

A Time To Sleep

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Rating: PG (might be sad, though...)

Summary: On the eve of his eleventh face and life, the Doctor knew he needed to see River Song one last time. See *his wife* once more before he departed.

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A/N: Still disturbed by the news of Matt Smith leaving this year, I woke up this morning with the thought that I want his Doctor to say goodbye to River, a proper goodbye. I am in the strange position to ship both Whouffle (Clara/Eleven) AND River/Eleven, though I recognize that it is most probably River he loves with all his heart(s). For obvious reasons. So this is a little scenario of what could happen, in my imagination (and hope).

He knew he wasn't supposed to come here again. He knew it was too dangerous. He also knew she wouldn't approve.

He didn't care.

In around a thousand years of living, he'd felt the sensation that engulfed his body right before regeneration every so often. Sometimes he'd been able to prevent it; once he had even created a second him. But in those ten times he couldn't avoid changing the strongest need he had always felt was to say goodbye to those he loved. Who had become important to him; to his recent face and life.

Never before had that desire been so demanding. Never before had someone managed to form that close a bond either. She sure had fought for it, with an irresistibly strong will that had ever since fascinated him. All those people travelling with him, he had loved them dearly; they were his friends, and some of them had become family. One or two he had even felt more for than he should ever have; than he knew he could give, in the end.

But she had always been more - and she wouldn't have accepted less.

On the eve of his eleventh face and life, the Doctor knew he needed to see River Song one last time. See *his wife* once more before he departed.

The Library was as empty as he had left it - sealed for all eternity, so no one would fall victim to the Vashta Nerada still inhabiting the planet. He was glad to see that no one had ignored the warnings he had put up; too many people had been lost when they had fought the shadows, River's whole expedition giving their lives to bring back countless others.

He had always thought that even one life was a price too high to pay, no matter how many others could be saved by it.

This was the place he had first met her. When he had been so young and still oblivious, and when she had known him better than anyone else, he himself included.

The virtual world he had never visited before. Donna had been there, but she had never told much about it except for it being a pleasant enough world. Still not reality though; still not the life good people were supposed to lead. A life on hold; a *saved* life that would never stop.

So when he entered this world and took in his surroundings, he was surprised, and then not, to find it as paradisiacal as it was. If one had to spend an eternity here, it better had to be a lovely environment. And yet it felt wrong; like a stopover on a journey that would never be finished.

This was where a thousand and one worlds came together. He assumed that every inhabitant, every conscience or maybe soul, saw what they liked to see. It was only but a projection, even if it felt so real.

In the end, it was an illusion - making the lost souls stored here believe they were still alive where they had been long gone. Or should have.

And even him, who was still alive, this world was leading; he felt how it brought him to his destination. Logged on to his mind, it knew who he was looking for, and in just the blink of an eye his surroundings from where he'd entered transformed until he came to stand in the garden of a beautiful mansion.

Not far away was a small, private playground, enthusiastically occupied by three children. And amidst the lush green grass, on a blanket, she sat. She looked happy there, watching the children, laughing with them - having the life he could never have given her.

He approached her slowly, coming to stand a few steps behind her; curiously noticing that the children seemed to look right through him. But then, he guessed, were they only a fantasy, a dream she had conjured up so she wouldn't be alone.

The thought hurt more than he would have ever thought possible.

"River," he said quietly, making her whirl around, eyes widened in wonder.

"You fool," were her first words, and he couldn't help but smile - he hadn't expected anything else from her. "What are you doing---" And she knew. He could see it in her eyes. He could see it in the tears forming in them.

"I'm dying," he nevertheless replied as she got up, and willingly enclosed her hand in his when she stepped up to him.

"I'm so sorry, Sweetie."

"Don't be." And for the first time since he'd met her, all those years of his life back, he pulled her into an embrace, holding on to her body; to the woman who'd become so familiar to him, even though she was still and would always be a riddle.

It must have been another lifetime when he drew back; but only enough to be able to face her. And to kiss her - with all the love he could never voice, because even now it hurt too much to face the reality of his feelings for this woman who had changed his life in so many ways; a woman who, just a for a moment, had made him believe that maybe he could have a family again, a normal life, one in which he wouldn't have to run from his demons any longer.

Alas, it was never going to stop; it would always be like this, and he knew it. What he had done could never be excused, and what was haunting him would never rest, nor would it let him rest; he had made his decision and he had to live with it forevermore, and with the pain and loneliness it brought.

Hesitantly he ended the kiss, pressing his lips to the corner of her mouth one last time, lingering a little longer than intended; he didn't want to let go. But he had to.

"You should rest now, River. Forget me. Find your peace. I don't know who I'm going to be; I don't know if I'm ever coming back."

"I will never forget you," she said then, putting a finger on his lips before he could even consider protesting, "but I understand." And she did. But it didn't mean that she wasn't hurting. She had fallen in love with this face of his, this young one that had given her more worries and sorrows than happy moments. And still he had been worth it. She had fallen in love with a man who had slowly fallen out of love with her, from the moment she'd first met him - first

in her life and timeline. She had always known this day had to come; known that one day he would leave this incarnation behind and become someone not even she knew yet. And still she could never stop loving him.

He was her wonderfully quirky and clever and yet so stupid Doctor, the man she had fought for and with, the man she would have let time die for. She had defied everything she'd been raised to be and do, she had rewritten time, made him rewrite it. She knew his secrets, and she knew his fears; she knew who he was - and that he could never stop.

But most of all, she knew his hearts, and she knew that, even though he never said it and was never going to, as much as she longed to hear it, he loved her. Different from her unconditional love, different from what she'd once been dreaming of as a young and quite naive woman, and yet so meaningful in its very own, very special way.

She wished nothing more than to be with him when he said goodbye to this world, because she knew it hurt, in more ways than one. He was afraid of the change, had always been; once he had told her about how much he dreaded leaving behind what he'd become so familiar with for many years and travels, even if with some of his faces the time had been right. But at the end of the day, it was like dying; and no one loved life as much as the Doctor.

"Where's Clara?" River suddenly asked, not being able to abandon the thought of not being able to be with her beloved when he regenerated.

"I brought her home. She is safe now."

"You should go back to her. Don't be alone when it happens." Gently she cupped his face with her hands. "And never travel alone. You need someone. Always." Then she placed another kiss on his willingly responding lips.

When she looked at him again, he considered her for a long while, his eyes never leaving hers as he took her hands from his face and kissed them. He had had many moments in his centuries of being in this universe when he had regretted leading the life he did; when he just wanted to remain and spend a bit more time with those he had grown so close to. But not even a Timelord was able to put time on hold; maybe he could travel among its many layers freely, but in the end it would always run through his hands.

"Why did you never travel with me, River?"

"One psychopath per TARDIS, remember?" He huffed lightly at that.

"I guess so. Still. There are so many things we--"

"Cherish what we had, Sweetie," she interrupted him. "And we had so much. All these memories, all these moments. I never wished for more."

"Maybe I did." The words were mumbled, barely audible; not that she needed to *hear* them. The tears that had appeared in her eyes earlier now found their way down her cheeks when she smiled at him sadly, and he let go of her hands to brush the drops away with his thumb, while his other arm went around her to hold her close. He wasn't ready to let go.

"Oh, my Doctor..." she whispered, her voice just as her eyes filled with tears, "a broken heart of mine would have been of no use to you." He wanted to answer, to say something, anything, to that. But he couldn't think of anything; and she didn't expect him to. There were no more words that needed to be spoken.

Fate had decided to let them live their lives in the wrong order; to not give them the chance to just be together, *run* together. Not for long, though. Sometimes she had thought that those glimpses she had gotten of a life with her Doctor were crueler than any final goodbye could ever have been.

And still she was glad she had had these glimpses; she had always truly cherished every single one of them. Being with the Doctor wasn't easy; it maybe was the hardest thing a heart had to take. But being without him would have been so much worse, would have made her life poorer, lonelier - loveless.

As broken as her heart was, it was also strangely strong and unbreakable, because she had been given the chance to have that time with this wonderful man. Nothing would ever be able to take that from her.

Slowly, hesitantly she noticed, the Doctor loosened his embrace, stepped back from her, looking as if it put a great strain on every single one of his muscles. He held her hand he had once again taken as long as possible, looked into her eyes, a thousand tales readable in them as he silently bid his farewell to her, his wife, his River Song.

"Goodbye, River," he said quietly - said it like he *wouldn't* come back. Couldn't. River closed her eyes for a moment, her lips trembling, betraying her where she wanted to be strong for him, because she knew it was what he needed most - someone who was strong for him, that man who was stronger than anyone else and yet so weak and breakable.

"Goodbye, my love."

And she watched him fade away, just as the world around her dissolved into nothingness.

END