**Circle 275**

“I think we're in Wales,” Ray declared as she stepped out from the TARDIS onto a bracken covered hillside. Below their landing site were the tiled roofs of a small town and the glitter of the sea all around what was not so much a hill but a high headland protecting a sweeping bay. It wasn’t anywhere she especially recognised, but it felt familiar, even so.

“I am right, aren’t I?” The Doctor emerged behind her carrying a hastily assembled contraption with huge valves and a disconcerting crackle when he turned it on.

“Yes, this is Wales. North Wales, to be exact. The settlement below is Penmaenmawr, on the Conwy coast.”

As he spoke, The Doctor was operating his contraption, which was starting to make very disconcerting whining noises.

“What IS that?” Ray demanded.

“It is a device for detecting quazic particles,” he answered unhelpfully. “There is a major source of them near here.”

“And these particles do what?” Ray queried. She wasn’t really bothered about the answer. She was in Wales, on a pleasant, sunny day. She was happy.

“Their applications are uncertain,” The Doctor answered. “There has been some research into their use in transmat technology. It has also been suggested that they might be used to force interstitial passages between dimensions. But the point is, they shouldn’t be here on Earth at all. They aren’t a natural element on this planet. The TARDIS detected the anomaly. That’s why it brought us here.”

“I see.” Of course, Ray knew they hadn’t come to Wales for her benefit. It didn’t matter. It was Wales. It felt nice to be home.

“WHEN are we here?” she asked, realising that there was nothing on the hillside to identify the era. The tiled roofs below could have been from any time from the eighteenth century onwards. Here on the hill it might be the Bronze Age or the Fifteenth century, or the Twenty-fifth century.

“1948,” The Doctor answered.

“I was ten in 1948,” Ray commented. “Strange to think of it. I'm living there down in Barry Island, following Billy around like a puppy - just as I always did.”

“Far enough away to avoid any difficulties like meeting your younger self.”

“Would that be a big problem?”

The Doctor didn’t answer her. He was looking at his strange instrument, then at a spot a few hundred yards away. Ray looked at a rudimentary camp consisting of a canvas awning over an assortment of fold out tables and chairs. Just in front of the camp there was somebody crouching in a slight depression in the bracken covered ground, a tweed covered back to them, intent on looking for something on the ground.

“That’s the source of the Quazic particles!” The Doctor made a rapid beeline for the spot where the tweed-covered back continued working, oblivious to his approach. Ray hurried after him.

“Good afternoon,” The Doctor said, raising his hat to the woman who stood and turned to him. She had a trowel in her hand and her face was dusty. She was around fifty years of age. Her face was brown and leathery from working on windy hillsides without ever thinking of a sunhat. The word ‘wiry’ described her slim body frame. One of those winds might have blown her away except for a stubborn streak indicated by the set of her jaw that kept her feet firmly on the ground.

“Good afternoon to you,” she answered. “Are you with the university? They said they'd be sending a mineralogist to look at our micro megalith.”

The lady laughed softly at her own little joke, one likely to be missed by the average passer by but eliciting a chuckle from The Doctor.

“Doctor Smith,” he said, proffering his right hand to shake while holding his contraption under his left arm. “And this is Ray, a mature student.”

Ray noticed that The Doctor didn’t specify which university they were from. The lady didn’t seem concerned with such details.

“Professor Amelia Rumford,” she answered. The name had a noticeable effect on The Doctor, who had to be nudged by Ray before he let go of her hand.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “I am delighted to meet you, Professor. I’ve heard so much about you.”

The Professor found it perfectly natural that a fellow academic would know of her. The Doctor’s widening smile was less explicable. Ray thought he looked like a Beatles fan who just got to sit next to Ringo on a plane.

“Anyway,” the Professor said, her arm sweeping around the small area of ground she was working in. “This is it. Circle 275, the smallest stone circle in Britain. So small there isn’t even a quaint local name for it.”

Ray looked with renewed interest at what she had taken to be just random stones. There were five of them in a rough circle that the petitely built Professor could cross in two strides.

“Yes, fascinating,” The Doctor remarked. “Absolutely fascinating.”

Ray wasn’t sure at first if he was being sarcastic. Then she realised that he absolutely wasn’t. This little group of stones was actually of interest to him.

“Anyway, you came at a perfect time to stop for a cup of tea and a sandwich,” the Professor said. She waved towards her little camp. She brought her new associates to sit in the shade while she poured tea from a large flask and opened a packet of sandwiches.

They were sausage sandwiches with a little mustard spread thinly. This delighted The Doctor as much as meeting Professor Rumford. Ray still wasn’t sure why.

“Have you no students working with you?” The Doctor asked.

“Usually,” she answered. “Six days a week they are busily working on the Druid's Circle up on the brow of the hill. Much more to see there. But it is Saturday afternoon. They’ve all gone off on a bus trip to Llandudno. I'm getting on happily without their chatter.”

“Students! They do make a lot of noise,” The Doctor agreed. “Universities would be so much more peaceful without them.”

Professor Rumford agreed with him before continuing her one-sided discussion of Circle 275.

“Of course, it is only unique on this island. It is remarkably similar in style to circles found in Ireland. This combination of a small size and quartz deposits is found in several parts of County Cork. As you will realise, this immediately suggests a cultural and possibly trade link across the Irish Sea.”

The Doctor said something about sea routes between bronze age Wales and Ireland to which Professor Rumford responded enthusiastically. But social archaeology was less exciting to her than geological anomalies. The particularly dense quartz deposits around which Circle 275 was built had been the focus of her interest for several days.

Ray wondered if ‘built' was actually the right word for the apparently random positioning of five unremarkable stones. And why was quartz of any interest? Surely it was a common and rather boring substance.

“Not to the people of the Bronze Age,” Professor Rumford explained. “They used it in all sorts of ways, for creating fine stone cutting tools with which they decorated their passage tombs, for making into very sophisticated jewellery... We’ve found some quite lovely quartz beadwork in burial mounds. But they also had some superstitions about places where deposits formed. Stories of fairy rings, where the human and supernatural world met are as old as these circles.”

“Interstitial portals,” The Doctor said, apparently randomly, except Ray had heard him mention that before in connection with those alien particles he had been tracking.

“Yes, you could call it that,” Professor Rumford replied before going on again about quartz deposits in Cork. Ray wondered what qualifications she needed to follow the conversation.

She let the increasingly specialised talk about stone circles wash over her and looked out over the hillside. Somewhere a dog was barking enthusiastically and a voice was calling to the animal.

Then a rabbit ran into view, possibly the source of the dog’s happiness. She watched it hop between the stones into the Circle.

And watched it vanish.

“What....” She stood up and took a step closer. The rabbit hadn’t just run away. It vanished even more surely than a magician's rabbit. There was even a sort of light effect, a twinkle, as the creature disappeared.

“We saw it, too,” said Professor Rumford at her side.

Then the dog ran up, still barking enthusiastically, tongue lolling, eyes bright, a rough haired border collie.

Ray gave a horrified cry and rushed forwards, skirting around the circle to stop the dog from following the rabbit into oblivion.

“It’s all right,” she said to the dog as she grasped its collar. “Good girl. You don’t want to go into there.”

A man ran into the strange tableaux. He looked at Ray with his dog, and then at Professor Rumford and The Doctor.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t realise there was work going on up here. I hope Bella didn’t disturb anything important. “

“Not at all,” Professor Rumford answered. “We were only concerned for her well being. I do have a habit of leaving my tools lying about. A cut from a sharp trowel would be nasty.”

“She’s a lovely dog,” Ray added, letting her go to her master. “I think the rabbit got away, though.”

“Just as well,” the dog owner admitted. “Well, sorry to have disturbed you. We'll be on our way. Good afternoon."

There were friendly words as the man and dog passed along the footpath that led uphill to the much more dramatic Druid's Circle.

“Good gracious,” Amelia said when man and dog were out of sight. “What is it all about?”

For an answer, The Doctor took up his home-made particle detector and swept the area inside Circle 275 thoroughly.

“Transporting the bunny drained the energy – for now,” he said. “It’ll be safe enough for at least twenty-four hours. Let’s pack up for the day and discuss the matter somewhere more convivial.”

“You mean the bed and breakfast we're all staying at?” Professor Rumford inquired. “Jolly good idea. I feel a little undone by events.”

The camp was easily dismantled and the burden split between three. Professor Rumford wondered if they ought to put a warning sign by Circle 275.

“That would be the certain way of getting people to walk right into it,” Ray commented. “Nothing like a ‘keep out’ sign to draw a crowd.”

“Besides,” The Doctor said when they were comfortably settled in the communal lounge of the Druid's View Guesthouse, amply supplied with tea and biscuits. “Very few humans would be affected, or even domestic pets like Bella. I noticed that her collar had little metal studs for decoration, and a buckle for fastening it.”

Both Ray and the Professor looked at him curiously.

“You mentioned fairy circle superstitions earlier,” he said to the Professor. “Traditionally there is no passage between worlds for anyone carrying iron. Actually, any metal would do but iron was obviously the common metal of old. That’s why you were always safe, Amelia. You always went to the circle with a trowel or two on your belt.”

“Why... Of course,” she admitted. “I never even realised I was protecting myself against fairy interference. “

“Not fairies,” The Doctor corrected her. “But that’s by the way. The important thing is that few people go around these days without some metal on them – a few coins, house keys, zippers on their rain macs. That’s why there aren’t dozens of missing people around here… Or not around here as the case may be.”

“Well, that’s good, then,” Ray suggested. “Its not really dangerous, after all.”

“Its very dangerous,” The Doctor contradicted. “Quazic deposits, once implanted in suitable ground grow exponentially. It was probably a single crystal millions of years ago, but now it is big enough and powerful enough to transport organic life. In a few years time it could be swallowing whole herds of sheep. In another decade the whole of that headland could be pulling in livestock, people.... Or worse, it could let something nasty through the other way.”

“Something nasty?” Amelia Rumford queried. “You don’t mean American exchange students? “

“Far worse. Legions of Zygons, Sontaran battalions, maybe even Daleks.”

Professor Rumford had never heard of any of these dangers to civilisation. Ray only knew them by reputation having heard some of The Doctor’s stories about them. Perhaps neither of them quite saw how much peril Earth might be in if The Doctor was right.

“You are talking about creatures from other worlds,” Professor Rumford said, a question rather than a statement.

“Not yet,” The Doctor admitted. “I don’t think it is strong enough yet to open portals to other worlds. The bunny will have ended up back in the Bronze Age or perhaps at some other weak point in the fabric of this dimension – Cardiff, possibly. There is a rift in time and space running right through Cardiff. “

“That explains a lot about Cardiff," Ray remarked with the authority of the only native Welsh citizen in the conversation.

“So, what are we going to do about this dimensional portal?” Professor Rumford asked.

“We?” The Doctor smiled. Later in her life and some time earlier in his, she would be just as accepting of things beyond human experience. He knew he could depend on her.

He COULD depend on her.

Whether he SHOULD was another matter. If anything should happen to her, now, before that other meeting, then the paradox would be nearly as dangerous as an unchecked quazic portal.

But even in her mid-seventies when he met her in his fourth incarnation, she was a strong-willed, utterly indefatigable woman who wouldn’t have let herself be held back because she was elderly, because she was a woman, because she was merely human.

Whatever he intended to do it would involve Professor Amelia Rumford in some capacity.

“So, what is the plan, Doctor?” Ray asked him.

The Doctor smiled wryly.

“I expect you’ve both guessed," he said. “One of us, at least, is going to go through the portal tomorrow and try to find the first crystal that landed. Once removed, Circle 275 will be a safe Bronze Age curio.”

“How will we get back if you remove the crystal?” Ray asked, logically.

“I can adapt my detection device so that it will capture the atom and then harness it as a mobile transmat. It may not work more than two or three times, but that should suffice. I just have to change any metal parts for plastic or glass. First, though, I’d better go and book us into a couple of rooms for the night, since we can’t do anything until the quazic particles have recycled.”

He was gone just long enough for Amelia Rumford to order another pot of tea. Long enough for the Professor and Ray to become fully acquainted in a way that was easy even two women of such different ages and different social worlds when left without the company of men.

It was time enough, also, for him to read the letter that was waiting for him at the reception. The letter told him something very important about their mission tomorrow.

Something that made him very glad that Ray and Amelia were firm friends, now.

When the two women came down to breakfast the next morning, they found The Doctor already on his coffee and a second round of toast. Ray wondered if he had even been to sleep or if he had just got up very early.

“I got up with the sun,” he said in answer to the unasked question. “Today is the Summer Solstice, you know. All over the northern hemisphere there are ancient sites where this day was marked. The belief was that the sun stood still in the heavens for five days starting today.”

“How could they think that?" Ray asked, between mouthfuls of cereal. “The sun rises and sets every day. They can’t have missed it.”

“Oh, you misunderstand what it means,” Amelia told her. “Most people do when they hear about it. By ‘standing still', what our ancestors meant was that the sunrise and sunset and the sun's path across the sky remained the same for those days. Where it was marked, Stonehenge, for example, special ceremonies were held. We modern humans with roofs over our heads and electric light no longer notice what was obvious in the past.”

“I see,” Ray said, feeling like her homework had been corrected by a teacher. Then she looked at what had kept The Doctor busy since the solstice dawn. It was a cube about the size of her hand. The translucent plastic appeared to have some kind of parts inside, but none of them metal.

“It is dormant, yet,” he explained. “But when the first crystal is inside it will light up rather beautifully. Pressing this button when it is brightest will make it act as a transmat. Anyone touching the cube will travel in time and possibly space.”

Amelia Rumford looked at the cube with fully believing eyes. Ray wondered why, but she couldn’t think any way to bring the subject up.

Walking up the headland in the early morning was pleasant. Ray almost forgot that they had a serious mission to fulfil, at least until The Doctor passed her his cube and started to explain how the single crystal would be attracted by the positively charged quartz inside. Then, not only would it turn the cube into a transmat device, but it would remove the danger from Circle 275.

Ray wondered why he was so anxious for her to understand how it worked. Surely it was his field of expertise?

All was quiet around Circle 275 and the more impressive Druid's Circle. It all looked perfectly harmless.

Except for the noise the cube was making as it came closer to the course of the quazic particles. Ray moved towards the Circle almost under compulsion to see what was going to happen next.

“Oh,” The Doctor exclaimed as she started to step between the stones. “I think there's something interesting here.”

He bent to look at ‘something interesting'. Ray kept moving forward into the Circle, possibly unable to hear him over the whine of the cube.

Professor Rumford reached out and touched her shoulder to draw attention to The Doctor’s distraction.

Then both women disappeared in a flash that caught the morning sunshine.

The Doctor stood up with a daisy in his hand, a perfectly ordinary daisy of no importance at all.

“Ah,” he murmured, reaching in his pocket for the letter he had picked up at the hotel reception last night. Its contents were a reassurance that he had done the right thing by letting the ladies go through the interstitial portal without him.

Ray and Amelia looked around with curiosity as well as alarm. They were clearly still on the headland, and it was still a warm, summery day, but there were crucial differences.

It was early evening rather than early morning, for a start. The sun was dropping towards the horizon out at sea. Shadows were long.

The grass and bracken around them was long, except for a well trodden path to the Druid’s Circle. That monolith was looking much newer against the sky, its uprights and cross beams set in perpendicular lines, not sloping drunkenly after thousands of years of weather battering them.

The five stones of Circle 275 looked fresher, too. They had been cut to near identical sizes and arranged neatly around the quartz deposit that was of such interest to the people who lived in this time and place.

Those people didn’t live in the village of Penmawr, at least not as Ray and Amelia knew it. There were no dwellings of any sort by the seafront. A sort of boat, possibly made of skins stretched across a wooden frame could be seen in the shallow waters, so they must live somewhere, but perhaps not so close to winter tides.

“My goodness,” Amelia said. “We’re really here. How wonderful.”

“Wonderful if we can get back,” Ray answered her. “The Doctor isn’t with us. I think he expected that to happen. That’s why he gave me the cube and told me how it should work.”

They both looked at the cube. At that very moment it made an extraordinary whine that cut off abruptly. Then it lit faintly, a soft bluish-white.

“It’s done what The Doctor said it would do,” Ray surmised. “The original single crystal was attracted to the positively charged quartz or whatever he said. Now we just have to wait for it to fully charge and we can get home.”

“Of course, he didn’t tell us how long that would take,” Amelia noted. “Though I suppose it might be difficult to know that offhand. Still, it looks a nice evening. Why don’t we stroll up to the Druid’s Circle and watch the sunset?”

That seemed like an acceptable way of spending a little time.

“You really seem to be taking all this in your stride,” Ray said as they ambled leisurely along the path trodden down by bronze age people coming to worship at the circle. “I’m used to weirdness, hanging about with The Doctor, but you... Its as if you’ve just been waiting for something like this to happen.”

“Not so much waiting as hoping," Amelia answered. “At least since I was a young woman. Nineteen-twenty-six – I was twenty-four, newly graduated. And there weren’t many women with archaeology degrees back then, I can tell you. I was with a group excavating around the standing stones called Long Meg and her Daughters – in Cumbria. We were camped for the night... It was midsummer eve and quite beautiful, and I went for a walk among the stones in the dying light of the day. Then... I saw something amazing. Suddenly there were no stones, no Long Meg. But there were men there... Rough, hairy men wearing animal skins. They were hauling the stones across country using primitive log rollers and ropes. You know how academics have always argued about how these Circles were built, often from rocks quarried hundreds of miles away. Well, there I was watching it happen. I don’t know if I’d gone back in time or if I was seeing a sort of echo of the past, but there it was, all happening in front of me. Long Meg and two of the Daughters were hauled into place before the light was gone. Then they built a bonfire and cooked haunches of meat. I could smell the burnt flesh and fat from it. Not very appetizing, I can tell you. They wee singing in a primal sort of way. No discernible words, and no tune to speak of. But it was singing. I watched and listened for a long time, then I must have fallen asleep. I woke up a bit past dawn, cold and stiff and back in nineteen-twenty-six. I walked back to the camp and made a pot of tea before anyone else was awake.

“Did you tell anyone?”

“Not a soul. Like I said. Not many women in archaeology then. Not so many now, come to that. Seeing primitive men building the stones, I’d have been finished. I just kept quiet and waited for it to happen again. I became the leading authority on standing stones of the British Isles into the bargain, despite the men. But I never stopped believing my own eyes. I never told myself it was just a dream.”

“Good for you,” Ray told her. They had reached the top of the headland and approached the Druid’s Circle.

“Don’t go up there!”

The voice that called out was a surprise. It was a modern voice speaking clear English, albeit with an American accent. Ray and Amelia looked around in astonishment to see a man whose hair and beard would have placed him in the bronze age or earlier, but who was wearing ragged remnants of an RAF uniform under a fur of some unidentifiable animal. He stood erect and his eyes looked intelligent. The unwashed smell from his clothes was noticeable, but the two women tried not to mind too much.

“Don’t go into the circle,” he repeated. “The tribe get really upset about outsiders going there. They won’t harm you if you stay away. They'll even share their food. That’s why I’m up here. I'm waiting for them to come up and do their sunset thing. Then they'll make a fire and roast something. They'll share so long as I don’t get involved in their ritual.

“Good gracious,” Amelia said. “It must be a solstice festival. I never thought to see such a thing.”

“I’m more interested in who this is,” Ray pointed out. The airman was sitting down in the long grass. He invited the women to join him and produced from a small pack he was carrying two more furs. There was an odd smell from them and both Ray and Amelia were reluctant to put them on, but the. airman insisted.

“You won’t look so unusual to them,” he said. “It took me a long time to gain their confidence and looking like them helped.”

“By ‘they’, I take it you mean the local tribe who erected the Circle?” Amelia questioned as she draped the fur around herself and sat.

“They’re not bad people,” he answered. “They found me when I was injured and used plants, herbs, to soothe my wounds, gave me food. But they cared for me outside their settlement, not as one of them. Not fond of outsiders, and I guess I’m the ultimate outsider.”

“You… must be,” Ray agreed. “Who are you and what happened to you?”

“I’m Group Captain Harry Benedict, Eagle Squadron. I bailed out of my Spitfire over the headland. I think it crashed into the sea, but I came down hard on the hillside and broke an arm and a couple of ribs. I stumbled around in the dark. Of course, the little town below was blacked out, no lights, nothing to guide me. I tripped over one of those stones below and fell into the Circle. There was a flash of light and a feeling like when I’m taking off in the plane – the pressure on my ears - but without the engine noise. The next minute I wasn’t in the dark. It was bright daylight. I was kind of where I started out, but it looked different. There was no town below, and all this stone circle business was looking like it had just been quarried, the edges sharp and no moss growing. It took a meeting with a couple of the locals to convince me that I’d got whipped back in time. It’s a hell of a thing to have to realise, but there was nothing I could do. I tried standing in that small Circle, but nothing happened. The locals have some sort of superstition about it. That’s what the five stones are about. To warn them off. But it seems like the door only goes the one way. I’m stuck here, the outsider on the edge of a stone age tribe.”

“Bronze Age,” Amelia corrected him.

“I don’t reckon they care so much what they’re called,” Harry pointed out. Amelia agreed that such titles were added later, of course.

“But these are people who have learnt to forge metal tools, to carve symbols on their monuments, to make jewellery just for decoration, trade with people as far away as Ireland, even France and Spain….” Amelia’s eyes were bright with excitement. This was literally a dream come true for her.

“Don’t get too excited,” Ray told her. “We ARE going back when this powers up.”

She held up the cube. It was a bright mauve, now, with a green tinge around the edges. She wondered what colour it needed to be, but she felt she would know.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“A chance of getting back to our own time."

“1941?”

“1948,” Amelia told him. “The war is over.” A question came to Harry's eyes. “Yes, we won. Hitler is dead. So is Mussolini. Both got their just desserts. Japan surrendered. Its all over.”

“Well, thank God for that,” Harry answered. “I must have been assumed dead long ago. That’s ok. My folks died when I was a kid. There’s nobody to miss me. That thought kept me going. If I had to live out my life as a caveman... Or whatever they are... But you mean it? There’s a way back?”

“When it’s charged up," Ray said. She and Amelia briefly explained about the particle they came to collect.

“And this Doctor friend of yours let you go through the ‘door’ on your own? Two ladies with no protection."

Ray and Amelia both assured Harry in no uncertain terns that they didn’t need a man to protect them. Harry was apologetic. Then he hushed them both and encouraged them to get down in the long grass under the furs.

The tribe were coming up the hill. They had flaming torches and piles of brushwood. Some others carried haunches of meat. A cooking fire was clearly going to be put together in the very near future.

The bonfire was prepared, but before any cooking happened there was a ritual to fulfil. The tribe, men and women and a handful of sturdy children gathered inside the circle. Hands were raised in praise of the setting sun.

“I do believe they are early followers of what the Romans called Sol Invictus,” Amelia said in excitement. “The worship of the sun as an actual living and indomitable god which dies every night and is reborn each morning."

“Stands to reason,” Ray agreed. “I can’t really think what else they could worship as a god. The sun keeps them alive, light and heat and all that.”

It wasn’t a very long ritual, and nobody needed to be sacrificed to ensure that the sun would rise again. Afterwards the meat was cooked, not exactly expertly. They still needed to invent spit roasting to ensure even and thorough cooking. Amelia mentioned fire pits that would make it even easier. Ray noted that there was nothing but meat in the feast. No fruit or vegetables.

The tribe were aware of their presence, and as Harry had said, they were not ungenerous. They bought portions of the charred meat on rough platters carved from tree bark. They seemed excited that Harry had two women with him, though in their very basic language they were dubious about Amelia. Harry answered them, then translated the main part of the conversation.

“I’m afraid they thought you were too old to be a mate,” he told Amelia apologetically. 'I told them you were a wise woman of my tribe. They thought you looked strong for childbearing," he added to Ray.

“I suppose that is all that women are in their world,” Ray considered. “Mates and mothers.”

“But respected as both,” Harry said. “They make fantastic bead jewellery for the women and give them the tenderest portions of the meat.”

Ray looked at the portion in front of her. She wasn’t really hungry and didn’t want to eat it. Amelia had tried some of the more charred portions, avoiding the pinker, rarer meat.

“Meat is still rationed from the war,” she commented. “I ought to make the most of it. Besides, not eating food that is offered would be an insult.”

On that basis she and Ray ate what they could. Harry finished off what they couldn’t face. He had been here long enough to take what food came his way.

One thing he wasn’t expecting was a sudden change in manner from one of the tribesmen, identified as Garr, son of the leader of the group who had come uphill to worship the sun. As the bulk of the group headed downhill again, Garr approached in a decidedly hostile manner. Harry stood and faced him, putting himself in front of the two women.

It became clear from the proto-language argument that it was about Ray. Garr wanted her and was offering two women of his tribe and two oxen in exchange for her. Harry was refusing emphatically.

“I really don’t like how this is going," Amelia said.

“Me, neither,” Ray answered her. “I don’t want to marry a caveman... or mudhouseman… or whatever he is.”

“Perhaps you won’t have to,” Amelia suggested. “Look at the cube.”

Ray looked. It was an actinic white and emitting a high-pitched whine.

Both women stood and threw off the furs. They stepped towards Harry, standing just behind him. They both touched the cube while pressing it against a rip in Harry’s battered uniform that exposed his shoulder. Ray pressed the button and hoped.

The Doctor materialised the TARDIS in the freight yard of Cork city railway station. He waited until a pair of railway workers had passed by without noticing the thoroughly incongruous British phone box in the newly established Irish Republic before slipping out and making his way to the passenger waiting room on the central platform.

Amelia and Ray were there, looking tired and a bit windswept. So was a man who had only recently shaved off a beard and was clearly wearing second-hand clothes.

“I got your letter,” he said as he walked up to the three. “Good thinking. Are you all right?”

“We are now,” Ray answered. It was a bit of a round trip. The first time we used the cube we landed in Pembroke in the fifteenth century and nearly got massacred by Henry Tudor’s personal guards. Then we were nearly arrested as German spies on the Gower Peninsula in 1915. Then we wound up in Cork....”

“In one of those Circles I told you about," Amelia added. “With the concentrations of quartz deposits. The cube was about done in by then, but after we hitched a lift on a cartload of cabbages we found out that we were only two days behind when we set off, and we sent a letter that would get to you by the evening before we went up the hill with the cube.”

“Don’t look at me,” Harry said. “I gave up understanding around Henry Tudor.”

“How did you afford the stamp?” The Doctor asked.

“That was me,” Amelia said. “I left all my loose change behind but I tucked some paper money in my pocket. We got a really bad exchange for Irish pounds. They really don’t like the English around here.”

“They don’t seem too fond of the Welsh, either,” Ray added. “Anyway, we had enough money to get Harry cleaned up, buy some supper and get a bed and breakfast for the night. Then we came here to wait for you. All the travelling we've all done, a train station seemed appropriate. At least, nobody paid any attention to us waiting in a waiting room.”

“Good thinking," The Doctor said. “Come on, let’s get you all back to Wales.”

If Harry had wondered how they were going to get to Wales from Ireland, without even an identity card between them, his guess couldn’t have come close. He stared at the TARDIS exterior. His eyes boggled at its interior.

Amelia Rumford smiled knowingly.

“I knew there was something about you, Doctor,” she said. “As if you don’t belong in our time at all, with or without quazic particles and time travel cubes.”

“The question is, what to do with Harry? Do we drop him off in 1941, to report back to his base, or do you think causality could open up in 1948 and find a place for him?”

“If I have a choice,” Harry answered. “1948, with the war over and done with sounds good to me. It's not that I’m a coward. I joined Eagle Squadron because I thought Hitler needed to be beaten. But now I know he has been beaten.... I'm not sure I could just go back.”

“I could probably get you into my university team as a postgraduate researcher," Amelia said. “Not much money, but room and board and no questions asked.”

“Excellent idea,” The Doctor agreed. “Before Ray and I move on I'll sort out some identity papers. A few people in government owe me a favour or two. Then there won’t be any questions TO ask.”

“Before we go?” Ray wondered aloud. “Does that mean we’re staying a little while?”

“I think we could help out with Amelia’s dig for a while. Otherwise she'll have nothing but students and you know what they’re like.”