inside an interior pocket of his knee-length brown tweed coat and pulled out a four inch long metal cylinder topped with a round lavender colored crystal.

He pointed the cylinder at an exposed circuit board within the open control panel and used his thumb to slide a small activator on the device, causing the crystal to glow. The accompanying high pitch whirl of the device was drowned out by the sounds of the ship. After a few moments, the crankshaft began to turn, the slow screeching of metal upon metal adding to the din. It then stopped, causing the Professor to issue another curse in another language. He propped himself up on one hand to look over the edge of the base into the pit that housed the workings of the shaft itself. The Cloister Bell chimed again.

“I’ll have to re-route power from the shields,” the Professor said to himself as he rose to his feet. This time it was spoken in his native tongue – that of a human born on the planet called Earth by its native inhabitants, in the country of the United States of America around the time near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by human reckoning.

He walked over to the plain white wall that was opposite of the doorway and placed his palm flat up against it at eye level. A small hidden panel opened up under his hand with a slight click. The Professor swung the panel outward to reveal a digitized control panel in the recess, and began to input commands on the small keyboard beneath an illuminated screen. The TARDIS jolted as another wave of vibrations and sounds coursed through the ship, causing him to lose his balance slightly.

This elicited another shout of “Professor!” from the unseen woman, the panic more pronounced.

“Come on, old girl, hold together for a little bit longer,” he said as he finished inputting the last command and turned to watch the crank shaft. “One more moment!” he shouted out towards his companion. “We’re almost there!”

A smile crept into his face as the crank shaft began to turn once more, at first slowly and still accompanied by the screeching, but then little by little, it spun faster and faster until it became nearly a blur and the screeching subsided as the self-lubricators kicked in.

“Now, Jacenia! Now!” He shouted to the woman. Then quietly, once more to himself, “And hope we don’t run into anything.”

At that moment the TARDIS was jolted so abruptly and violently that the Professor was thrown into the air and right towards the spinning machinery. The Cloister Bell rang once more, but this time the sound seemed to deepen and stretch out into infinity. As the Professor’s body was hurled towards the engine, its movement seemed to begin to slow down in that strange phenomenon that humans experience during times of impending disaster in what Time Lords call a blink of time. A living being’s eternity could pass through their mind in that moment, and the Professor saw every detail of the spinning crank shaft as his body floated towards it and his eyes performed that involuntary maneuver.

Blink.

His vision blurred and the whiteness of the Engine room was replaced with that of soft overhead lighting in a large open room with a light colored hardwood floor. To his right, set against one wall of the room was a large hospital bed surrounded by various instruments and panels. A large blue curtain had been drawn across the room opposite from where the Professor was standing. To his left, against the other wall was a small basinet with a heat lamp and readout screen above it, as well as a small built-in desk and chair. Closer to the wall behind him was a large lounge chair rocker. The wall behind the Professor was taken up by large floor to ceiling windows, the blinds of which had been adjusted for privacy, but still allow for the natural sunlight to permeate the room.

On the bed lay a woman clothed in a hospital gown and panting heavily. Her long auburn hair was plastered to her forehead with sweat. Her feet were placed in stirrups at the end of the bed, pushing up on her legs so that her knees were separated and raised. Between the woman’s feet sat an older female doctor. On one side stood a nurse, monitoring the equipment and tending to the woman. On the other side, with his back to the Professor, was a dark haired man holding the woman’s hand and one leg. The room hummed with the sounds of the equipment, but over the din was the sound of a rapid heartbeat echoing from a pair of round speakers that were tucked into a cloth elastic support around the woman’s distended belly.

“You’re doing really well, Elizabeth,” the doctor told her in a gentle voice. “She’s starting to crown. Only a couple more pushes and she’ll be out.”

“OK ... OK ... I’m ready,” Elizabeth replied.

She tensed, face screwed up in the effort of pushing, as a long deep grunt escaped her lips.

“That’s it baby,” the man told her. “I can see her head moving. She has a ton of hair!”

“She has hair?” Elizabeth said breathlessly after she had finished pushing.

“Yeah, a full head of it,” the man replied. It was only just now that the Professor recognized the man’s voice as his own.

The attending nurse took a look at the baby’s head for herself. “Did you have a lot of heart burn while you were pregnant?” she asked.

Elizabeth nodded. “Oh my God, yes.”

“You know, a couple of our friends mentioned something about that,” the Professor heard his younger self say. “I guess that old wives’ tale is true.”

The nurse was about to reply when the rhythmic sound of the baby’s heartbeat began to fade. The nurse looked to her monitors while the doctor looked up at her, not speaking, but a look in her eyes that signaled a potential problem. The Professor hadn’t noticed it then, back when he was his younger self in that room, but this time he saw both the nurse and doctor tense slightly. The nurse attempted to adjust the speakers on Elizabeth’s stomach to place them in a better position with which to pick up the baby’s heartbeat.

The Professor saw his younger self move his head to look first at the nurse then at the doctor. He recalled an unspoken question on his lips and a cold feeling of fear creeping into his body.

“OK, we need you to push, Elizabeth,” the doctor told her. “One more deep push to get her out.”

The nurse looked at the younger Professor. “It’s OK,” she tried to reassure him. “We lose the signal sometimes. She’s almost done. One more good push, honey.” That last directed at Elizabeth as she continued to reposition the speakers.

Blink.

It was pitch black, and there was a steady sound of static filling the Professor’s ears. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust and he realized the static was the sound of a steady rain pouring down around him. Through the darkness he could tell he was on a wide dirt, now mud, trail surrounded by a mixed forest of evergreen and deciduous trees. The gloom was lightened slightly by a dim glow coming from the windows of a wooden slat covered cabin at the end of the trail. The Professor noticed that the cabin had a covered front deck and he thought to use that as shelter from the storm until he realized that despite the downpour, he was completely dry. However, the thought of shelter was shared by two others who had come into view from another trail to the right of the cabin.

They ran up onto the porch, and from the dim light the Professor noticed that it was a man and a woman, both appearing to be in their early 20’s. The woman stood near the doorway, arms hanging slightly out from her body as she let the rainwater drip from her soaking wet blouse, and shivered. The man shook his arms and hands, sending his own drops of water flying everywhere.

“Well, this isn’t exactly how I planned this evening to go,” the man said, in a voice well known to the Professor, as it was his own.

“That’s just our luck, I guess,” the woman responded. The voice he recognized as that of the woman giving birth in the hospital room.

“So much for a nice quiet weekend by the lake,” the younger Professor said.

Elizabeth moved towards him and draped her arms on his shoulders, caressing the back of his head with her hands. “It can still be nice and quiet,” she said. “It’ll just have to be in doors, perhaps by the fireplace.” A knowing smile creased her face.

The younger Professor returned the smile before leaning down and gently kissing his companion. They broke off as a flash of lightning lit up the area followed almost immediately by the crashing boom of thunder, causing both of them to jump in surprise. A second or so later, there was another flash, but this one much farther off, behind where the older Professor stood.

“Maybe not so quiet,” Elizabeth said. “We had better get inside ... what is it?”

Her question prompted by the younger Professor turning his head and looking out into the woods, down the trail where the older Professor stood quietly.

“I thought I saw something out there, but it probably was just a trick of the lightning.”

Elizabeth looked out as well, a slight frown of concern crossing her face. “Let’s go inside.”

“OK,” the younger Professor said, “But first thing’s first.”

He knelt down on one knee while taking one of her hands in his and reaching into his pants’ pocket to withdraw a small black velvet box. “I’m not going to let a little rain put the dampers on my plan.”

Elizabeth drew her hands up to cover her gaping mouth as the younger Professor opened the box to reveal a glittering diamond ring.

Blink.

He was back in the TARDIS, but not in the engine room. The room in which he found himself had walls that formed a pentagon. Instead of the usual roundels that peppered many of the common rooms of the TARDIS, this one had the walls covered in a light, airy white fabric. Each wall was faintly illuminated in a different color – blue, red, green, white, and yellow, with the only door in the center of

the white wall. Instead of the usual background hum and vibration that could be heard and felt throughout the TARDIS, this room was deathly silent, and there were no furnishings of any kind. This was the Zero Room.

However, he found that he was not alone. In the center of the room were a man and a woman leaning over the form of a third person who was lying on the floor. Though the pair appeared human, the style and composition of their clothing marked them as coming from a world other than Earth. They were strangers to him, though he felt he should know who they were. He wondered where Jacinia was, and if she was all right. The Professor shifted his position slightly to get a better view of the person lying on the floor, as the woman began to speak.

"I thought this was supposed to help him." Like her clothes, she has a particular lilt to her speech that marked her as alien.

"Perhaps the damage is too severe," her male companion replied with the same lilt. "At least he seems to be breathing better."

"At least he's still breathing at all," the woman said as she knelt down next to the figure on the floor and dabbed at his head with a white cloth that appeared to have several large red stains on it.

The Professor stared at the figure and saw that it was a man dressed in the same clothes that he currently wore himself, but in disarray – the jacket torn and burned in several places, as were the pants. As the woman dabbed, he saw his own face – battered and bruised, with blood running down his face from several nasty gashes spread around his forehead and cheeks.

"Maybe it might take more time," the male companion said.

The Professor saw his injured self move slightly, and a groan escaped from his doppelganger's lips, before speaking faintly, "Time ... not yet ... not ready."

Suddenly, a white glow began to form around the injured Professor's hands and face. It was not a light from the room, but appeared to be coming from underneath his skin. His body began to vibrate suddenly, and there was a faint crackle of energy as the glow began to get brighter and obscure his features. Then a sound began to fill the room. It was quiet, but persistent, and sounded much like the Time Rotor of the TARDIS during takeoff and landing.

"What's happening?" the woman asked, alarm in her voice.

"I'm not sure," her male friend replied, "but I think we should get back." He started to step away from the Professor and grabbed his companion's arm to pull her back with him.

The Professor watched as the white energy expended by his dying body increased outwards to fill the room. He instinctively raised a hand to shield his eyes and jerked back as the whiteness came towards him and enveloped him. When he lowered his hand, he found himself ... nowhere. He may have still have been in the Zero Room, or it could have been a completely different room, as he could see no walls, no ceiling, nor the floor. Everywhere around him was just white. He was clearly standing upon something, but could not feel the floor under his feet as he took a few tentative steps.

The Professor then had the feeling that he was being watched, and turned around to be faced with a row of thirteen men standing a dozen paces away. From the corner of his eyes he then detected more figures to the left and right, and, upon turning his head to look at the other newcomers, saw that another thirteen men has materialized opposite of the first group. At first, he had trouble discerning features on the figures, other than that all were male, almost like there was a thin veil of fog between him and the others.

Then one figure from each row stepped a couple of paces closer to the Professor, causing the veil to be lifted from three of the four rows of men. The faces of the last row of men to appear remained veiled. However, he still recognized the figure of the one who stepped forward as it was wearing the same clothes that the Professor wore.

"Well, you certainly have done it now, my boy, haven't you?" the figure behind him said.

The Professor turned around to see the face of the man who spoke, though he already knew what he would see; the voice being a familiar one from his past. There, the form of the Doctor faced him – the first incarnation – chin raised slightly and hands on the lapels of his black jacket, his eyes beholding him with that look of superiority that he had always carried about him. Behind the Doctor silently stood the figures of his other twelve incarnations.

“The inevitable conclusion for when you send a human to perform a Time Lord’s duties.” The voice came from the man to the Professor’s right. Again, another voice he recognized from his past, but with anger and hatred as opposed to the fondness he felt for the Doctor. He turned to face the first incarnation of the Time Lord who called himself the Master. Like the Doctor, the Master’s twelve other selves stood silently behind their forbearer.

“Come now, you can’t be too hard on him. After all, his best work is yet to come.” This time the voice coming from behind him was unfamiliar, though he felt he should recognize it. The Professor turned to be faced with an older man (though not quite as old as the First Doctor) dressed in the dark robes of a monk’s habit. The face seemed to be one he recalled in passing from his time on Gallifrey.

“Where am I, and what’s going on?” The Professor asked, as he turned slightly to view his veiled doppelganger, thus far the only one who had not spoken.

The Master snorted, as if it was a question that need not have been asked. However, it was the Doctor that spoke up. “We are at a very special conjunction. We are nowhere, and yet we are everywhere and in every time.”

“The four of us play a special part in the Time and Space continuum,” the Monk chimed in. “You are the last piece to arrive. Now things can proceed as planned.”

The Professor looked back at the Monk. “Plan for what?”

The Master barked a short laugh. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

A thought occurred to the Professor and he turned to face the row of his other selves and changed his line of questioning. “I can see all of you clearly. Why can’t I see myself?”

“Because your future is still yet undecided, my boy.” This from the Doctor.

The Professor turned to ask the Doctor another question, but was stopped by a voice that was his own.

“The time has come to begin and for us to return to the beginning.”

The Professor turned to face his doppelganger again and ...

Blink.