New Dawn Fades
by omphalos

Summary

Sometimes second chances turn out even more disastrously than the first attempt, especially when they involve the Master. Epic time adventure and dark romance in which Jack's voice is every bit as important as those of the Doctor and the Master.

Notes

Set after most of the events of Last of the Time Lords, in a pocket timeline wherein the funeral pyre never happened because the Master wasn't allowed to die. Where it exists, and with the obvious exception of canon events in episodes airing after LotTL, I try to follow TV canon to the letter. I've also nicked at least one concept from the spin-off novels, albeit adapting it to fit TV canon.

See the end of the work for more notes.
"I can still hear them, you know."

Playing aimlessly with the ring on his finger, the Master leans back against the railing at the side of the Console Room, wondering if he'll get a reaction this time.

"Hmm?" The Doctor doesn't look up from the console panel he's been using as an executive stress toy for the last half hour — since really, sitting as she is in the middle of the vast and empty ice floes of Alderion Five, the only feature in thousands of miles of stable glacier, the TARDIS hardly has an urgent need for enhanced plasma nebulising in her reticular coils.

It has taken them weeks of cannibalising the Master's TARDIS — reclaimed from the drifting reaches of the Silver Devastation in the year 100 trillion — to fix the damage the Doctor had done to his own in repeated acts of gross vandalism. Just because the Master had taken the old jalopy and turned it into a thing of beauty. The Doctor never did have a good eye for art.

They would've been better off simply moving over to the Master's TARDIS, of course. It was a later model, had a fully functioning chameleon circuit, no damage to its navigation controls, and all sorts of other fun goodies, which the Master had never really had a chance to explore. Not to mention the weaponry. Ooh, big guns and bigger bombs, all so new and experimental that they virtually still had the protective wrap around them from the factory.

That TARDIS had been a gift to him from the desperate High Council. Brand spanking new, they might as well have stuck a big red bow on it and said 'Happy End-of-the world'. The last great Time War raging around them, they'd begged the Master to 'take it'. 'Save us' was what they'd really meant.

But no, the Doctor doesn't like guns and isn't prepared to trust any capsule that has the Master imprinted on its circuits, so it's back to this clapped out box of junk again. At least the Master has managed to persuade him to take a few of the new toys back with them. Not the guns, of course. The man is such a hopeless sap.

Now, thanks more to the Master's skill than the Doctor's tinkering, this ancient TARDIS is just about up to travelling time and space again. After a fashion. And there's certainly nothing wrong with the reticular coils. The Master knows this as he overhauled them himself. No, this is simply a case of anything to avoid looking at the Master, dealing with the problem he represents. Really, it's laughable. Why insist on keeping him alive, on making him into the sad collared pet he's now apparently meant to be, if it's only to ignore him?

"I said," he repeats with exaggerated slowness, "I can still hear them."

The Doctor looks up, that annoying look of wide-eyed concern he seems so fond of in this regeneration forming on his face as he takes off his glasses. "Nothing I've done helped control things at all?"

"Of course not. It's not a mild case of tinnitus, you know. Take two pills and come back next week. Tell me, Doctor, has anyone who's ever consulted you been better off for the experience? Hmm, let me think..." The Master lets a grin grow slowly on his face and doesn't bother finishing his sentence.

"Stop it." But the Doctor's words sound almost fond as he turns back to that oh so fascinating panel,
and the Master feels his grin concertina into something uglier.

"Will I get a dog treat if I do?"

The Doctor smiles briefly as he pushes his glasses back up his nose. "Do you want one?"

"Yes, let me out for a run. All good doggies need their exercise."

"Blood'll freeze in your veins the instant you step beyond the exterior field of the TARDIS."

"Oh yes. Because, of course, I didn't know that without you telling me."

"Not gonna let you hurt yourself, Master." The Doctor almost singsongs that one. Gods, but the man is aggravating!

"Funny how hearing my name from your lips has lost its... tingle."

That makes the Doctor look up again, eyebrow raised. "Tingle?"

The Master smiles lazily. "Yes, tingle. Prickle, thrill, groin-tightening tickle, stirring of somatosensory neurons – all gone now. You managed to kill that as well when you fastened this abhorrence around my neck. Aren't you proud?" He draws himself to his feet and strides over to the Doctor. "This thing was never designed for Time Lords, you know. It hurts."

"Oh no, it really doesn't. Not physically at-"

"It hurts!" He slams a hand down on the console and glares at the Doctor, who gives him a wry look in return.

"Ever heard the Earth phrase 'hoist by your own-"

"Oh, shut up, do." The Master holds his hand up, forbidding another word. "I suppose I should change my name now, anyway. How does 'the Kept Boy' sound?"

The Doctor frowns. "Now you're being silly."

"Am I? How kind of you to let me know. How about 'Courtesan' then?" The Master moves a finger to his mouth, cupping his elbow with his other hand in a pose of deep thought. "No, you're right. That would require you not to be a sexual remedial, after all. Hmm, 'the Indentured Servant'?" He lets his hand drop, rests it casually on the gravity pivot. "I know! It's perfect! From now on I'll be known as 'Rover'. You can attach a dog tag with my name on it to this collar and throw balls for me to catch."

The Doctor snorts softly, and his hand falls upon the Master's, removing it from the control and then keeping hold of it. "No, no, no. Oh no, my friend. We're not not playing that game again. Took blimin' ages to clear up after the last time you tried that."

Well, it'd been worth a try. Though really, it hadn't been a lot of fun last time, thanks to the damn collar.

The Doctor steps closer, suddenly all bright-eyed and bushy enthusiasm. "Ooh, I've got an idea. Let's head for the Roanar galaxy and spend a week or so in the Styrex Nebula dust clouds. It's beautiful there, ever been? Best to go during the passage of Coroth's Comet when the particles of tronium implode in the debris, releasing little puffs of brilliant light." He gestures with his fingers as if releasing
something and makes an appreciative noise, deep in his throat. "Aww, it's better than the London Eye at the turn of the year, and it lasts for months!" He grins cheesily at the Master. "Months!"

The Master stares, bemused, then forms a moue with his lips. "Oh, how sweet. Is this to be our honeymoon then? I'm touched, Doctor. But, tell me, don't you think we should have consummated our union first?"

Stopped mid-flight of ridiculous fancy, the Doctor frowns slightly again. "Well, where do you want to go then?"

Why does his opinion matter when he's the helpless prisoner here? That's what the Master wants to ask, but instead he gives the answer most likely to aggravate. "Earth."

"No." The Doctor drops the Master's hand and turns away, back to the console.

"Why not?" The Master walks around behind the Doctor, trailing a hand over his back. "I began to understand what you see in those primitives during my many months amongst them. It's still a gross perversion, of course, your attraction to their rather smelly company. But since when have I ever refused to give an interesting perversion a fair crack?"

"That's what you call what I saw you do to Lucy, is it? A 'fair crack'?"

Ah, a delicious hint of anger about the Doctor now. Excellent. "Oh, I wouldn't waste your sympathy on her, Doctor. She was a sociopathic bitch long before I had her father killed and took control of her pretty blonde head. Stupid, too, and that's her unforgivable crime. At least your Martha had half a brain cell. Tell me, do you miss her?"

"I always miss them," the Doctor says softly, long fingers stroking the screen control. "Always."

The Master wonders if he's meant to be touched by that revelation. "More fool you then for befriending the short-lived and limited. I've often wondered, is it a insecurity thing? Can you only believe in yourself when surrounded by those vastly your intellectual inferior?"

Meeting the Master's eye, the Doctor shakes his head. "You underestimate them; you always did. Been your downfall more than once. Human beings are... just amazing." He smiles, his eyes getting that faraway awe and wonder look about them again.

Liking neither the look nor the fact he can't honestly deny the 'downfall' accusation, the Master says quickly, "God, it must have given you the hard-on to beat all hard-ons when they all chanted your name. Doctor, Doctor, Doooooootteeeer..." He moves to stand closely behind the other Time Lord, not touching but whispering near his ear. "Doctor, oh Doctor. Save us, Doctor. We believe in you, Doctor. Have our babies, Doctor. Die for us, Doctor." With the nail of one finger, the Master scrapes lines across the Doctor's suit jacket, from shoulder to shoulder, from collar to tail, ending with a little pat of the Doctor's bum. "Messiah complex, anyone?"

The Doctor turns to face him, lifting a hand to cup the Master's face. "I won't let you hurt yourself, and I won't let you hurt me, either."

The Master lifts an eyebrow, steeling himself not to move back from the intimacy before the Doctor does. "Do you really believe you have that power? Well, gosh and golly, I think you do. And after all those tears you rained down on my dying body as well. Of course I can hurt you, you silly man." He grins hugely, looking up at the Doctor from under his brow. "And, of course, I will."

At every opportunity offered, in fact.
The Doctor doesn't react, and a second later, the Master feels the great Messiah's presence faffing about in his mind again. "Oh!" he exclaims exasperatedly, stepping back and bringing up an arm to knock the Doctor's hand away. "Don't you ever stop?"

"Let me help you," the Doctor says stubbornly, stepping after him.

"You can't, not that way." Another step back and a TARDIS roundel outlines itself against his back.

"What way then? Tell me." That's his Doctor, always playing the good straight man, leading them to the inevitable punchline.

"Let me go." The Master steps forward again, right into the Doctor's personal space, ignoring his own annoyance at the way this body has to look up a little to meet the Doctor's gaze. "Let me go, or let me go outside."

Is that fear he sees contracting the Doctor's irises? "You wouldn't do that. You wouldn't just walk out there, just like you couldn't detonate those black hole converters."

"Think you know me so well, don't you?" The Master pushes hard at the Doctor's chest, sending him tripping backwards. "Well, you don't! Because anything, anything, is better than staying here a moment longer in this... slave collar!" He spits the words out, tugging at the hated silver torque. "It's worse than anything!"

Leaning back against the consoles, the Doctor raises his hands to rub at his face, fingers slipping under his glasses. "You'll adjust," he says, somewhat muffled by his hands.

"I will not."

"You've no choice."

"And I'm meant to be the evil dictator here?"

Rassilon, he could throttle the Doctor for that look of saintly suffering now directed his way. He would throttle him if he thought for a moment he'd be allowed to get his hands even a little close to the Doctor's scrawny neck before a single thought from the Doctor disabled him, removing the Master's control of his own body. From the moment the Doctor had discovered the collar in the Master's small box of personal possessions aboard his war-TARDIS, the Master had known he was in trouble. This must be how the beloved pets of humans feel when forced to wear those cone-shaped collars 'for their own good'. Torture is never for the recipient's 'good'. At least the Master has always been honest enough to admit that.

"I hate you with a purity of emotion that's almost edifying," he remarks, attempting to sound casual about it.

"I know," the Doctor says, heaving a lugubrious sigh. "I do know."

"And you, of course, forgive me that as well."

"Yeah. Pretty much."

It's the look of apparently genuine sympathy that the Master hates most of all. He snorts and turns away, beginning to wander around the console room as the Doctor watches, fingers dancing over controls and fittings, tapping out that inescapable beat. He starts to chant softly to the Doctor.

"Forgive us, for thy mercy's sake, our multitude of sins forgive. And for thy own possession take
and bid us to thy glory live..."

"Oh, do shut up!" Exasperation isn't quite as good as that flicker of anger earlier, but the Doctor does look a little magnificent, all righteous glare and hands on console as he leans forward.

The Master hides a small smile. "Let's go to Earth, Doctor. I miss the old place. I know! Let's visit your muscular freak. I owe him a great big... kiss."

"You owe him a lot more than that."

"No, you do." The anger he wants to see in the Doctor's eyes now fills the Master instead. "I never asked for his excess of life to be force-fed into me. It was an invasion, and when I get away from you, which you know I will eventually, he's top of my list for some quite delicious revenge."

"Jack can look after himself," the Doctor says, but the Master doesn't miss the flicker of concern passing over the far too angular features.

He chuckles and says with almost truthful relish, "Ah, so much you can do to a man who can never die. I wonder... D'you think if I cut off his head he'd grow a new body? I never tried that one on board the Valiant." He shapes a 'so-so' movement with his spread hand. "Or would he just live on as a helpless head, needing to be carried everywhere? Oh, wouldn't that be funny, Doctor? Imagine it! I could cart him around under my arm, introducing him to people and offering them great head at bargain prices..."

"Stop it. Now." Ah, the stern headmasterly voice. The Master likes this one, even though he does it so much better himself. "This silly game's unworthy of you," the Doctor continues.

The Master shrugs. "Helps keep the deadly tedium at bay for whole minutes at a time." He watches the Doctor program the flight console with some co-ordinates and set the rotor turning over. "She was beautiful as a paradox machine," he says wistfully, remembering. "Glorious, really. All red and throbbing like an open wound..."

"She was an abomination." A shiver seems to run through the Doctor's body as he takes off his glasses, slipping them into a jacket pocket.

"And you forgave me that too!" The Master chuckles gleefully. "Is there anything I could do that you wouldn't be able to dredge up some scraps of forgiveness for from somewhere?" He strides around the console, back to the Doctor's side. "Tell me. I simply must know."

The Doctor shakes his head, apparently refusing to answer, and the Master grins lopsidedly.

"I know why, you see," he whispers, getting closer still. "I know why you can forgive me all my oh so terrible sins." There's still no response from the Doctor, who's fiddling unnecessarily with the linear axis control, so the Master continues. "You can forgive me anything because you know that, whatever I've done, whatever appalling, incomprehensible atrocity I've committed, your own crimes are still... so... much... worse."

The Doctor slams his palm against the transtemporal stabiliser, and the TARDIS jolts violently as it takes off for Doctor-knows-where. The Master is thrown back against the railings at the side, jarring his back painfully, but he's still laughing. Oh yes, he's laughing.

"Bullseye!" he cries through his giggles, sliding about on the floor as the TARDIS continues to jerk about in the Vortex. "Straight for the hearts! Oh, our great martyr doesn't like that, does he? What's it called when someone commits genocide on his own kind, anyway? There must be a word or a phrase. Come on, come on, it's on the tip of my tongue. Oh, I know!" He pulls himself to his
feet at the console edge and grins over at all that sexy fury distorting the Doctor's face. "It's 'complete and utter bastard', isn't it? Yes, that's the one."

The TARDIS arrives... somewhere, and there's silence bar the drumming in the Master's head. So loud it's got, but calming again now the point's been scored, the vulnerable ankle pierced. The Doctor's face is rigid, teeth obviously gritted, holding back so many things the Master thinks he'd love to hear. Or maybe he wouldn't. Hard to tell, sometimes.

The Doctor hits the door control, and they open to show what are presumably the Styrex Nebula dust clouds. Colours blaze and fade in an ocean of glittering fragments. The Master hasn't been here before; why would he have? This is a mere vanity of creation, pointless prettiness in an accident of circumstance. Even the elements here aren't worth the effort of extraction.

The Doctor thinks otherwise, judging by the way he walks to the open doors and stares out, releasing a little sigh. Cosmic fireworks, how typical of the man.

The Master walks over and puts his hand on the Doctor's back. "One little push. That's all it would take right now," he remarks, but all he does is stroke softly over the material of the Doctor's jacket. It feels horribly like saying sorry, but he doesn't stop.

"You can no more kill me than I can kill you," the Doctor says peaceably. Stepping to the side of him, the Master can see the sparkling colours flashing in the Doctor's dark eyes, and he thinks that, just briefly, he can understand the appeal of this useless place.

"Maybe I'll be able to do it one day," he says, equally gently. "If you keep me on your leash long enough."

"Maybe," the Doctor agrees, turning to take the Master in his arms.

Humphing softly, the Master lets himself be held, knowing it's as much a way to stop him throwing himself out of the TARDIS as it is a sign of the Doctor's affection. Not that he'd actually been intending to jump. He's not that desperate yet, not quite.

He still remembers the Eye of Harmony.

With a sense of irony, he rests his head on the Doctor's shoulder and closes his eyes against the Doctor's pet panorama. He can still see the brief blazes of colour through his eyelids. They're like the Doctor's bloody humans, aren't they? They flare then die, over in a moment, but remembered on your retina for far longer.

"Need you to live." The Doctor's words are said so quietly that the Master almost misses them against the background of the drums, his thoughts, and the beating of four hearts.

"So I can redeem you?" the Master asks, and it isn't really a jeer.

The Doctor's chest moves as he snorts. "Something like that."

Suddenly the Doctor's a whirl of activity. He pulls away from the Master, holding him by the shoulders. "Let's have a picnic! We can land on that asteroid. That one, over there!" He waves one hand wildly out of the open doors. "Extend the TARDIS's defensive shield. Have ourselves an outdoor feast amongst the imploding particles. What d'you say?"

The Master smiles, and for one reason or another, he hasn't the will to dampen this latest harebrained idiocy of his captor. It'll get him out of the TARDIS for a while anyway. He nods wry acquiescence.
"Excellent!" Grabbing the Master's hand, the Doctor pulls him back over to the console where the Master suddenly finds himself the recipient of a blink-and-miss-it kiss as the TARDIS doors close... which is a first for them. Then he's being dragged down into the bowels of the TARDIS, presumably towards the kitchen, and he finds himself laughing. The Doctor's laughing too, and just for a moment, it's like they're boys again, skiving off class together to play in the mottled shadows of the silver forests.

They'd been inseparable until their eighth year. Even after they started at the Academy, their friendship persevered... for a while.

He's been told his problems started with the Untempered Schism. He'd dispute the word 'problems', but otherwise wouldn't argue. It's quite possible, he realises with a sudden clarity, that the Doctor was every bit as affected by his glimpse of the untamed Vortex as the Master himself had been. Maybe it's just that insanity comes in many different sparkling colours against that black backdrop of infinity, flaring then dying, flaring then dying. That's a cheering thought.

The beat of their running feet on the metal floors of the TARDIS forms a familiar rhythm, and the Master discovers that, just perhaps, for the moment, he likes not being alone.
Particle Physics

The Doctor finds he's clicking his fingers again. Click, click, clickety click – dysrhythmic and really flipping irritating. He stuffs his hands in his pockets and purses his lips, trying to put his mind to work on the problem he's set himself for today, persuading his cranky old TARDIS that a smoother Vortex translation would benefit all.

So far he's taken off the roundel that hides the dematerialisation circuit fitting and... Well, that's about it really. Can't seem to concentrate for some reason. He tuts to himself in the same non-rhythm of his fingers. He smacks his lips. He sighs.

Well, okay, not exactly 'some' reason. Nah, it's just a little bit more precise than that. Pretty much the same reason he does anything these days. Oh yeah, it's been all-change for him since visiting Malcassairo. Since then, he's had a clear and present reason for everything. Not just 'cause it's fun, or 'cause it's right, or some synchronistic magic of luck or willful TARDIS putting him in the pertinent spacetime intersect.

Exhaling loudly, he stares unseeing at the uncovered circuit and reaches out mentally for a presence that's been missing now for days. "Whatcha up to, old foe?" he murmurs.

He'd thought he'd wanted nothing more than peace and quiet when he'd finally cut the increasingly provocative and stircrazy Master a teeny tiny little bit of slack. The Master wasn't the only one feeling claustrophobic. After having not let the man out of his sight for weeks, the Doctor found he was daydreaming of easier times when he'd had, say, merely the end of the universe to have to deal with.

So he'd done everything he could think of to ensure the TARDIS wouldn't play ball with any dastardly schemes, double-checked and then quadruple-checked that the control collar couldn't be removed without a mental command from him, and then told the Master to sod off elsewhere in the TARDIS and amuse himself for a while 'cause really, the Doctor was tired of being the favoured cat toy.

Took less than a day for the Console Room to start feeling too empty. Missing an evil genius, now there's a thing. Did Holmes pine when Moriarty wasn't around? Maybe he did, just a little. No other Edwardian rascals could offer quite the same challenge.

Oh now, why's his foot tapping like that? This is ridiculous. He is not in drug withdrawal.

Thanks to his TARDIS-enhanced awareness, he can sense the Master, still where he's been the last one hundred or so times the Doctor has checked, which is closer to the Console Room than he's been since banished. At first, the Doctor hoped he was on his way back up, but nah. 'Course not. The Master's obviously aware of how much the Doctor wants him to return. So, of course, he won't. The Doctor'll have to go fetch him.

He starts for the stairs, stops, pivots around on his toes a few times, pulls at his hair, and releases a huge sigh in exasperation at his own behaviour. He knows he'll go looking in the end, so why this hesitation? Daft, that's what it is. Just a little bit barmy.

Aww, he'll probably catch the Master in the act of some carefully staged sabotage. Could be fun, that. Can't be up to anything too naughty, after all. The TARDIS won't allow the Master anywhere near anything vital now. Absolutely won't. Nope. Well... almost absolutely. Oh, at the very least, the Doctor'll know if his failsaves are bypassed.
He hopes.

'Specially all the 'really not here, no, honest, completely missing' webs he's woven round the
Cloister Room as, well, there's been something very off there since the Time War. The last thing
he wants is the Master stirring up whatever wrongness lurks where the dimensional link to the Eye
of Harmony once sat.

It'd do the Master good to get up to some nice juicy mischief though. He hates the collar so much,
and really, the Doctor hates it too. He knows it's cruel, but sometimes a choke chain is necessary...
Isn't it? He's not sure he knows anymore. Sometimes he thinks that forcing control on the Master is
like, oh, crushing butterfly wings or caging tigers in circus wagons. Then he remembers the
screaming.

This time he gets halfway down the first spiral of stairs before he stops and hovers.

The trouble is... he's not sure what the trouble is. He's all serrated edges and vibration like a bread
knife that's been bent over the side of a table and let go, all buzzy and scraping. A familiar feeling,
yeah, but familiar from, ooh, a long, long time ago now. Is it something the Master's doing to him?
Well, course it is! Has to be. And that's plenty enough good meaty excuse to go find his nemesis
right now!

He vaults over the banister to the floor below and heads off, chasing his sense of 'Time Lord'
through the corridors, whistling a jaunty tune as he takes off his glasses and tucks them in his
jacket pocket.

Doesn't take long to find the Master, Time Lord sense giving way to ordinary hearing as the Doctor
discovers loud rock music is crescendo-ing out of his tiered wardrobe room. He's not sure if he
should be asking how the Master managed to persuade the TARDIS to play it, or how the TARDIS
managed to find any to play, but the words die on his lips anyway when he pushes open the door to
find... chaos.

Clothes are everywhere. Every aisle and stair is carpeted with them. Several racks have been
completely denuded. On the stairs above the Doctor, the Master is, apparently, dancing. And
singing, loudly. Whilst wearing a black cape. And waving a walking cane around in an
aggressively suggestive manner.

The Doctor finds himself thinking fondly of goatie beards, smirking, and evil laughter. Nothing
wrong with a little wicked chuckling occasionally. It has 'not posturing like Iggy Pop meets Robbie
Williams in his 'Let Me Entertain You' phase' going for it at the very least. The Doctor shouldn't be
surprised though. The Master had often pranced about to music during their lost year on the
Valiant together. Normally when something had pleased him or his plans were coming together
nicely...

Oh, now, that's worrying.

The Doctor leans against the wall and silently begs the TARDIS to end the noise. For once, she
actually listens. Perhaps it's giving her a headache too. Mind you, she's not exactly fond of the
Master to start with.

"Hey!" comes the protest from above. Then, "Oh, it's you." The Master leans over the railing and
looks down at the Doctor, frowning. He's wearing black leather gloves.

"Who else would it be? What, exactly, have you done to my wardrobe?"
The Master looks slowly around the room and then giggles. "Spring cleaning?" He straightens and comes trotting down the stairs, cape swishing around him and revealing its purple lining. "So does your presence here mean I'm persona grata again now?" He grins and points at the Doctor with his cane. "Got bored without me, didn't you?"

The Doctor decides it's better not to admit to anything. Preferably not even to himself, though it's a bit late for that. He folds his arms, still leaning on the wall by the door. "Wondered what you were getting up to. Thought I'd better check."

"Ooh," the Master says theatrically, and crouching slightly, he tiptoes closer to the Doctor. "Did you think I might be doing something a little bit... evil?" He grabs the edge of his cape and swirls it up to hide the bottom of his face.

The Doctor chuckles. "Well, are you? Other than to my poor wardrobe, I mean."

"Wait and see!" Still grinning, the Master straightens up and lets the cape edge fall. "Don't I remember you wearing this, Doctor?"

"Probably. You're in a good mood."

"Hmm, am I?" The Master tips his head from side to side as if trying the idea out. "Tell me, is it making you worried?"

It probably should be, but in fact the Doctor's having problems fighting off a silly grin. "Like seeing you happier."

"Sap." The Master's own grin has vanished. He steps into the Doctor's personal space, threat in his posture. "You've always been revoltingly sentimental, but you're getting so drippy over me now that I'm thinking of taking swimming lessons. I mean, yuck!" He pokes the Doctor hard in the chest with the top of the cane. "Have you completely forgotten who I am? What I've done?"

"Oh yeah, like I'm ever gonna forget." The Doctor can't keep that little edge of bitterness from his voice. He takes the Master's hand, removing the cane and letting it drop. He keeps hold of the hand though, running his thumbs over the leather. The Master's always had a penchant for gloves; they keep the rest of the world once removed, keep the Master untouchable. "The things you've done?"

"Oh yeah, like I'm ever gonna forget." The Doctor yanks his hand violently away from the Doctor. "This?" He pokes the Doctor hard in the chest with the top of the cane. "Have you completely forgotten who I am? What I've done?"

"Us." The Master repeats flatly, staring at his hand in the Doctor's

"Yeah, us. You and me. Us. Here. Now. The last surviving Time Lords."

"I wouldn't even be here now if not for some of those 'really big deals', you idiot. And there's no 'us'. This?" The Master yanks his hand violently away from the Doctor. "This is a manufactured situation forcing oppositely charged particles into a dangerously close orbit around each other. Won't the explosion be fun when it comes?"

"Is it going to be soon?" The Doctor asks as he watches the Master stalk over to a wall console. Thin leads are dangling from it, connecting to the Master's iPod – one of several Earth-tech 'treats' the Doctor let him keep. Well, that answers the 'where' question about the music at least.

The Master mutters something that sounds like "Gods, I hope so," as he pokes at buttons in an irritated way. He turns and glares at the Doctor. "What, I can't even play music anymore?"

"Not sure how you were playing it in the first place, Master, considering I gave the TARDIS strict
instructions to take no orders from you unless they involved food, access to non-essential areas, or lighting. But you can have your music back when I go." He pushes away from the wall and walks slowly towards the Master. "Does it help? Loud music, I mean. Does it help block the drumming?"

"Little bit," The Master answers, obviously grudging.

"What else helps?"

"Well, not you nosing about in my head, if that's what this is leading up to again. Hurting you helps though, so thanks for that." A sweet smile, there and then gone, is directed in the Doctor's direction. "Acts of wanton destruction and cruelty help, ooh, a whole load. Oh, how I do miss acts of wanton destruction and cruelty." The Master pulls a clownish unhappy face and sighs. "You're meant to be a humane man; I ask you, is it fair keeping me from an activity that formed such a vital part of my behaviour 'in the wild'?" He makes speech marks in the air with his fingers and tips his head to the side questioningly.

"I could download you a copy of Manhunt 2 if that's what you want," The Doctor says dryly. "Would've have thought 'god' games more your line though."

The Master closes the gap between them, standing very close in a way that increases the vibrating bread knife feeling to a nasty degree. The Doctor wriggles in his suit, but doesn't, for some reason, step back. Hmm, there's that 'some' reason again.

"I'm so bored, Doctor," the Master says, meeting his eyes, his voice intense. "I'm so very bored."

"I'm sorry."

"God, I hate that big-eyed Bambi look. Makes me nauseous." The Master sticks his tongue out in a 'nasty taste' expression. "Don't be sorry; what good is that? Do something about it. You made damn sure I can't amuse myself when you slave-collared me, so that makes it your job to keep my genius entertained. Do it!" He presses himself against the Doctor, forcing him back a step. "Do it now!"

"Do what?" The Doctor asks. He licks his lips and wonders how his mouth got so dry. "What is it you think I can do that's so entertaining?"

"Well, one thing comes to mind easily enough," The Master replies somewhat scathingly. He grabs the Doctor's bum with both hands and yanks him tight against his body, his fingers pressing hard into the Doctor's buttocks.

Suddenly, the Doctor remembers exactly from when and where he knows the bread knife feeling. He was right; it was a very long time ago, when the Kasterborous system still held a planet called Gallifrey and before even his first regeneration.

He laughs, and if the laugh ends on a little bit of a squeak, well, that's only because he's being held so tight it's interfering with lung expansion. The Master's hands are roaming his body, clutching and bruising. The Doctor forces himself to remain as still as possible and asks, "So... you want to have sex then?"

"What gave me away?" The Master asks, pausing his ravishing to give the Doctor a wide-eyed smirk. "Thought I was being ever so subtle."

"You really want to?"

The Master seems to study the Doctor. "Surprised? Didn't you expect me to? Well, it's true that
you're hardly my ideal choice, but, you know, prison." He gives the Doctor a disparaging look. "Standards must drop, I suppose."

The Doctor ignores that as the complete bollocks he knows it is and puts his arms around the Master, acutely aware of the body beneath the cape and clothes, the muscles and bones and two beating hearts. "You really, really want to?"

"I want to fuck, Doctor, not make glorious love under moonlit skies or whatever you're getting dewy-eyed about now." The Master emphasises his words with a few quick thrusts of his hips. "Meaningless, recreational sex, the one thing those silly humans of yours got right. God love 'em."

"I'm hardly expecting turtle doves and snuggles, Master," The Doctor says with a small smile, trying to control his reactions to the contact. "Still not sure I believe..."

The Master sighs with exaggerated exasperation and lets the Doctor go, stepping back. "You know, anyone would think you don't want me. I'm... devastated. After all those tears and longing looks. What's a girl to think?"

The Doctor steps after him and puts his hands to the clasp of the cape, undoing it and letting the cape fall to the ground. "You know I want you," he says seriously. "In whatever way I can have you. There's only us left. Just never expected you to want this too. Hah!" He grins and points a finger upwards. "Still waiting for the other shoe. So, when should I start ducking?"

"Other shoe?" The Master laughs. "Ooh, how untrusting."

"There's always far more shoes than feet in any encounter with you, Master. Can almost see them sometimes, buzzing round above me like, oh, manic stealth bats or something. Manic stealth bats all waiting for a chance to wallop me on the head." He waves his hand around his head in demonstration. "Don't deny it! I'm praising you in all your sneaky genius. Say 'thank you, Doctor!'" He sticks his tongue into the corner of his grin and pokes the Master in his stomach.

Looking down at the pointing finger, the Master carefully pinches it between his thumb and forefinger and removes it from his person. "Compliments, Doctor? Whatever do you want from me? Oh right, yeah, I remember, sex. Almost forgot in all the talk of dive-bombing bat-shoes." He rolls his eyes in a way that looks almost fond to the Doctor's eyes and steps tight to him again. "Didn't actually think I'd held back my opinion on the best way to ease the crushing tedium of an eternity with you."

"Oh Yes. Yes, yes, yes. Hard to ignore a hand groping far too low down my bum for comfort. Give you that. But..." The Doctor pauses, breath held, waiting for his prompt.

The Master looks at him for a few seconds and then waves an exasperated hand. "Oh, go on then. I'll bite. 'But' what?"

"Well, that's just it, Master. Didn't think you would bite. Thought you might be a whole load of woof-woof and no big gnashing teeth." The Doctor bares his own teeth and gnashes them a few times as illustration.

The Master pinches the bridge of his nose. "Can't we just skip to the punchline here?"

"Aww, you're no fun." The Doctor gets a pointed look in reply to that and nothing else.

He sighs and admits to himself that, as he knows where this conversation's going, he almost certainly shouldn't be using it as a form of playful flirtation. He inhales deeply and lets his expression still, his hand rising to cup the Master's face, gently forcing him to meet his eyes.
"All that time you had me in your power," he says. "A year, Master, a whole Earth year. And not once?"

The Master screws up his face in an incredulous expression, taking a perhaps inadvertent step back. "Are you seriously suggesting you regret that I didn't... rape you?"

The Doctor shakes his head. "Wouldn't have been rape, and you know it. You knew it. That's why you never tried. That's why instead you kept me aged and feeble. That's why you did choose rape, of innocent humans, of the mind-controlled, of my friends, in my presence. Because that way you could hurt me without risking getting close to me, or letting me touch you. Oh, without even letting me talk to you, Master!" He watches intently for the Master's reaction to his words.

The Master snorts, but the Doctor doesn't miss the disturbed expression quickly replaced by scorn. "Oh, Doctor, Doctor, Doctor. I've heard the words 'I forgive you' so often now they've long since ceased to have meaning."

"Nah," The Doctor shakes his head firmly. "Nah, they've not. You'd like me to think that though, wouldn't you?"

The Master turns away, heading for one of the racks of clothes. He pulls out another hanger from the rack and quickly discards the red hunting jacket on it, making an exaggerated face of disgust. The Doctor represses a smile as he follows the Master to the rack. He watches and waits for the new serve he knows is coming once the ball has been recovered.

"So," the Master starts eventually, still continuing with his apparent project of relocating the Doctor's entire wardrobe from the shelves and hangers to the floor. "You remember all that lovely entertainment I laid on for you on the Valiant then?"

The Doctor sighs and doesn't bother answering. The punishment the Master inflicted on him during the year-that-never-was had never really hurt, not in any way that mattered. But what the Master did to his human victims was another matter. Every scream, every whimper, had seemed to act as a carrier wave for the constant refrain of 'This is your fault. This is your fault, Doctor.' The words became perhaps a little like the Master's mental drums. There'd been nights...

Oh, there'd been nights, all right, but really, it's better not to think about them. Never really happened, after all, not as far as this universe was concerned.

"Yet you still want me stuck here with you?" The Master asks, dropping a tatty old fur coat to the floor and stepping over it, closer to the Doctor again. A sly smile curves his lips as he opens the buttons of the Doctor's suit jacket. "Still, apparently, want me?"

"There's only us now."

"You keep saying that as if it matters."

Stung, the Doctor can't help an explosive, "It does matter!"

The Master chuckles, the low sound pulling images of an earlier regeneration from the Doctor's memory. "Because we're of the same thoroughbred blood? Ooh, how bigoted of you, Doctor." He smooths his hand up the Doctor's shirt. The touch... The touch means more than the Doctor wants to admit. He tries not to react to it as the Master continues talking. "If that's all it is, create more! Your genes and mine, a little mixing and matching, a little twisting, a dash of Lazlabs magic, and maybe even some human DNA for the non-Time Lordy bits. Easy. We could grow them in fields of looms, acres of new Time Lords. Never alone again. Think of it, Doctor."
The Doctor says nothing. He's already thought of it months ago on the Valiant and has tried hard not to think of it again. If they try that, somehow, some way, the Master will sabotage it. Warp the new Time Lords to his will and bidding, most likely. And anyway, their genes combined are hardly likely to produce the most stable of new breeds.

He wraps his arms around the Master and presses the side of his face against the Master's short hair, breathing in the scent of Earth shampoo.

"We could go back in time, found a new Gallifrey," the Master waxes on, his voice intense. "Oh, can't you see it, Doctor? I'm sure between the two of us we could create the Eye of Harmony. We were the brightest minds of our generation, after all. You could be the new Omega, and I, of course, would be Rassilon."

"Who's getting dewy-eyed now?" the Doctor asks, still trying hard not to visualise the Master's evocative ideas, which is actually getting easier as his mind currently seems way, way too interested in the Master's gloved hands; they seem to have found their way under the Doctor's shirt.

"At least we wouldn't be bored. Why not try? You maunder on so about our lost world. What's stopping you righting your wrong, Dudley Do-right?"

"The Daleks..." The Doctor starts, his eyes closing in spite of himself as the Master's hands stroke and pinch.

"What, you think that just because we go back in time and create a new Time Lord race that they'll found a new Skaro too?" The Master purses his lips thoughtfully. "You do seem to have been stunningly inept at that particular genocide of yours, but think! If there's no Time Lords around to stop them when they decide to do just that... Well, then God help the universe, eh, Doctor? Kaboom! It's exterminate time."

There... is something in what the Master's saying, and the Doctor knows he can't afford to ignore it, that he has to think it through, thresh the truth from the Master's manipulation. But... "Do we have to talk about this now?"

The Master chuckles, running his thumbs over the Doctor's nipples, pressing and pulling at them. "Getting impatient? All hot and bothered at the thought of doing it with a fellow Time Lord, aren't you? It's almost charming." He moues his lips. "Cute even. D'you think any of your pretty humans ever worked out why you wouldn't play their sex games?"

"Who says I didn't?" The Doctor replies, really not thinking before he speaks. He leans in to kiss the pouting mouth, but the Master moves his head back just enough to avoid him.

"You did fuck them then? Well, well, well." The Master stops his molesting and grabs the Doctor's hand, pulling him down with him into the discarded clothes to sit cross-legged. He leans his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, giving the Doctor a look of totally over the top interest. "I want to know all the details. All the lurid, sweaty, sticky, nasty, cross-species details. Come on, you pervert, tell me everything."

The Doctor stares at him, unable to stop the look of dismay growing on his face. "No! Abso-blimin-lutely not!"

The Master widens his eyes. "Thought you wanted sex with me? You won't be able to hide from me in the link."

"Which is an entirely different thing from me sitting here sharing saucy secrets out loud for your
pleasure." The Doctor sighs. "Anyway, there really isn't that much to to tell. Some of my regenerations have been more... flexible than others, but, well, in the end, there really isn't any point, is there? They can't ever... It's never the same." He stares fixedly at some point beyond the Master's ear and hopes both that the light's dim enough to hide the blush he can feel burning his cheeks, and that the fortifications he's constructed around certain not all that old memories will hold.

"Because your poor humans lack the cerebral circuitry that would allow them to really join with you? Oh Doctor, that's the positive advantage of humans, not the limitation."

"And there!" The Doctor points at the Master. "That. That there. That's exactly the attitude that stinks of all bark no pitbull."

After a hesitation, the Master nods sagely. "You think I'll avoid sex 'cause I don't want you inside my head. It's true; Time Lord shagging is usually far more trouble than it's worth. All that intensity and deep meaningful bollocks, typical of our race." His voice and posture drip with distaste. "The looms made physical union unnecessary for reproduction, so instead of saying 'Whoopie! Now we can really have some fun!', they had to make even sex a six-act ceremony of rite and pompous formula. I do hope you don't expect me to follow conventions."

"I was never much cop at them either," the Doctor admits.

"I remember," the Master says with a sly smile, which makes the Doctor badly want to kiss him.

"What else do you remember?" he asks, smiling himself.

The Master snorts. "And you're not getting any romantic reminiscing from me either. Really, Doctor, you're hopeless. I just want to get naked and do some gruntwork to alleviate the tedium. If you can't oblige, make your clapped out capsule take us somewhere where someone or something else will."

The Doctor watches as the Master tugs neurotically at his silver torque, seemingly unaware he's doing it. There's nothing physically uncomfortable about the thing, whatever the Master likes to claim; it's slim, smooth and loosely fitted. It's very well made, of course; the Master should take pride in his own work. Nonetheless, the Doctor often imagines he can see chafing.

Sometimes he worries the collar is trapping the Master inside his own head with his tormenting drums and allowing him no way to release the tension. Certainly some of the wilder tantrums have suggested that. Sometimes the Doctor wishes he'd left the thing where he'd found it in the Master's TARDIS. If he had though, the Master would be long gone by now, committing multiple atrocities in a fit of pique no doubt and blaming the Doctor.

Keeping his voice soft, the Doctor asks, "Will it help block the drums?"

The Master sneers. "Fucking? Depends how good you make it, I suppose."

"Me?" He gives the Master an incredulous look. "Oh come, that's hardly fair. I'm not exactly an expert."

The Master snorts. "Doctor of everything, my arse."

"Well, if you insist."

That forces a bark of laughter from the Master, who then shakes his head firmly. "No way."
The Doctor nods. He hadn't expected the Master to have changed that much regardless of how different this regeneration sometimes seems. "I probably shouldn't do this anyway. It's not exactly ethical, having sex with one's, er, political prisoner."

"Is that what I am? Mealy-mouthed as ever, Doctor. And who's trying to get out of it now, anyway?" The Master starts to stand up, and without thinking, the Doctor grabs his arm to stop him.

"I'm not. Not really. I want this. It's just so easy to think of reasons why sex with you is a very bad idea. But I want this. I really, really want this." He tries to imbue his words with a hint of the desperate need he feels for the Master. Not necessarily for sex, but for the man, the Time Lord, his opposite yet his only equal. His one remaining chance.

And that's a perfect opportunity for the Master to exclaim 'tough!' and to flounce off, leaving the Doctor frustrated and miserable, but instead the Master just settles back down and asks, "Worried I'm going to give you a nasty dose of venereal evil?"

"You won't," the Doctor says softly, shuffling closer to the Master. Part of him is wondering what he's doing, but the rest doesn't care. Nah, that's not true. The rest is screaming inside him: 'Grab him now before he tries to get away again!' There's been a gaping chasm inside the Doctor since the Time War, and he just can't cope with it alone anymore.

He sits as close as he can manage, grabs at the back of the Master's neck, and starts kissing him fiercely.

For a few moments, the Master fights him, trying to pull back; then the Doctor feels a strong hand behind his own neck and a tongue thrust hard into his mouth. Oh yeah. This is good. No. Nonono, this is bad, isn't it? The Master tastes of strawberry jam. Okay, that's just incongruous and probably doesn't matter. There's a real living Time Lord body writhing against him, trying to force him down onto his back, and the only reason the Doctor's resisting is so that he can feel the sensation of the Master's strength for that much longer.

And the bread knife's not a bread knife anymore; it's a, oh, a gyroscope or a solar system. Spinning and tugging and pushing, all in a wonderfully imperfect balance, and he knows what he wants now. Oh yeah, he knows all right.

The Doctor raises a hand to the Master's face, fingers pressing at his temple, but the tentative link is blocked hard, a solid lead door slamming down. The Master breaks the kiss to mutter, "Not yet. I get to decide when, not you," and the Doctor doesn't fight it, moves his hand down. It's only fair the Master gets to control this as the Doctor's taken everything else from him.

He lets himself lie back in the tatty fur coat and moans into the Master's mouth as his own is filled with hard squirming tongue, an equally hard and squirming body lying on top of him. After a while, the Doctor's wondering if he'll need his respiratory bypass system to kick in, but it's the Master who breaks them apart.

He holds the Doctor's face in his gloved hands and stares down at him, managing a breathless, "You kiss like a human."

"So do you."

"I know. Good, isn't it?"

"Very. Do it more."
And they're off again. The Doctor tries to unbutton the Master's shirt, but when the Master simply rips the Doctor's shirt open, buttons flying everywhere, the Doctor gives up and does the same. Soon both of them are topless. Well, the Doctor still has his tie somehow, but that's all. Skin to skin, it's incredible. He can feel the charge building between them like static electricity before a storm.

The Master's grinding into him, his legs between the Doctor's, and the Doctor's thrusting up frantically. It's all so animal, so, so... human. And it's not enough. It's never been enough. He needs what only the Master can give him. It's a betrayal of so many people he cares for, and it's more than he deserves, but he's taking it anyway... if it ever gets offered.

He breaks the kiss long enough to beg, "Please. Please, Master."

The Master laughs, lifting himself up on his arms above the Doctor. He seems in full evil dictator mode, and just for a moment, the Doctor's not sure he's ever felt so vulnerable. Everything the Master's done to him over the years, every crime of the Master's he's been forced to witness, and yet only this makes him feel like he could be broken? He's starting to understand just how much trouble he could be in here.

And the Master knows it too; it's in his eyes. The Doctor shudders. "Please," he whispers. Please don't.

"Not yet," the Master murmurs again, and the Doctor can't tell which plea he's answering.

Suddenly hating how passive he's being, the Doctor bucks, rolling them both over so he's on top, forcing his legs between the Master's and frowning when it just makes the Master laugh. "Stop it."

"No." The Master's grin is smug and oozing confidence. "You can't control this. You can't control me. You're riding a wild horse, Doctor. Ooh yes, and it's a vicious bastard that hates you for the audacity of thinking you can tame it. Only a matter of time before you fall to the rocks and get trampled into pâté de Seigneur du Temps!"

The Doctor feels his teeth clench, his nostrils flare. He's furious and frightened, and he doesn't totally understand where either emotion is coming from. He grabs the Master's head between his hands and spits, "Shut up," before kissing him in a way designed to damage delicate flesh. He tastes blood almost immediately, but it could be his own.

Suddenly, he's on his back again, winded, having been thumped hard between the hearts. The Master straddles him, says, "Warned you," and starts to strip the Doctor of his trousers. The Doctor lets him, but as soon as the Doctor's naked, he makes a grab for the Master and flips him back to the floor.

This time he's punched in the jaw, hard enough to bruise, and before he can recover from that he finds himself rolled on his belly, trying not to choke on a mouthful of old fur, the Master's weight above him. "You know," the Doctor says in a tight voice, "I realise it's been a long time, but this isn't how I remember sex going."

"Don't care," the Master says, sounding angry and very close to the Doctor's ear. "This is how sex is going to be. It's the only way you're going to get it, and you're going to get it unless you use the collar. That's your only choice here, Doctor, whether or not to use it." Leather clad fingers tangle into his hair and tighten. "So, what'll it be, brave contestant? Gonna have to hurry you now..."

"Do it." What else can he say?
"Is that your final answer?"

"Don't push it, Master."

There's a snort close to his ear. "I was thinking more of thrusting it."

"Dry? Oh lovely, that will be fun."

"You'd deserve it." There's movement above him; the weight lifts. "Fortunately for you, I happen to have found some fascinating stuff called 'Passion Fruit Juicy Lube' in one of the bathrooms. Can't think what you might've needed that for."

"It's Jack's." His legs are moved apart by surprisingly gentle hands.

"Oh, of course it is. Who else? Quite a lot used up too, I see."

"Nothing to do with me." The Doctor bites back a noise as a cold, slippery, leather-clad finger presses between his buttocks. "So, you just happened to pick it up then, Master, thinking it might come in useful? Oh. Oh, ahhh. That's, ah..."

"No 'might' about it, Doctor." The Master works his finger in and out. "You've always been so obliging about falling headfirst into my traps. Got to thank you for that. Really."

"Trap?" he asks weakly, not sure he really wants to know.

"Told you, wait and see. It'll be fun." The Master's voice lowers into a near growl as he adds, "I promise."

The finger leaves him, and after the noise of a zip opening, the weight returns on his back. Is this really happening? Has the Master trapped him in some kind of illusion? Oh bugger. Literally, oh bugger. The Master's pushing inside him. Pressure moving inwards, a burn like an up-welling of strange joy deep within him – it's something he's not felt for nine regenerations, but the past is echoing around him like a mirrored mosaic.

Nah, this doesn't feel like any illusion the Doctor's ever known, and he's known, ooh, a wide variety. Course, a good illusion trap is one that creates a willing prisoner, and the Doctor's feeling pretty damn willing. It's been so long. He's been empty so long. And yeah, he knows the Master just admitted to a trap. He's just not sure he cares.

"Master?" he starts, trying to show willing to his conscience.

"Feel good?"

"Yeah. Yeah, don't stop."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Need more."

"Not yet. Be patient."

"Hah!" Patient? The Doctor pushes up to meet the Master coming down. "Master, I need-"

"I said not yet!" The Master punctuates his words with hard and ill-aimed thrusts, and the Doctor shuts up quickly, wondering again what in the name of lost Gallifrey he's doing.
The Master probably intends never to initiate the link at all. That's the trap; fooling the Doctor into human-style sex. He doesn't realise the Doctor would've said yes anyway. Would say yes to almost anything that brought them into closer contact. And that's wrong, isn't it? That's very, very wrong.

The Doctor's having trouble thinking. He's trying to work out why he feels he needs to be thinking right now, but he can't even think enough for that. It's like the Master has his laser screwdriver pointing at the Doctor again, but instead of ageing him, it's stripping him of centuries, sending him back, back, back to where it all began between them.

The Master's almost silent above him. His gloved hands lean on the Doctor's shoulders, holding him down, his thrusts regular and steady. Is he remembering too? When the Doctor moans at the building ache inside him, is the Master remembering a boy moaning in his arms in the crimson grass? Aww, but the Doctor needs the link. He has to have it.

It's been so long, so very, very long. He wants it now, the perpetual now of the event horizon, never starting, never stopping, always just the moment. The Master inside him, him inside the Master, a squirming ouroborus trapped in amber. And, well, what if this is a honey trap, or maybe just a load of desperate bollocks on his part? He still wants it, craves it. He'll beg; he'll do whatever he has to.

He reaches out with his mind again, probing at the Master's locked tight thoughts, and the hands move on his shoulders, fingers slipping under the loop of his tie, pulling it tight against his throat.

"Stop that or I'll walk away and leave you here right now. You know I'll do it."

The Doctor stops. Lets his head sink when the tie loosens again.

"Now," says the Master, victory in his tone. "We're going... to have a nice... little chat."

"Wha... What?"

"Chat, conversation, tête a tête. Off to a good start, I must say."

How can the Master be talking so calmly while he's thrusting into the Doctor? Only the unnatural cadence to the clauses giving any hint of what he's doing. "What about?" the Doctor asks raggedly before burying his face back in the fur.

"You, and what... you think you're... doing here." The Master stops moving, and the Doctor groans in frustration. "Seriously, Doctor, what do you think you're doing? I mean, let's take stock. You're lying on the floor of your good ship TARDIS, starkers, the cock of your immortal enemy bugging you ragged, and... you're loving it?"

"Do we have to analyse it?" the Doctor asks, his voice just a tad high-pitched and panicky.

"What do you think your precious humans would say if they could see you?"

"Jack'd probably be getting off on it."

"Yeah, give you that one." The Master chuckles. "But the girlies? All those pretty girlies of yours, stretching out like a daisy chain back through time. What would they think? More to the point, what about all the rest of your precious humans? 'Doctor, oh Doctor,' they prayed, charging you up like a skinny Van de Graaff generator with their faith in you. Oh, what would they say if they could see their saviour like this?"

"They don't remember me." The Doctor closes his eyes as the Master starts to thrust again, fast and very hard, stopping just as suddenly.
"Oh, don't kid yourself." The Master's close to the Doctor's ear now. "They remember all right."

"No. You're wrong. Humanity completely lacks our time sense. They have no legacy of the paradox. It never happened for them. Nothing happened."

"Oh, perhaps not in their oh so limited conscious minds, but the memories are there, lurking in the corners of their nightmares, haunting the shadows of de-ja-vu." The Master pronounces each syllable of the French phrase with relish. "Maybe they'll catch sight of a silver football and have no clue why they're screaming, bless 'em. Maybe they'll constantly feel like they've forgotten something essential that they absolutely had to do. Oh and the Japanese, I mustn't forget them. As a nation, they'll fall into a tragic depression because some vital part of them knows that they're really all dead."

"Stop it. That isn't true."

The Master laughs. "I thought I was the one who underestimated them. Oh yes, Doctor. It's true. It's all there, just below conscious memory. They can never reach it, but they can never truly forget. Life'll seem just that little bit less real. And here you are, their nouveau Christ, being fucked up the arse by the Devil. Funny, isn't it?"

"Stop it. This isn't a game. Or if it is, I don't want to play anymore. Get off me." He tries to roll the Master off from his back, but then a finger touches his temple. No, two fingers. Two ungloved fingers, and oh...

The joining is brutal in its abruptness. The Doctor's head is suddenly brimming over with the Master's presence. There's no time to prepare himself, to protect things he doesn't want seen; the Master's just there. It's the most amazing thing the Doctor's felt in any regeneration. He's not alone. He's really not alone.

"Rassilon's rod, you've got it bad," he hears the Master say, out loud or in his head, the Doctor's not sure. "My poor Doctor. What does the hero of the universe do when the only one left he can love is, well, me? Not that I don't understand the attraction, but the irony, Doctor. Oh, you have to admire the irony."

The Doctor pushes back along the link, determined that this union won't be one-sided. He's surprised to meet no resistance at all. The Master's mind is wide open.

At first the Doctor feels like he's walking into the wardrobe again, a thundering beat greeting him, but of course it isn't rock music. It's the drumming. Is this what it's like all the time? His poor Master.

He hears the Master snort above him, feels him starting to move inside the Doctor's body again, but the sensation is distanced now. All the Doctor cares about is the mental connection, and it's the Doctor moving there, stirring their thoughts together, sharing so much of himself. He's blending them together, almost losing himself in the bliss of it. Aww, yeah, he needs this.

He can hear someone gasping. Probably him, but he can't be sure. He's swirling into the Master like cream into coffee, like the arms of a great spiral galaxy. Not alone. He's not bloody alone anymore, and it feels... amazing.

"Neither of us are," the Master mutters darkly; the Doctor's pretty sure that was aloud. The Master's thoughts are dark as his words, but it's the darkness of space, and it's studded with glittering pinpricks of stars. They pulse like Christmas lights to the same rhythm that permeates all of the Master, filling the Doctor now too. He's brimming, every cranny found and over-filled with the
stuff of the Master.

So many memories of the Doctor at the forefront of the Master's mind. Somehow, the Doctor hadn't expected that. They've clashed so often over the centuries. Each memory seems stained by a twisted sexuality in the Master's mind, their passion as youths corrupted into contactless battles of will, good versus evil, that still made the Master hard. Yeah, not just the Master. The Doctor remembers, for instance, the hefty erotic charge of a fanged Master wrestling him down onto stone and chewed bones.

The Master laughs, long and loud, and the sound echoes in the Doctor's ears and mind. "Oh, Doctor, my dear Doctor, how we do define each other."

The Doctor can feel the Master's physical pleasure rising and crystallising, and he links it to his own instinctively, like he always used to, forming a feedback loop. They feel each other's growing delight, each other's echo of their own delight, like mirrors reflecting mirrors reflecting mirrors, infinite and all-consuming. The Master feels the burn of a cock thrust inside him and the Doctor feels himself plunge into a squirming body. There's gasping and sobbing, and it's got to be coming from both of them now.

And the drums, the never-ending drums, are getting louder and louder, faster and faster, but always the same beat, and it's the beat of their hearts, of the pulse in their veins. It's the rhythm of the universe, of time itself, and a message of: Come! Do it! Fight, fuck, hunt, feast, scream, love, laugh, and above all, live! Why does the Master hear them only as a call to war?

The Doctor tries to show him, links them even closer to each other so the Master can see, but the Master shies away, roaring above the Doctor, dragging their linked attention elsewhere. Anywhere else, apparently. Taking pity, the Doctor opens vistas of their shared youth, lets them both experience what they once were again.

And it's in these memories of near innocence that they can stop fighting each other, just for a moment, and let the link cradle them as the pleasure builds to an almost painful threshold.

Above him, the Master is thrusting desperately, all rhythm and control gone, grunting like an animal, the fingers of his still gloved left hand tightening the tie around the Doctor's neck. Inside their joined minds, however, it's the Doctor who is leading them, pulling together the strings of their thoughts and feelings, tighter and tighter, more and more intense, until all borders between them are gone and all they are is one burning, spasming pulsar in the soft black field of space.

"Doctor..." the whisper fills the silence after the crescendo.

Just before he loses consciousness, the Doctor becomes aware that the beat, so much quieter now, is more than just noise, more even than the call of the universe. Each pulse forms a cobble in a path leading back into recesses of the Master's mind so distant he's not sure even the Master knows they're there. The Doctor starts to follow the path where it leads, but blackness catches him from behind like a mugger, and he falls past the event horizon into otherness.

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The Doctor wakes up coughing.

His mouth feels full of fur... maybe 'cause it is. Oh bugger. This isn't good, is it? He's got a feeling a whole warehouse full of shoes is about to fall on his head. Sitting up, he looks around, wincing at the soreness of his bum. No sign of the Master. Reaching out, he can feel the other Time Lord somewhere above him in the TARDIS. Well, they're both still alive. That's something.
Sighing, wincing again – this time at the pain in this throat – he twists onto his hands and knees to look for his clothes. He'll need a new shirt if his rather jumbled memories are correct. His right hand lands on something cold. He looks down and suddenly finds he can't breathe.

It's the Master's collar.

That's... not possible. It's not possible! Only a mental command from him could open that collar, and he'd damn well remember if he'd... Oh no. They'd linked minds, merged... The Master's thoughts and his had been as one. Oh, how stupid is he? The limited collar technology wouldn't have been able to tell... and it's at least a teeny weeny bit possible the TARDIS couldn't either!

Oh no. No, nonononono...

He's still trying to hop into his trousers as he stumbles from the stairs into the Console Room, the collar dangling around his wrist like an over-sized bangle. The Master's sitting casually on the captain's chair, immaculately dressed, legs extended and ankles folded, the Doctor's sonic screwdriver turning round and round in his gloved hands. By the chair is the small tank holding the Doctor's severed hand.

Everything looks suspiciously normal in the room apart from the Master. Doing up his fly, the Doctor ignores the cheery greeting smile aimed his way, and snatching back his screwdriver, he heads for the navigation controls. "What are we doing here?" he asks stupidly, looking at what they report.

"Oh, come now, Doctor," the Master says, pulling in his legs and standing up. "Do I really need to explain the significance of the Kasterborous system?"
"This is impossible. It's just not possible."

The Master shakes his head ruefully at the Doctor's bare back and sits down on a handy rock. Eventually the Doctor'll have to admit the evidence of his own wide eyes, but until he does, the Master might as well take it easy. He shrugs off his jacket, loosens his tie, and lets the warmth of the twin suns soak through his shirt.

Strange being back here, really. This red-gold planet with its dry heat and burnished sky seems, hmm, hyper-real, like the planet of the Tellytubbies compared to Earth. Everything's just a little too bright, too intensely coloured, textured or scented. The Master supposes he can see why the Doctor's having a few issues waking up and smelling the... well, the Schlenk Blossom actually.

The Doctor, naked bar his trousers, is golden in the sunlight, almost metallic. His hair, wildly spiky from all the wringing he's been doing, seems bronze-tipped. The Master pulls one leg up onto the rock and wraps his arms around it as he settles in to enjoy the view. Time Lords should always be seen in a fiery light, he feels. The two suns are near conjunction, high in the sky.

It's enough to make him purr really: the collar gone, the sunlight warming his blood, and the golden vision of his rival to heat it further. But the Eye of Harmony burnt away the cheetah infection along with everything else he was back then, and he doesn't ever purr anymore, not out loud.

Fuck, it'd felt good inside the Doctor. Too good. The drums had been full throttle, overpowering, but the drums had been shared, and that was... yeah, too good. Dangerous. He'd better make sure it doesn't happen again. Well, maybe once more, but then that's it. Once or twice more. Can't let his head become too comfortable a place for the Doctor; he might try to move in.

Still, it's handy dandy that the Doctor craves him so intensely. Works out nicely for him and his plans. The Master isn't sure where the Doctor's craving has come from; it certainly wasn't there the last time they tussled back in... oh yeah, San Francisco. Of course it was. Not the Master's finest hour. Such a pain, sometimes, perfect recall.

The craving's probably just the Doctor's survivor guilt getting all twisted up with a pre-existent martyr complex and, ooh, an underlying avoidant personality disorder. Yeah, that's it, so creating an obsessive-compulsive need for the symbolic punishment object. Perfect!

The Master grins to himself. Human psychology is so funny. Poor little things trying to make sense of irrational genetic imperatives and mental crossed wires. They've got no chance. Bless.

And yet there they still were, self-cannibalising at the end of the universe when everyone and everything else had long gone. The rats of the cosmos, that's humans: opportunistic, highly adaptable, breeding incessantly, and remarkably resilient as a race if not as individuals. They sometimes even washed up cute as fluffy buttons. Despite ample opportunity, they'd failed utterly in their efforts to become extinct, and there, at the end, they paid the price for not lying down to die when their time came, came, and came again.

He has to admire them just a little for that.

The Master watches the Doctor crouch several metres away, hands moving through the dark crimson grass as if trying to reassure himself it's really there. The golden back seems to be shaking
– laughter or more of those precious baby Jesus tears? The Master should bottle them, sell them to some barmy collector of esoterica for a few planets' worth of credit.

Abruptly, the Doctor stands and turns, sprinting back through the long grass. The Master likes the way the Doctor runs in this regeneration. For such a tall and gangly body, it has surprising co-ordination. The Doctor drops straight from his run to his knees in front of the Master and grabs the Master's arms. "This can't be!"

"Oh, but it is."

"This... It's is one of your tricks! You've done... something." The Doctor's fingers are pressing into the Master's arms uncomfortably. His eyes are huge and full of something like panic. The Master can't decide whether to be amused or annoyed.

"Yes, I did something," he says, trying to detach the clenched fingers from his flesh with little success. "I broke your isomorphic protection on the TARDIS controls and brought us here. Isn't that obvious?"

"But where is here?"

Annoyance is starting to win. "D'you think you could let go of my arms? Starting to lose sensation in my fingers. You remember my fingers? Things that made you moan out loud not so long ago?"

"What? Oh, yeah, sorry." The Doctor releases the Master and sits back on his heels. "Sorry. What is this place, Master? You have to tell me."

The Master rubs at his upper arms and warmly considers whacking the Doctor round the head a few times. Might help straighten out his corrugated thoughts. He'd sulk though and then probably remember the collar. No, best to pretend to be a good boy for a little longer. "You saw the coordinates."

"Yes, but..." The Doctor rakes at his hair with both hands. "It's impossible. This shouldn't... This place can't exist!"

"And yet. And yet." The Master should've brought a crossword book or something with him. This could go on for a while.

The Doctor stares intensely at him, seeming almost physically pained by his own confusion... which looks hot actually, really bloody sexy. The Master imagines the slender body completely naked, stretched out further, crucifix style, noble suffering racking the angular face, touches of fresh blood on brow and palms. You have to hand it to humans, a huge religion based around an all-pervading image of erotic sadomasochism. No wonder they like the Doctor so much.

"I saw it burn," the Doctor repeats slowly, blinking and looking a little taken aback as if he's picking up on some of the Master's irreverent thoughts.

"I believe you," the Master tells him in his best 'humouring the kiddies' voice. The Doctor's face, the faintest silver over the gold. The Master wonders if he can get away with licking them. Then he decides he doesn't care if he can't and so drops to his knees. Holding the Doctor's head in his gloved hands, the Master licks lasciviously up one side of his face.

The Doctor, unbelievably, doesn't even seem to notice. "But... I saw it burn."
The Master raises an eyebrow. Really, for a genius, the man is staggeringly slow at times. Shrugging, he proceeds to collect the tang of salt from the other cheek.

"This isn't Gallifrey. It can't be."

Sighing, the Master pauses in his fun. "Well, technically, I suppose you're right. It isn't Gallifrey yet. Maybe never will be."

"I don't understand."

"You never do understand, Doctor." The Master shakes his head. Hopeless, the man's hopeless. He licks the spot just below the corner of the Doctor's left eye before saying, "Did you happen to note the time coordinates before doing the forty-metre dash out here?"

"Of course I... er, no. Not so much."

Taking his hands away from the Doctor, the Master spreads them out in an expansive gesture. "Welcome to the year -10,003,075 BR. Sentient population: zero. Please drive carefully and take your litter with you when you leave."

"Why now?" the Doctor asks.

"Oh, it's a good several centuries out from where I was aiming, but I've pinched your old bucket of bolts often enough to know not to expect much in the way of pinpoint accuracy."

"She does her best. She just associates your touch with trauma; that's all." The Doctor's sweet when he's feeling protective too. Really, the Master needs to stop noticing things like that. He schools his face into proper disdain as the Doctor continues blathering. "How did you get the TARDIS to obey you, anyway? My locks and bindings were..."

"Very thorough, yes. Well done. Good job. But hardly a match for my intellect."

"Oh, bollocks to that. Your infamous genius is no better than mine."

"You mean to tell me you couldn't have broken through your protections?"

"Of course I... ah, you used my hand. Obvious, now I think of it." The rueful look on the Doctor's face suggests he's now actually starting to use his supposed intelligence. "There was enough of me still in your mind that, oh yeah, combined with my hand, the poor old girl was fooled. Gotcha. Did you make me pass out?" he asks with sudden suspicion.

"Bingo." The Master rests his hands chastely in his lap and tries not to remember the thrill of half-strangling the Doctor while their mutual orgasm still sang through their minds. "And this is the issue that really matters right now, is it, Doctor? How I got you here?"

The Doctor shakes his head like a dog with a flea in its ear. "Nah. Right. So. We're back in the early days of the universe? And Gallifrey is... still here."

"Early enough that the birth pangs can still be felt in some places." The Master smiles, feeling like a proud ringmaster. "Ten million years before Rassilon and the Eye of Harmony. We are, at this moment, the only intelligent life in the universe, give or take the odd Eternal or nasty space vamp passing through."

"Gallifrey burnt. I... I... It was gone. From time and space, gone. At least, I thought it was."
"Nope."

"What d'you mean 'nope'?" The Doctor glares at the Master. "You can't just say 'nope!' It happened. I was there. If... If you've done something to bring it back then... the paradox will be enormous! You'll destroy everything."

"Oh, Rassilon save me, you've been spending far too much time with humans. They've rotted your brain. Really, Doctor. I'm embarrassed for you." The Master pauses as something occurs to him. "Or was it me? Has my fun and games with the laser screwdriver caused premature senility to set in?"

"Oh, shut up and just tell me."

"Can hardly do both." He grins in a way he knows is dead annoying. "Tell me!"

The anger in the Doctor's voice finds the Master reaching up to tug at the slave collar that's no longer circling his throat. Irritated, he changes his movement into a dismissive wave. "No, you tell me! When you committed your double whopper genocide with extra cheese, what did you use? How did you do it, Doctor?"

Never has he seen the Doctor appear more shifty. Eyes averted, hands knotting in the grass, the Doctor looks like a scared boy caught stealing, not a Time Lord confessing his most terrible of deeds. "I didn't... I'm not... I don't know."

"Doctor!"

"I really don't!" The Doctor manages to meet his eyes, briefly. "Romana just... She gave me this remote detonation thingumy, a key to a doomsday device. I fixed it into the TARDIS, to the Imprimatur circuits in the Cloister Room. She told me to activate it only if all hope was lost, and there was no... If Gallifrey was doomed. Knew what it would do, more or less, but there was no time for details. She... She was weeping, Master. I'd never seen her weep. A tear here and there, yeah, but never..."

"Ah, our wonderful Lady President." The Master interrupts quickly before things can get too maudlin again. "Ooh, I wonder if she planned all this."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." The Master laughs a little gleefully. "Can't claim to have liked the bitch, but Romana was probably the best president that miserable bunch of self-serving, fat-brained reactionaries ever had. She resurrected me from the Matrix as her last best hope. Or maybe it was 'last desperate chance'. Something along those lines. I laughed in her face!" He barks with more of the remembered laughter and then grins wryly at the Doctor. "I said yes in the end though. Incentive package was just too good to refuse."

"As in 'do as I say or go back to being dead'?"

"And a nice new TARDIS as a sweetener. She had me at the 'not being dead' clause though." The Master winks at the Doctor, who laughs too. The Master's nose seems full of rich scents – the blossom, the soil, the light honey tang coming from the Doctor's skin. He finds himself sharing a gormless smile with the Doctor and looks away hurriedly. "So, what was our great Lady President like in bed, Doctor? Did she let loose? Submit to your masculine will like every good girl should?"
Obviously somewhat outraged at the question, the Doctor makes a finger gesture obscene in at least four systems, and the Master giggles, catching the offending finger and taking it to his mouth before he can stop himself. Oh, what the hell, he might as well. The finger tastes of cut grass. He presses his tongue to its slightly calloused underside as he moves his mouth back and forth around it.

"You shouldn't joke about this," the Doctor says eventually, slowly, sounding distracted despite himself. He attempts rather feebly to tug his hand away from the Master. "They were our people, *us*. And you still haven't explained..."

The Master reluctantly lets the Doctor's hand go. "Right. Bzzzzt! Fun over. So what did you do with this device? How did it work?"

"I think..." The Doctor rubs his hands roughly over his face. "It connected straight to the Eye of Harmony via the RP system. So... some kind of temporal string deconstructor powered by the Eye, using data from the Matrix?"

"Plus a more physical destructive capacity, surely."

"Rather inevitable, that, when you're playing with singularities." The Doctor's gaze is distant, or perhaps merely unfocused. "The Daleks were winning. After everything, all our defences, they were winning. They were under the Panopticon, the High Council all dead, our fleets destroyed. There was no one left to stop them. I had no choice." The Doctor turns to look straight at the Master, but still doesn't seem to really see him. "I had no choice."

"You know," the Master remarks quietly, doing his best not to jog his own memories of the events, "if you actually believed that, you'd be a lot more full of joie de still alive."

The Doctor doesn't seem to hear him either. "Pressing the button knocked me and the TARDIS into a Vortex bubble. I was granted a window to reality, and I couldn't... I watched Gallifrey burn. I felt them all die, Master. All of them. First those on the planet and then little echoing screams from around the universe as Time Lords were wiped from existence. All of them, gone. Never been. I killed them all."

"Oh now, don't go getting all damp about the eyes again." The Master can't resist lifting a finger to the Doctor's cheek, catching a tear, the leather shining as the tear runs. "You're pretty in pain, but there's a limit to how much useless sentiment I can take; you've long passed it."

"Sod off." The Doctor looks away, sniffing noisily.

"Now I don't think you mean that, do you?"

The Doctor sighs and finally moves off his knees, sitting cross-legged in the grass. The soles of his feet are stained by the grass like the thinnest smear of blood across them. "Romana... She said it was my fault. The war was my fault, so I had to be the one to stop it. Thought the device would kill me too." He shakes his head violently, a shiver running through him. "My punishment was to live."

The Master decides to settle down too, at the Doctor's flank. He moves his legs so that they are spread, bent up, to either side of the Doctor. This way he's close enough to keep playing with his new favourite toy.

Okay, not so new as all that.

"Your fault why?" he asks, flicking a small insect from the Doctor's chest.
"I started it." The Doctor laughs without humour, pushing his fingers hard back through his hair. "Six regenerations ago, I was sent to Skaro, to when Davros was building his prototype Daleks, and I was told to change things. Stop them before they could threaten the whole universe. Couldn't do it. Not genocide, not then. But I put them back a good thousand years or so. They remembered. Took revenge. Started a cycle of tit for tat that grew and grew."

"Oh, Doctor. I hope you've learnt your lesson. Never poke a denned tiger with a stick. Go in with heavy artillery or don't go in at all. Better still, an armed warhead from a far away bunker. Ooh, even better yet – blow the whole planet into dust and rocks! More fun that way too. Ka-boom! One atomised tiger, sorted."

"They should've sent you."

"They should have!" The Master snorts. "Well, they did. Later on. Didn't exactly go to plan, not to their plan. I achieved their objectives my own way. Then the ungrateful bitch sent me back again to be tried and executed for the crimes they'd had me commit. Ooh, I hope the High Council's deaths were really nasty! With a bit of luck, they're all stuck in some temporal event horizon, paralysed in unending torment. That'd be nice, wouldn't it? Yeah, nice." He smiles, picturing it.

Hmm, the Doctor's staring at him for some reason, brow creased.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." The Doctor shakes his head. "Nothing much, anyway. Just remembering collecting your ashes after the execution."

"Aww, were you sad?" The Master widens his eyes and purses his lips into a moue. "Tell me, did you shed a rare tear?"

The Doctor smiles ever so slightly. "Mostly I just didn't believe you were gone. Seen you come back from the 'definitely dead this time, absolutely gone, no question about it' so many times, Master."

"Yet, this last time, you felt you had to force things?"

"Jack offered. He saw how... I was upset, and he offered. Very big of him, considering how you'd treated him. I didn't even know he could do that. Not even sure he should actually, but then he really shouldn't do anything at all, shouldn't exist at all, not anymore."

"I'm sure he found forcing his freak version of the kiss of life on me to be enjoyable revenge for any mistreatment he experienced." And Jack Harkness, or whatever his real name is as it certainly isn't that, is going to pay in many and varied ways for his interference. The Master has plans.

"You really regret being saved that much?" the Doctor asks. "Even now? You seem to be enjoying life today."

As the Master's currently playing his fingers in that fascinating patch of hair on the Doctor's chest while getting off on pleasant fantasies of torturous revenge, he can't really deny that. "The drums are quieter out here. Don't know why," he says instead. It's true enough. He decides to take one of his gloves off so he can better feel the Doctor's skin.

"That's interesting," the Doctor says thoughtfully. "Maybe the drumming's connected to the background noise of the universe somehow? With no sentient species alive right now, all that buzz and cacophony we're used to is."
"Or maybe it's simply that I'm not wearing your atrocity of a collar anymore."

"Actually, it was your atrocity of a collar."

"Don't remind me."

The Doctor chuckles, but then immediately frowns again. "Thought I'd wiped the Daleks and Time Lords both from history. But instead there's us two alive, and the Daleks... Well, the bastards keep coming back, don't they? They're worse than you for not staying dead. And Gallifrey..."

"My guess? The physical destruction was limited to the forward-flowing timestream initiated when the Eye of Harmony was created, and pre-Eye Gallifrey therefore remains."

"Hmm." The Doctor's frown deepens. He's thinking hard; the Master's glad to see it. "The Eye technically existed outside history, but I suppose... the device had a limited blast range?" He smiles weakly at the Master. "Our genetic parents no longer ever existed, you know. You and I should be a... ooh, a deadly allergen for the universe."

"Seeing as galaxies are persistently failing to go ka-boom, or even moob-ak around us, Doctor, I'd say, nope, we're not walking paradoxes. That, or our understanding of paradox needs updating since the War. But my lovely little paradox loop on Earth worked just the way it was meant to 'til you and, what's that phrase? Oh yes, you and your meddling kids interfered."

He smirks. In fact, viewed retrospectively, everything went exactly according to his plan, including the interference.

"Yeah." The Doctor nods. "So the universe healed a bit messily around the scar. Is still healing, in fact. Time's been chaotic since the War. Straight lines have gone all wibbly-wobbly; forks have appeared where there were no forks before. Rifts and ruptures are all over the blimin' shop. The universe is... convalescent." He snorts and then his tone darkens. "Would've been mutated into a Daleesque hell had the War continued. We kept looping back, both sides, changing history to get the upper hand, crossing time-lines without care, destroying the warp fibres of reality. It was... obscene."

"I was there." The Master had in fact been responsible for some of the obscenities. Their recent fun and games on Earth wasn't the first time he'd created a paradox machine, merely his most successful attempt. He's developing quite a knack for them. He pinches the Doctor's nearest nipple to wake him up. "I saw it for myself, Doctor."

"I know." The Doctor rubs absently at his chest. "Sorry. Never saw you, but I think I felt your presence occasionally. Maybe. Did... were you wearing the regeneration of Professor Yana?"

"Awkward way to put it, but yeah. A lot younger then, of course. You liked him, didn't you?"

"The Professor? Aww yeah, he was great, admirable. Dead sexy intellect."

"He was a weak fool."

"Because he cared?" The Doctor directs what seems a half-hearted glare in the Master's direction. "'Cause he strived for the good of others even at the very end of things? If that's a weak fool, then I can only hope to become one myself."

Oh, how he does walk straight into them. "In that case," the Master says, smirk even more pronounced, "be reassured, Doctor. You've always been one."
"Yeah, and I love you too, Master." The Doctor smiles with unexpected wickedness, and the Master has to amp up the willpower to stop himself fidgeting. He doesn't like either what was said or the nasty look of confidence in the Doctor's eye. He'll have to do something about that.

Not now though.

There's a long silence. So long, the Master uses the wait to remove his shoes and socks. He lies back in the long grass and shuts his eyes, luxuriating in the sounds and sensations of his home planet in a way he hasn't taken time for since he was a youth.

Not that it's quite the same here, in this time, epochs before the industrial age Gallifreyans had come close to ruining the atmosphere, but still. The bird and insect song, the scents in the air, the warm spectrum colours everywhere – it's easy to believe that, were he to hike over those distant mountains behind him, he'd be able to see the spires of the Citadel on the horizon.

"I suppose you think I'm very slow," the Doctor says after some minutes.

"Pretty sure I said something along those lines," the Master replies, not opening his eyes. He grins to himself, biting his lower lip.

"It's just... I want this to be real too much. Can't trust myself. My thoughts are... Nothing's making much sense, you especially. Can't begin to work out what you're planning, Master, and..."

"Then stop trying. Lie down here with me and relax. Think about easier things such as the last time we lay together in long Gallifreyan grass."

The Doctor snorts, but does what he's told, lying down on his back beside the Master.

The Master rolls onto his side, a long blade of grass in his hand. He plays it over the Doctor's chest and chuckles when the Doctor's lips twitch. He says, "I would've died of old age as that human fool if not for your Martha."

"I'm not sure. Maybe it was just time for you to investigate the watch, even without Martha. I did it once, you know, became human. Quite recently in fact."

Interesting. "Who or what were you running from?"

"The Family of Blood."

"Those mosquitoes? Why on earth run from them?"

"Felt sorry for 'em. Stop it, that tickles." The Doctor catches the Master's hand and holds it. "It was... strange wanting so little from life, being content with such simplicity. Yet in many ways, that rubbish little man I became had more than I've got, more than I've had for... a very long time."

"He sounds revolting."

"He was nowhere near as admirable as your Professor. Although..." The Doctor makes a so-so gesture with his head. "He came through when it mattered."

"Did he cry? I bet he cried buckets. This regeneration of yours seems to have a talent for it."

"You know what I think?" The Doctor rolls onto his side to face the Master, propping his head up on one hand and pushing down the grass between them with the other. "I think you're still a little bit inside my head."
The Master considers that, poking about experimentally in his mind. "Been a while, Doctor, but I seem to remember that's inevitable after shagging one's own. Wonder how long it'll take to lose you this time?"

"Did I ever really go? Think how often I've featured in your plans, even when you've had to pull me in from galaxies away, just to make my life a misery."

The Master grins. "Like it should be."

"Probably." The Doctor's not grinning.

"Oh, don't go getting all glum again. It's only fun when you disagree. I picked on you 'cause you were the only one bright enough to appreciate my cleverness. You must know that."

That at least gets him a smile. The Doctor leans forward and briefly kisses the Master on the lips. "Nice here, innit?" he says as he pulls back. "Don't remember the last time I felt so... at peace with things. Not been able to talk about what happened before now."

"Yeah, I've got that peaceful feeling too. It's revolting." The Master leans forward and returns the kiss. His lasts longer and involves a quick dart of tongue before he finishes. "Or it should be. Not exactly natural for either of us, all this relaxation. Could be the sunlight?"

It is very warm and bright, after all, filling their vision with a red glow, their skin with a warmth more natural to a human body than a Time Lord's. Hard to do anything but bask when in such heavy, syrupy light.

"Hmm." The Doctor strokes a light finger across the Master's face, perhaps following the line between light and shadow. "Maybe. Or maybe there's something in the air during this period. Prehistoric botany wasn't exactly my field at the Academy."

"Well, it was hardly mine."

The Doctor probably didn't want to say any more at that point anyway, but he's denied the chance. The Doctor's hand hooks around the back of the Master's neck, and suddenly they're kissing passionately again, the heat already on the Master's skin igniting like wildfire and spreading through his whole body.

With a deep groan, the Master surges up, moving on top of the Doctor, doing his absolute best to consume the Doctor's mouth. He's holding the Doctor's face with his hands, and as one is already gloveless, it's a matter of no consideration at all to thrust into the Doctor's mind.

He's welcomed with such an upswell of desperate joy that it makes him laugh, tipping his head back from the Doctor's and almost roaring his amusement out to the world. The Doctor's hands scrabble up, grabbing at the Master's face, and his presence washes through the Master's mind like a warm wave over hot sand, seeping through all the cracks in his thoughts, saturating him.

It's almost too much to keep control, and the Master growls like an animal, shifting above the Doctor and dragging clawed fingers hard down the Doctor's bare chest. He laughs again as pain ricochets from the Doctor's mind. Oh yeah, there's so much more where that came from. He opens the Doctor's trousers, pushing them down a little. There's no underwear; the Doctor never took the time to put it on after waking alone in the wardrobe room.

The Master's intending to move down, use his lips, tongue, and a pleasantly torturous amount of teeth on the slender long cock he's just exposed, but the Doctor stops him, pulling him in for another kiss. 'Don't,' he hears in his mind. 'Stay with me.'
He hadn't exactly been planning a hike to Mount Cadon, but so be it. The Master feels between them again, freeing his own cock and pushing his lower clothes down far enough not to interfere. That done he relaxes into the Doctor's embrace, biting at the Doctor's lower lip. Suddenly remembering how, he drags a barbed thought through the Doctor's mind.

"Fuck!" The Master truly isn't sure which one of them yells it as brilliant sparkles of pain explode between them. Their bare cocks grind together, their thoughts starting to weave into a single glittering tapestry. Pleasure soaks through the Master, gold as the sunlight. He's aflame, soaring, feeling full of power, when he becomes aware that the Doctor has stopped moving and is pulling abruptly back from the mental link.

"What's wrong?" the Master asks in a voice he can only hope sounds more irritated than panicky. "I didn't do anything!"

The Doctor's hand squeezes the Master's shoulder in a way that feels like reassurance, but all the Doctor says is, "So, tell me, if the Time Lords are imperfectly wiped from history, are our prehistoric ancestors around currently or not?"

Frowning at what seems a complete non-sequitur, the Master nonetheless tries for a civil answer. "I couldn't locate any while I waited for you to wake up back in the TARDIS. My guess is they've gone from the time-line too. Why, were you hoping to invite them to join us?"

"And the saurians?"

The Master can feel a deep scowl tightening the skin of his forehead. The drums are suddenly louder again, regimenting his mind. "Nothing whatsoever to do with the proto-Gallifreyans beyond providing competition in these early days," he snaps.

"So they still exist." The Doctor nods. "And have had no competition to scale them back. And that deep, slow thumping noise I can hear getting closer and louder is therefore...?"

Swallowing, the Master looks up. "Um," he says, staring at the very large shape lumbering towards them. "Time for tubby bye bye!" He jumps to his feet, hauls his trousers up with one hand, and deserting jacket, shoes, and Doctor alike, he hurtles for the TARDIS.

About halfway there, he trips over a tussock and is hauled back to his feet by the Doctor, who grabs his spare hand and yanks him back into a sprint. They speed through the grass, hearts beating fast. Giant feet thump into the ground behind, and the warmth of the suns disappears as a huge shadow is cast over them.

"They never grew this big before!" the Master yells. He's convinced he can feel hot lizard breath on the back of his neck.

"Just keep running!" the Doctor yells back.

They slam inside the TARDIS just as huge jaws snap together above their heads. Good thing the Master left the door open when following the Doctor's mad dash out. Before they can do anything but catch a single breath, the TARDIS jolts violently, throwing the Doctor towards the stairs and the Master onto the central console.

"External forcefield!" the Doctor yells, dangling from the stair rails as gravity in the TARDIS interior suddenly shifts sideways, the walls becoming the new floor. "And the AGG!"

"I didn't break all your protections, Doctor," the Master complains, clinging to two of the more handle-like controls and hoping he isn't telling the TARDIS to do something highly dodgy.
Nonetheless, he tries to monkey swing himself around the console. His unfastened trousers fall through the air to hit the Doctor in the face. "Use your mind-link to this senile old bitch."

"Don't call her that." The Doctor's voice is somewhat muffled, and the Master can't stop a giggle escaping at the sheer ridiculousness of the situation.

He hits the artificial gravity button just as the TARDIS is jolted again... and nothing happens. "At least get her to listen to me!"

"I'm trying! You've upset her."

The Master closes his eyes and wonders if he's going to have to apologise to a machine. He's not sure he could handle the humiliation on top of all the rest. Abruptly, the world rights itself again, and he breathes easier.

As the Master reclaims his trousers, the Doctor heads for the console, turning on the forcefield and murmuring soothing nothings to his cantankerous cow of a TARDIS as he does so. "She needs a firmer hand," the Master says, doing up his fly and tucking his shirt back in. "Like the pilot."

The Doctor shoots him a mildly outraged look, and the Master laughs. "Put it this way if you prefer. You need my hand, and that only comes in sizes 'firm', 'firmer' and 'utterly inflexible'."

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?"

He taps himself on the side of his head. "There's certain things you can no longer plausibly deny, Doctor."

"Same applies to you, Master."

The Master just smiles, at least until he sees the Doctor come towards him, collar in hand. "Oh no," he says, hurriedly backing off. "You're not putting that back on me."

"I have to."

"No, wait! Listen! Look! While you snored in blissed out unconsciousness, I could've put that damned thing on you. Think!"

The Doctor pauses. "Okay, why didn't you?"

A damn good question; it would be just splendid if the Master actually had an answer, not that he'd tell the Doctor if he had. "Wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy," he says instead, putting his hand on the stair rail and getting ready to run for it. "Which would be you." No way will he accept that thing again. Just no way.

"Oh come." The Doctor's look is scornful. "So you'd age me into that shrunken gnome thing and put me in a cage to laugh at, and I'm expected to believe a control collar goes too far?"

"I thought you forgave me that."

"I did and I do, always. That doesn't mean I wouldn't rather have less to forgive." He looks down at the collar in his hands and frowns. "Suggest another method then. You're the expert on this kind of thing. How can I ensure you're not running off to destroy worlds and ruin lives as soon as I turn my back on you?"

"Permanent 'contact'." The words have left the Master's mouth before he has a chance to even think
about what he's suggesting.

"You're joking." The Doctor clearly doesn't believe the Master said that either. "An entrelacement bond?"

They give each other very uneasy looks.

"Nah," the Doctor says eventually, drawing out the word. "Surely the collar's better than that."

The Master shakes his head, still having problems believing he's really considering it. Has he sunk so low? He can hear his hearts pounding in his chest. He speaks in a low, intense voice. "The bond would leave me free will. You'd know where I was, what I was feeling, could talk to me no matter what, but you couldn't just... drop me, like a puppet with its strings cut. Like your fucking puppet."

The Doctor just stares, frowning slightly but one eyebrow raised.

Turning aside, the Master plays with a control on the tesseractulator console. On, off, on, off... On, off, on, off... "We'd be equal. Both in the same poky little boat. You'd be as trapped as me."

"True..."

The Master clenches his teeth. It'll only be a stronger, more permanent version of the mental linking they're already experiencing thanks to the sex. A lot stronger and far more permanent. On, off, on, off.... On, off, on, off...

The Doctor seems to be waiting for the Master to say something more, but there's nothing to say. The drums are so loud that he can barely hear anything outside his head. His fists clench.

He speaks with slow deliberation. "Don't you dare make the mistake of thinking I actually want to be bonded to you, Doctor. I despise everything to do with you. You disgust me, you weak, snivelling, wannabe martyr. It'll be unmitigated hell, a bond with you. But it'll still be better than that abomination back round my neck."

And if he has to be in hell, better by far that the Doctor should burn too.

Turning the torque in his hands, the Doctor shudders. "It was that bad?" He shakes his head and gets out his sonic screwdriver from his trouser pocket. There's a snap, and the collar is suddenly in four pieces. The pieces drop to the floor, bouncing slightly with metallic clinks, and the Doctor kicks them aside. "Okay, deal. We create the bond, for better or worse. Sink or swim together." He holds his hand out to the Master.

Oh sweet mother of chaos, what has the Master done? What the hell has he done? This is insane... but it's the only way if his plans are to succeed. The Doctor has to trust him. The Master forces himself to put a hand into the Doctor's. It's shaken briefly and then dropped. The Doctor doesn't seem to want too much contact either.

"Right now. Suppose I'd better go get washed," the Doctor says, but he walks around to the other side of the console and starts communing with the TARDIS instead. Probably fixing all the protections the Master broke earlier.

The Master just stares at the metal floor, trying to stop the screaming in his head. He can't do this. He absolutely cannot do this. He crams a knuckle into his mouth, bites at the ring on his finger. Oh, he knows better than most that there are no absolutes; there's always a way. But no one ever claimed the 'way' wouldn't break him.
He only realises he's been rapping the drumbeat out on the console for Rassilon knows how long when the Doctor's hand falls on his and stops him.

Stepping behind the Master, the Doctor's other arm wraps around him and pulls him close. "Let me help," he says softly, close to the Master's ear.

The Master laughs, feeling not even slightly amused. "You'll hear them too, soon. Let's see how you cope. Betcha don't. Betcha break. Fuck, that'll be funny."

The Doctor lets go of the Master's hand, bringing his own up. Cool fingers massage at the Master's temple and a firm presence slips back into his mind.

"Get out," the Master says because he has to, but he makes no attempt to stop the Doctor moving around in his head. What's the point now, with what he's just agreed to? The important thoughts are either well enough hidden, or they're not. Better to know now than later. "I can't do it here, Doctor, not cold like this."

"Not trying to create the bond now, just ease some pain. Can't do something like entrelace standing up anyway. Lots of prep work needed."

"You should know."

"Yeah. Is this helping?"

"Little."

"I'll keep at it for a while then."

The Master closes his eyes and leans back against the Doctor. The drums and the accompanying headache are subsiding to a degree. The Doctor's touch whether inside or outside the Master's head is annoyingly welcome. "Suppose you think you've won," he says quietly.

"I'm not playing to defeat you, Master. What you've suggested is a non-zero sum. It's possible for both of us to win – much better."

"We could both lose."

"We could," the Doctor says evenly. "So, my friend, should I be assuming you've brought us here to prehistoric Gallifrey so that... What was that you said back in the wardrobe?"

"I suspect you're referring to my suggestion of 'let's play Rassilon and Omega'."

"Yeah," the Doctor says, eventually adding, "Without accepting for a moment that's a good or even remotely sane idea, I'm not Omega."

"Ooh, you are too."

"You're the better mathematician. You're the obvious candidate for Omega."

"Oh come. I'm an even better shoe-in for the power-mad genius dictator." To prove the point, the Master tries out his best Ming the Merciless cackle. It sounds a little fractured to his ears.

"You have a point," the Doctor concedes. "But I'm not spending millennia going ever more potty while trapped in an antimatter universe. It's bad enough that the great man himself felt it necessary to wear my face for a while."
"He did?"

"Hmm. Didn't you hear about that one?" The Doctor sighs, warm breath touching the side of the Master's head. "If it's even possible for us to create another Eye of Harmony, let alone wise, it'll take both of us working together for... well, centuries."

"Oh, not as long as all that. After all, we've studied both men and their achievements. We know how they did it. Easier than starting afresh."

"Yeah, I even got to reprogram the Hand of Omega once, but still. If only we still had access to the Matrix."

"I can't believe it's gone," the Master says, pressing back a little against the Doctor.

"Neither can I."

"No, I mean I really can't. If there was a last ditch plan in existence for this doomsday device of yours to be used, there must have been other secret protocols for 'if all else fails' scenarios. I'd bet a regeneration that the Matrix is out there somewhere, perhaps lurking in the void, waiting to be refound."

A silence has time to settle between them before the Doctor eventually whispers, "But where?"

There's a much shorter pause; then they both start talking excitedly at once. The Doctor stops and steps back, offering the floor with a hand gesture to the Master when he turns around. The Master asks, "The device you fitted to the Imprimatur circuits - how closely have you investigated it?"

"Not at all since fitting it. Didn't want to think about it afterwards. It's still there though. The Cloister Room's been all icky and wrong since the War."

The Master snorts and waves a hand at the stairs. "Shall we?"

The Doctor grins in full Cheshire cat mode. "Yeah. Yeah, I think we shall."

In the end, it takes them well over an hour of wandering through corridors to find the Cloister Room, thanks to the obsessive number of perception filters the Doctor's woven around it. So many he can't even see the door himself, apparently. The Master passes the time putting an equally obsessive level of protection around a small corner of his mind while admiring the Doctor's naked top half, skin and bone though it mostly is.

"So," he says once they're finally inside. The Doctor's staring dolefully at the dome of the relay Eye in the centre, apparently sensing something the Master can't. "Let's have a look then."

"Yeah," says the Doctor almost dreamily. "Awww, yeah." Suddenly, he's all activity, whirling around and heading for a column at the side of the room. He looks at the Master, grinning hugely, sonic screwdriver in hand. "This is probably highly unwise," he says, bouncing on his toes.

The Master grins back. "Do it." He bites his lower lip.

Two quick buzzes from the sonic and the Imprimatur circuitry is exposed. The Master peers in at the only part of the system he doesn't recognise, a black box connecting to the rest in three places. "Looks old, very old. Seal of Rassilon etched in the top. Why aren't I surprised?"

"The Anonymous Little Black Box of Rassilon? Hah!" Still grinning like a madman, the Doctor carefully lifts and turns the box. There's a hole on one side, a deeper black circle against the slate
grey Zyton 7.

"Just the right shape for a finger," the Master points out.

"Volunteering?"

"Your TARDIS. You're the one imprinted in this circuitry."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right. Wish me luck." The Doctor slips an index finger into the hole.

The Master watches, alarmed, as the Doctor stiffens abruptly, his eyes wide, but then the Doctor just takes his finger out and lets the box lean against the circuitry again.

"Odd," he says. "Thought something was going to happen there. Felt something reading me, but then it just stopped. Nothing."

"I'd better try," the Master says, moving to pick up the box.

"Oh, there's really no need," says a female voice from behind them.

They whirl around as one to watch a tall, dark-skinned woman in full ceremonial robes descend from the dome of the Eye. She smiles at them both.

"Somewhat dishabille, aren't you, Doctor?" she says, a slight smile curving her perfect lips.

The Doctor's doing his best startled goldfish routine, and the Master can tell that any moment now he's going to start repeating 'what?' like a stuck recording. So the Master takes matters into his own more capable hands, which he holds open in enthusiastic welcome.

"Ah ha! My Lady President! How perfectly delightful to see you again."
"Romana?"

"Yes?" Forced perhaps by the rigid ornamental collar, the imposing figure of the Lady President turns to face the Doctor more fully, her richly coloured robes oddly silent as she moves. She's still standing on the dome that covers the Eye relay, at the very edge.

The Doctor feels a grin pulling at the corners of his mouth, almost frantic to be let loose, but he can't set it free, not yet. First Gallifrey and now Romana? Can he really be this... well, luck doesn't start to cover it. "It can't be you."

"I assure you it is, Doctor."

"But I... I felt... Really?"

"It's really me. Just not all of me." Romana's smile is perfect, as it always was, and this new dark-skinned regeneration is still utterly her. She's beautiful.

"Which bits are missing?" the Master asks. He's standing far too close to her, and the Doctor's hands twitch, wanting to yank him back. "All seems present and perky to me. Very perky, in fact."

The Master's eyes are very obviously focused on the cleavage revealed by Romana's not even slightly standard presidential robes.

"What are you doing here, Master?" she asks, turning her head to look down at him, no doubt deliberately using the extra height from the dome to her advantage. "No, never mind. I don't suppose for one moment it's something I'll want to hear. As for what's missing, well..." She slowly sweeps her hand through the Master's upper torso. "Physical matter, as you can see."

"Yeah," the Doctor says, giving in to impulse and pulling the Master back a little. He keeps his hand on the Master's arm. "Obvious holographic projection utilising the TARDIS sensory grid. Got that. But, but... it's really you? Really really?"

"Yes, Doctor, it's me." Romana frowns slightly and asks the Master, "Has he had a recent blow to the head?"

The Master sniggers. "No, it's this latest regeneration of his." He puts his hand up to the side of his mouth and stage whispers to Romana, "I think it's a bit faulty. Keeps leaking around the eyes too."

The Doctor's glare meets the Master's smirk at fifty paces, and the smirk wins the draw. It cheats, of course. Sighing, the Doctor lets go of the Master. He taps his teeth as he studies Romana. "So, ah, you were inside the Little Black Box of Rassilon?"

"Oh, what a good name for it. Well done, Doctor!" Romana grins at him, and this time, the Doctor lets his own grin free, feeling it take charge of his face on a swell of delight. She's really back! "It's just called the 'extinction control' in the protocols," she continues. "They're very dry. But it does date from Rassilon's time."

Which, the Doctor realises, he'd know himself if he'd ever taken the job of Lord President seriously. "Ah ha! And as well as the instructions for the, er, well, there was also you?" Aww, if only he could touch her. He'd hug her so hard, lift her up and swirl her around as if they were dancing.
"I downloaded my data from the Matrix and as much other useful emergency knowledge as I could fit into the control. It didn't have the spare capacity for much after my files sadly. Anyway, you'd better get me up to date on the situation quickly. Did all go to plan?"

His joy flip-flops into sorrow as the memories he can never truly banish rise yet again. "Everyone's dead, Romana, never existed. Everyone but us. Gallifrey's gone too... but not completely. We're landed on Gallifrey now, in fact, way, way back in prehistoric times. Good, eh? It is good, isn't it?"

She smiles softly in a way that seems sympathetic. "I'd hoped for as much; the protocols were not at all clear about the ultimate limits of extinction. The Daleks?"

"Oh, all gone. No worries there." The Doctor waves his hand breezily.

The Master barks with laughter and turns away, walking to the other side of the Cloister Room. The Doctor frowns at his back before continuing.

"Well, I say 'all', but what I mean is 'mostly all'. Mostly all gone. That is, the Emperor escaped the War and made thousands more. But they're all gone now too. Rose - you'd like her; she's lovely - she fixed all that like a wiz. So all's well that ends... wellish." He takes a breath. "There was the Cult of Skaro. Bit of a problem there. Well, several problems. All sorted now though. Well, I say sorted, but actually... There's one. One got away. Dalek Caan. Or was it Sec? Nah, definitely Caan. Not sure where he is. Looked, but... Other things got in the way. See, there was this lizard migration, and Marth-"

"Doctor!"

"Yes, Romana?"

She shakes her head slightly, black ringlets moving across her cheeks. "You could at least try to use my title when we're discussing official business."

"Oh, yeah, sorry. Right. Yes, Lady President?"

"I'm going to interface directly with your TARDIS database. It will be quicker. Presuming you've kept your logs up to date."

"Ah. About the logs..."

She sighs. "Have you ever followed standard procedure in your life, Doctor? Oh well, I'll still take a peek. Then you'll no doubt fill in the substantial gaps afterwards."

"Rather than me, Lady P," the Master says from the other side of the relay Eye's dome. "It's like teatime on the geriatric ward trying to communicate with this old banger. You'll ask for data on the Syclofyn system and find yourself listening to a rambling account about how her favourite naughty boy once became Pharaoh of New Cairo by accident, and oh, by the way, cold out, isn't it? Not like the Vortex storms from when she was a young TARDIS. Oh no."

"Banger?" The Doctor glares. "You're asking for it, Master." And how does he know about the New Cairo incident anyway?

"Asking for what precisely, Doctor?" the Master asks, sickly sweet smile directed at the Doctor like a missile that'll kill him with sugar-shock. "Ooh, will you sulk if I do it again? Will your lower lip tremble? Oh no, tell me you won't be forced to shed a tear."

Romana gives the Master a haughty look. "She won't give me any trouble. I'll have you know that
the Doctor's TARDIS and I are old friends."

"Oh, I'd heard as much," the Master replies, holding onto a strut as he leans forward towards her. "Nice of you to confirm the rumour though. Tell me, how did you find him?"

"What?" Romana sounds honestly bewildered.

The Doctor covers his eyes with a hand, pinching at his forehead. "Ignore him. Really, it's best."

"A bit passive?" the Master asks. "Lacking in initiative? Prone to moralising at exactly the wrong moments?"

"Aww, just stop it!" Striding across the room, the Doctor grabs the Master's arms and hauls him over to the side. "Stand here and stay quiet."

"Oo-ah. The fluffy rabbit of God has claws. Nasty!" The Master's over-the-top camp drops from him like a heavy sheet to the floor, revealing a face of utter fury. "No."

The Doctor realises with belated clarity that trying to dominate the Master in front of another Time Lord was a very bad idea indeed. "Sorry," he murmurs quietly, trying to meet the Master's anger with sympathy and warmth. "Didn't think. Sorry."

There's enough residual link between them for him to know that by apologising he just made matters worse. He can almost hear the drums he knows must be pounding in the Master's head, and he winces, wants to reach out and ease the pain, but knows he can't, not now. Romana would require too many explanations apart from anything else.

Ack, Romana.

He whirls back round just as she starts talking again. "Doctor, can your almost empty logs possibly be right? The Time War was years ago in your personal time-line. What have you been doing?"

"Oh, er, this and that, a bit of the other. Quite a lot of the other, in fact. You know, the normal."

The Master snorts, and the Doctor feels him step close behind so their bodies touch. Hands move round to rest flat on the Doctor's waistband. While the Doctor is staring down at them with dismay, the Master moves his head round to the side of the Doctor's shoulder.

"He's been exercising his perversion for humanity mostly, Lady P," the Master says. "He's such a dirty old Time Lord, our Doctor. You ought to pass a law against the things he does - 'interfering with lower species' or 'greater ape-molestation'. Ooh, I know, throw in 'corrupting a TARDIS' for good measure. It's no wonder she's senile with the things she's been forced to witness."

Corrupting a... Huh? "So says the Time Lord who married a human and forced my poor TARDIS into becoming a paradox machine?"

The Master nuzzles the Doctor's bare arm. "What can I say? Standing on the shoulders of giants, here. I owe it all to you, my dear, dear Doctor."

Just as the hands are starting to move lower, the Doctor clasps the Master's wrists and forces his arms apart, stepping out of their circumference. He gives Romana his best 'not my fault, honest' pained expression.

She's looking at the Master though, not him. "I do believe I need you to shut up now, Master. So be a good little renegade and do that. Doctor, why did you leave it so long before awakening me?"
"Well," he starts slowly, "maybe 'cause I didn't have the first clue you were still around to be awakened?"

Her lips quirk. "I can see it was a mistake to tell you about it after instructing you in the device's primary purpose. I don't suppose you heard anything else I said after that. We've lost a great deal of time as a result."

Time in which to do what? The Doctor stares uncomfortably at Romana, seeing no reason to disbelieve that she did indeed tell him, but remembering it not at all. Maybe he would've found out sooner though if the Cloister Room hadn't felt so very wrong since the loss of the Eye of Harmony.

"Aww, Romana," he says in the end. "Can't you drop the stern presidential thing even for a few jiffies? I'd no idea you were in there to be found, and it's lovely to see you, you know."

"I suspect it's good to see you too, Doctor," she says with another of her enchanting smiles. "My emotions are somewhat limited without a physical component to feel them, but I remember being very pleased indeed to see you in the past. I must say I do approve of this new regeneration of yours, although the taste in clothing is rather more unusual than I'd expect, even from you."

The Doctor looks down at himself. "Ah, yes. Keep forgetting to put my shirt on. No worries. Can do that now. Um, do you have to stay in here...?"

"For now, but I'm sure I can persuade the TARDIS into lending me some kind of continuity throughout the capsule."

He's suddenly aware of movement at the door and spins around, trotting over to grab the departing Master's arm. "Where are you off to?"

The Master glares accusingly at the Doctor's hand on his arm. "Elsewhere."

"Oh no, you don't. You're staying in hands' reach 'til we've done the- Well, until. Come here." He tries to tug the Master back into the room, but this time the Master digs his heels in.

"I think, Doctor, you're forgetting which one of us is called 'Master' here."

"Oh, I never forget which one of us chose that name, believe me. I'm sorry, but you have to stay close by for now."

"I have to?" The Master folds his arms and lifts his chin, every inch of him screaming defiance. "Oh Doctor, I believe I'm going to have to say-" he meets the Doctor's gaze and carefully enunciates "-make. Me."

"Aww, you're gonna force a fight between us? Here and now? Seriously?"

The Master flicks a glance towards Romana and says, "Where better?" and suddenly the Doctor understands. The Master has never cared to share.

He takes a deep breath and turns back to Romana. "Lady President, my apologies, but I urgently need to sort something out. And, um, find a shirt." He gives her an apologetic smile and adds a far less formal, "Sorry. Really."

She offers him a wry expression and folds her arms. "No doubt you'll explain everything when it suits you, as usual. I'll work with the TARDIS while you're 'urgently sorting out' the Master, shall I?"
"Er, yes. Good idea!" He stares painfully at Romana for a few seconds longer, wanting desperately to stay, to lose himself in the new fact of her reality, but then he turns back to the door, starting to jog when he realises the Master's already gone.

He catches up with him two corridors away and grabs his arm. "You're going the wrong way."

With obvious bad temper, the Master shakes him off and carries on walking. "I'm heading precisely where I mean to."

The Doctor doesn't bother to chase after him, but instead calls out, "Looking for some specific hidey hole in which to have your jealous sulk?"

The Master freezes, and the Doctor has to repress a smile. Still with his back turned, the Master says, "Jealous?"

"What would you call it then?"

"Tell me, Doctor," the Master asks, turning to face him with an icy smile. "Of which of the two of you great Time Lords am I meant to be jealous? Now, let's consider the contenders carefully. Shall it be the bodiless president of a race that currently consists of just two infamous renegades? Or will you, brave contestant, opt for a Time Lord so desperately sad and lonely he'd consider entrelacement with his greatest enemy just to fill up the gaping holes inside him?" He pauses and then adds, "Or has that plan gone bye-bye now there's a potential for more attractive bond mates?"

And the only important sentence out of that bile-dripping bunch of them was the last one. Oh yeah. The Doctor doesn't need to think about the rest of it.

"You shouldn't put yourself down, Master," he says, grinning in a way that, yup, probably does count as wicked. "As evil megalomaniac genius types go, you're definitely the most attractive one I've met. And I've met the lot. I mean, look at Davros! Admittedly, you did favour the over-crisped greasy rasher style yourself there for a while..."

"Hardly by choice." The Master's sour expression slips smoothly into sly. "You preferred Tremas, didn't you?"

"I preferred Tremas as Tremas, believe it or not," the Doctor says, leaning against the wall while he waits. "I liked the man. A lot."

The Master laughs loudly. "Why d'you think I chose him?"

The Doctor tries out a variety of 'looks': exasperated, revolted, angry, even fond. In the end, he just holds out his hand for the Master's. "C'mon. Let's get this linking done."

"What, seriously?" The Master fidgets; at least, it looks like fidgeting to the Doctor. "We're doing the Big SuperGlue Extravaganza now? What about our grand and très beau prez back there? What's she going to think?"

"Wouldn't've thought you'd care what she thinks," the Doctor says, crossing his arms.

"I don't." The Master walks forward, stopping in front of the Doctor. He carefully places a fingertip on the centre of the Doctor's forehead and pushes. "But you do."

Trying to ignore the pressure he still seems to be able to feel on his forehead even though the Master has dropped his hand, the Doctor says, "Clear enough that I'm gonna get nowhere talking to Romana 'til I can stop worrying about what naughtiness you're getting up to. So we do this now."
The Master clasps his hands to his chest theatrically. "Ooh, Doctor, you're so romantic! How my hearts do flutter at your sweet, sweet poetry! Oh, I think I may swoon." He claps a hand to his mouth and adds, "Oops, my mistake. It was just indigestion."

The Doctor stares at the Master for a few seconds. Then he yanks him close with a hand behind his neck and kisses him hard. Very hard. He uses all his strength to hold the struggling Master still and close to him, and inevitably, the Master stops trying to escape quickly enough. The Doctor keeps up the bruising kiss 'til the Master starts to take control, and then he gently pushes him back.

"Romantic enough for you?"

The Master's mouth is still a little open and his breath laboured. He turns away with a visible body shiver. "That was revenge for calling you 'passive', wasn't it?" he mutters eventually. "Left or right?"

Feeling more than a little smug that he just managed to shut the Master up for at least five seconds, the Doctor takes the Master's hand and leads him though the TARDIS corridors, stopping in front of a door, which he opens, revealing a square empty room of white and soft greys. Special roundels line the walls, and there's a gentle pink glow to the light.

The Doctor walks in only to find himself held back from the centre by his hand still held by the Master, who has stopped short outside the door and won't budge.

"What's wrong now?" the Doctor asks, feeling a little like a human preschool minder.

"This is a zero room."

"Yes, and a nicely refurbished one if I say so myself. Put off sorting it for so long after having to jettison the old one. Anyhow, this'll be the perfect place for what we need to do together. Come on." He smiles encouragingly and gives the Master's hand a little tug. "In you come."

"I don't do zero rooms."

"Why not?" The Doctor boggles at him. "What could anyone possibly have against zero rooms? They're lovely places, full of, ooh, healing and relaxation and stuff."

The Master stares at the floor, his hand limp in the Doctor's. "Too quiet."

The Doctor frowns slightly. Zero rooms are meant to be quiet; they're cut off from the rest of the universe, little havens of peace and stillness. "Quiet like a library?"

"Like nothing. Like emptiness."

His frown deepens. "Like the void?"

Slowly, painfully slowly, the Master lifts his head and meets the Doctor's eyes. "Like what's left of me when the drumming stops."

The Doctor holds his breath 'til he's convinced his hearts aren't going to break, which of course they aren't; he's way sturdier than that, but still. He resists the unwise urge to hug the Master and just says, "You won't be alone in the room or in your head. You won't be alone in your head ever again."

The Master snorts softly. "You really think this madness will last? I predict it takes less than a week before you're begging me for divorce."
"It'll last," the Doctor says, not allowing himself to believe otherwise.


The Doctor raises an eyebrow. "Having second thoughts by any chance, Master?"

"You're talking as if I have a choice about this."

"You do! Was you who suggested it, after all."

The Master's answering expression seems full of hate, and the Doctor closes his eyes against it.

When the Master starts talking, it's in a low, strangely calm voice. "I will hurt you again and again. I'd do it even without a permanent bond, but I'll be able to do it so much more efficiently with one. I'll break you. Not just once, but repeatedly. One way or another, slowly or in one spectacular downhill toboggan rush of despair, I'll drag you down as low as me, and then, guess what? The universe will finally be mine. With you at my side, there's no one left capable of stopping me."

And then the Master laughs. Not the normal barking laugh or giggle of this regeneration, but the low constant cackle of the earlier days, and the Doctor drops the Master's hand, wraps his arms tightly around himself and tries not to shiver.

"You're far too good at that," he says quietly, eyes still closed.

"What, freaking you out?" the Master says in a far more normal voice. "You could say it's my life's work."

The Doctor feels a hand flat on his chest, above his folded arms, and opens his eyes. The Master's standing very close looking almost sympathetic. "I am what I am, Doctor."

The Doctor swallows, nods, and puts his hand on the Master's. "I'm aware of the realities, promise. But I still have hope." The second sentence is true, at least. The first would be true too if he actually allowed himself to think about said realities. Hasn't got time right now.

"Hope of what? Ooh, of curing me?" The Master seems amused. "Well, have fun trying."

"Let's do this," the Doctor says quietly.

The Master manages a step towards the Zero Room before stopping again. "Why do you still want to anyway? You're not alone anymore, you silly man. If Romana's still around you can bet your skinny behind the Matrix is out there somewhere ready to be reclaimed. All the old bastards'll be back before you know it. You don't need me."

The Doctor makes no attempt to stifle his sigh. "We're doing this as a compromise so that I can still keep an eye on you, but you don't go more doolally than ever wearing the collar. We're not doing this 'cause I want a... a wife. Been there, remember?"

"You know, it's strangely hard at this moment to forget the last person with whom you briefly shared an entrelacement bond. Can't think why."

"Aww, a very different situation, that."

"A loveless marriage forced on you by circumstances? Not that different, surely."

"It wasn't loveless, and you and I aren't getting married. That's as much as I'm going to discuss either subject with you. Come on." He takes hold of the Master's arm with a firm grip and walks
him into the Zero Room before the Master can find another way to procrastinate.

After shutting the door, the Doctor turns back to the Master, who is standing in a rigid posture in the centre. The Doctor walks up behind him and wraps his arms around the alarmingly trembly body. With one hand on the Master's stomach and the fingers of the other on the Master's temple, the Doctor immediately opens mental contact between them.

He not only meets no resistance, he finds himself almost dragged inside, the Master's mind full of desperate panic. "I'm here," the Doctor says aloud in the most soothing voice he can manage; the Master's extreme fear is rubbing off on him a little. "You're not alone. I've got you."

"Don't condescend," the Master says in a low, angry voice, but when the Doctor shifts slightly for a more comfortable posture, the Master grabs the Doctor's hand tightly and won't let it go.

Away from the panic, the Master's mind is silent. No drums and little in the way of thoughts not connected to the refrain of ohgodempty-empty-empty-shamefuldon'tlook-nothing-there'snothing-ohgod in his surface mind. The Doctor does his best to fill the silence with himself, with things that should be soothing or pleasing. He shares his respect for the Master's intellect, his memories of the friendship they once treasured, his ongoing erotic fascination with the man... even his recent desperate need for the Master, how he felt when the Master was refusing to regenerate.

Under the repeated emphasis of how important he is to the Doctor, the Master seems to calm and the terrible silence eases, though the grip on the Doctor's hand is as painful as ever. 'Suppose you're going to be unspeakably smug now,' the Master tells him mentally after a while. 'Well, don't be. It's no compliment that your presence is the telepathic equivalent of Valium.'

The Doctor smiles to himself. "Well then," he says aloud. "You'll not be suffering from insomnia any time soon, will you?"

"Shut up," the Master hisses. "If you ever mention what just happened to anyone, anyone at all, I'll kill you. In the most prolonged, painful way I can think up, and you know how good I am at torture. Bond or no bloody bond, I'll kill you, Doctor."

"I believe you," the Doctor says, not bothering to keep the sadness from his tone. He gently strokes the Master's face with his fingers. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself. You haven't been alone in your own mind since you were eight years old; fear isn't an unreasonable reaction."

"I said shut up!"

"Won't mention it again. Now close your eyes."

"Already closed. Happier not seeing the blank walls, thank you very much."

The Doctor rearranges his arms around the Master. "Okay, I want you to relax in my hold as I lower you down. I won't drop you."

"What is this? Stupid new age human trust exercises?" Despite the sarcasm, the Master allows the Doctor to take his weight.

"Just thought it would be easier on you if I were the one interacting with the room. C'mon, lay back. It's nice and comfy, I promise." The Doctor carefully lays the Master down about a foot above the floor. "There."

Now that the Doctor can see the Master's face, he can't help but notice how pale it is. The Master looks small, almost little-boyish with his eyes and mouth tight shut and fear still pulling slightly at
his features. The Doctor kneels beside him and kisses his cheek softly, stroking his short hair and sending more gentling thoughts.

The Master pushes into the touch like a needy cat and says nothing. After a while, his hands reach out, feeling around him. "Oh goody, I'm lying on a bed of your thoughts. How abysmally symbolic is that?"

"You're welcome to make your own bed if you wish."

"My thoughts aren't exactly restful. You've won, haven't you, Doctor? You've won again. You always bloody win. Always get things exactly how you want them."

The Doctor wonders what universe the Master is talking about as it certainly isn't this one. "Look. Okay. Here's your last chance to back out of this then. I can mend the collar, or... Or we'll find another way. Tie you up when I'm busy or sleeping; something like that. I've got some special cuffs Jack gave me that could probably be jiggered up into something useful."

The Master gestures with open hands. "Oh, what enviable choices. How lucky am I? If only I could have them all at once."

The Doctor draws a deep breath through his nose. "Master, I know it's hard for you to say, but I need to know. This once, I need an unambiguous answer. Yes or no to the entrelacement?"

There's a long silence while the Doctor continues to touch the Master soothingly, then, "You're in my head. You know the answer."

And that's probably as good as the Doctor's going to get without being cruel, so he accepts the silent 'yes' and extends the invisible bed. Lying himself down on his side, he wraps one arm across the Master's body. "Any questions before we start?"

The Master shrugs, his eyes still tightly shut. "I generally prefer to take over other people's minds, not play warp to their weft. You're the one with experience."

"My previous attempt wasn't exactly at a pass grade; I'm far from sure it counts."

"Because you didn't love her." The Master really wants to believe that, doesn't he?

"I did, but I wasn't... obsessed with her."

The Master barks with laughter. "You're seriously telling me your bond and therefore your marriage failed because your head was full of me?"

"And you think you never win." The Doctor shakes his head ruefully.

"You should've run away with me when I asked."

"Yeah. No argument there." By the time the Doctor actually had run, from his family and preplanned life, it'd been far too late to make amends.

"Tell me, Doctor." The Master twists, turning to face him even though his eyes are still closed. "Presuming we can, why do you even want to bring back that gang of pompous old gits? They never liked us, and we never liked them. They never treated either of us with any kindness and only with the sort of respect that's generated by fear. So why?"

It's a fair question, and it's not as if he hasn't asked it himself. Of course, it could be directed just as
easily at the Master himself. Sometimes family is family, and that's all that's needed as a reason.

"I never wanted them dead," the Doctor says in the end. "Far from it. Let's stop putting this off now, Master." He closes his eyes and strengthens the mental connection between them. "We don't need all the ritual bollocks; we're already close enough linked to do this. Just watch what I do and copy me. Easy enough, but... be thorough. Cutting corners - not a good idea."

"Doctor..." The Master shakes his head, seeming frustrated. "You've been a good boy and given me my last chance to opt out. Well done, good show. But what about you? This is Russian Roulette with a fully loaded gun. Talk about self-destructive! While I do, of course, rejoice in your suffering as is only right and proper, I'm not at all sure I want to be used as your hair-shirt. It's... demeaning."

The Doctor sighs heavily and repeats, "Just watch what I do." He takes hold of the Master's face in both hands and leans towards him 'til their foreheads touch. Mentally, he takes a tiny strand of what makes him him and tugs it looser and looser, finally looping it over what seems like a sturdy thought projection within the Master's mind.

'It's just like interlacing our fingers,' he sends telepathically, as it's easier now than using his physical body to communicate. 'If we had millions of fingers.'

The Master doesn't answer, but he seems to have got the trick already and to be busy weaving them together like an expert. The Doctor swallows down a lump of something that feels nastily like anxiety and continues his work. He can't afford second thoughts and caution, not this time. This time, nothing can go wrong.

It takes ages, and to start with, it's easy enough to concentrate on the work, but as they become more and more bonded, it becomes harder not to just relax into the sensation of being almost at one with another of his kind. The Doctor can feel himself shifting and making little noises out in the Zero Room. He thinks the Master is fidgeting physically too, though the Doctor can't be sure; he's too lost in their minds. 'Master...'

'Focus, Doctor.'

'It's hard.'

'I know. I can feel it.' A mental giggle.

'You should be paying attention to what you're doing!'

'So should you!'

They work on for a little longer, then the Master sends, 'You know, you really are a sad little obsessive, Doctor.'

The Doctor looks at what bits of him the Master's currently rooting about in and winces. 'And you're not? As far as I can tell every scheme you've ever indulged in was all about impressing me.'

'I think you're a little confused over the meaning of the word 'impress'. Try 'defeat' or 'humiliate' instead. Better still, try 'utterly annihilate'.'

'Really? Aww, that's sad. 'Cause if your aim was to impress me, I'd say you'd succeeded many times over. But if your ambition was my utter annihilation, well, really, you're just a little bit rubbish, aren't you?'

'Oh, just shut up.' The Master yanks at his section of the interweaving between them, and a fairly
violent shudder runs through both their minds. 'Ouch! Hmm, I may think twice about doing that again.'

'Yeah. This is going to take some learning for both of us.'

Right, time to stop faffing about and get the rest of this done. The Doctor spends a few moments centring himself. Well, a bit more than a few as he has a new centre now, and that's not exactly a centring thought itself. Oh bollocks, this is probably the stupidest thing he's ever done, and he's done some really very stupid things in his time.

He's not about to stop though. Or think about it more if he can help it.

After another indeterminable period, which is a strange concept for a Time Lord to come to terms with as the one thing they're always meant to know is time, the Doctor pauses from smoothing out a knot that seems to have formed in the threads and takes stock. They're nearly done. In as much as it's possible for two distinct entities to become one, they're just about there.

'You're right,' he says thoughtfully, 'Though I'd rather you'd worded it differently. With our two intellects networked like this, well, there's sod all we can't do, is there?'

'Providing we can agree in the first place what it is we want to do,' the Master remarks dryly.

'There is that, yeah. Sure we'll find some middle ground though.'

Linked like this, the Doctor 'hears' the future-echo of what the Master is going to say before he properly verbalises it. It's fascinating, watching the thoughts spark, congregate, and crystallise into actual words. All in a fraction of a second, of course, but the Doctor can stretch out his perception of time, make it appear to happen in slow-mo over minutes. He could lose days, real time days, like this, just watching the Master think.

'Can you feel it though, Master?' he asks, watching his words bounce around the Master's surface mind, igniting little neuron flames, tiny stars that sparkle, ignite others, and then die. 'We're not just connecting in the now. This bond is spreading out through time. It's... amazing.'

'Course I can bloody feel it, you idiot.' The Master sounds tired. 'You know you're going to need help when we leave this room, don't you?'

Help? Oh, of course. 'The drums.' The Doctor feels himself nod. 'Will you help, or just point and laugh?'

'Not sure yet. Oh, I suppose I'll help if you need it, otherwise we'll never get to hear all the fascinating gossip our lady prez no doubt has to impart. I might say "I told you so" a few hundred times first though.' The Master's chest moves against the Doctor as he chuckles. 'Love me, love my drums.'

'Still sure I could sort them out for you... us.'

'Maybe I'll let you try now.'

'Now I'm filling all your empty spaces?'

'That sounds alarmingly sexual, Doctor. Do I need to remind you who's the top here?'

The thought comes with a pretty strong mental impression of being on top of and inside himself, and the Doctor isn't at all sure how to react to that. His body seems to know though. 'Stop that. At
least 'til we've finished. We don't want to go wrong now. We're so close to done.'

But the Master clearly doesn't want to stop as the Doctor finds himself making the last few connections by himself and having to do it under an increasing onslaught of pure mind-sex. 'You are evil,' he thinks hard at the Master, who chuckles both inside and outside of their minds.

'Did that really need saying, Doctor? Mmm, this is good. This is good, isn't it? Wonder what will happen if I do this... Oh yeah, really, really good.'

The Doctor can feel his body is panting, feel himself clinging to the Master. Rather desperately, he makes a last review of his most recent work. It's not neat, but does seem to be sound, and with a sense of relief, he does the mental equivalent of tying off the loose ends.

"Sorted," he says, speaking out loud for what seems like the first time in years; his throat is dry and hoarse.

He doesn't get the chance to say anything else as the Master immediately rolls on top of him, pinning him down and kissing him hard. The thing that really causes the Doctor to lose it, however, is what the Master's doing in their heads. He has snatched complete control of both of them, and the Doctor can do little more than helplessly react as shock after shock of excruciatingly intense pleasure jolts through him.

Just as the Doctor realises he's screaming, the onslaught gentles down. Waves of sparkling bliss lap over him soothingly. 'You are far, far too proficient at that,' he tells the Master breathlessly while trying to get his bearings back. 'Considering you've never done it before.'

'Mmm, aren't I just? Ready for another go round the circuit?'

'No!'

'Tough!'

But when the lightning strikes start up again they are less fierce and more spaced out; it's clear the Master's busy learning what works and what doesn't. The Doctor can now give back a little of what he's receiving. Soon they are both moaning, both crying out each other's names.

The pleasure plays off itself, locked in a loop between them and unable to diminish, only grow. The Doctor reaches out, deep into the Master's mind, not looking for anything in particular, letting thoughts and memories pass by him unanalysed, his aim, such as it is, simply to get as deep as he can into this man who has been the one constant throughout his life. As he goes, he sends concentric ripples of bliss through the Master, like dropping pebbles into a pool.

'Fishing for pearls?' the Master asks, and even his mental tone sounds breathless. 'Come back up here and feel this,' he urges, and the Doctor's swept back to near the surface, where the Master buffets him with blasts of sheer ecstasy.

'Master!' he calls out, gripping tightly to him in both planes of their existence. Oh buggering bollocking hell. 'Ahhh, Master!'

'Doctor!' A clear clarion peal in his mind. 'Mine!'

And then they hit the ceiling of their capacity to withstand the shared pleasure, and their bodies shudder as one as their minds fill with cascading supernovas, stretching out, out, out into a single point in time and space... and then slowly fading.
"Blimey," the Doctor says eventually. "That was... That was. It just was."

"Yeah," mumbles the Master from above him, which is when the Doctor realises just why he feels so weighted down all of a sudden as if gravity had increased. The Master groans and rolls off the Doctor, falling to the floor beneath him with a soft thump. "You made the bed too small," he grumbles.

"Sorry." The Doctor rolls to his side and looks down at the delightfully flushed and rumpled looking Master. "Well, look what I did," he crows, feeling very smug.

The Master's eyes are open, but there's no sign he's bothered by the Zero Room anymore. He slowly levitates to the same level as the Doctor and grins at him. His pupils are large, making his eyes dark and inviting. "Think I may have to reassess what will stop us achieving great things together. It won't be the inevitable difference of opinion on what constitutes 'great things'. It'll be the impossibility of getting anything done at all when we can do that to each other whenever we want."

The Doctor has a horrid suspicion the Master may be right, not that 'horrid' is at all the right word for it. 'Hopeful' would be way more accurate. Wrong? Ooh, probably. Does he care? Not a lot. "We deserve some happy."

"Do we?" The Master smiles. "I know plenty who'd disagree with you, Doctor, but I for one agree." He flicks the end of the Doctor's nose with his fingertip and then sits up.

Becoming unpleasantly aware that the inside of his trousers feels wet and sticky, the Doctor sits up too and lifts himself gingerly to his feet. "A shower, I think. Before anything else."

"Agreed on that one too. Gosh, could that be a sign? We agreed twice in less than thirty seconds. Is the universe coming to an end? Who knows! Tune in next week to the Master's Adventures in Doctor-land to find out." Full, apparently, of silly good humour, the Master stands, a fastidious look appearing on his face as he pulls at his own clothes. "Yuck."

"Yeah." The Doctor runs his hand over the back of the Master's head, enjoying the fur like texture of the cropped hair. "Let's go."

The Master starts walking, but then he pauses, frowning at the closed door. "Hmm, d'you think my head'll explode as we leave the room, when the drums come back with you already in situ? That'll be fun, won't it, Doctor? Good splatter fun." He pulls an unhappy face.

"Your head isn't going to explode, Master." The Doctor pulls him close for another brief kiss. He feels a little like he could sleep for a good month or so, but only after he's clean and, oh dear, after he's also spoken with Romana. Oh well, he can't at this moment think of a better way to have grown so weary. With a happy sigh, he lets go of the Master, turns and opens the door, and walks out.

With a quiet snort, the Master follows.

They stand together out in the corridor and attempt to assess things. Well, drums.

"They're not very loud," the Doctor says cautiously.

"No," the Master agrees. "Mind you, they're always a lot quieter after a good touch of violence or shagging." He shrugs. "Oh well, let's go and get clean. Maybe we'll be treated to a good head splatter later on when I stop feeling too blissed out to hate you like I properly should."
It's a lot easier to ignore remarks like that now that he's fully connected to the Master's mind, the Doctor finds. There's very little even approaching mild dislike in the man's surface thoughts at all. Smugness, mind you, plenty of that. But then the Doctor's hardly innocent on that count either.

After a shower - together - and a donning of clean clothes - apart, but not really - the pair make their way back to the Cloister Room. Romana is sitting on the floor, looking bored. "You were a very long time," she says, looking up.

"Sorry," the Doctor says with a grimace. "My fault, sorry." He holds his hand out to help her up and then remembers, giving her a sheepish grin as she stands quite effortlessly without his help.

"Whatever were you doing in the Zero Room for all that time?" she asks, running her hands down her robe in an apparent attempt to smooth wrinkles that aren't there.

"Ooh," says the Master. "Has the Lady President been trying to play peeping tom?"

The Doctor winces. "So how are things going? Able to come join us in the Console Room now?"

"Yes, I've been wandering all over the TARDIS while I waited for you two to sort out your 'urgent' business. My room has gone."

"Um, yeah. Had to jettison it, I'm afraid. Long time ago now. I'm sure we can find you a nice new one. That is, if you want one, what with... Well, you know." The Doctor gestures a little uselessly at Romana.

"Oh, with a bit of luck it won't be too long before I have a body again," she says breezily. "Of course, exactly how long does depend on how much 'urgent' business you two have to run off to attend to in the middle of loom building."

The Master laughs loudly. "Naughty, naughty, Lady P. So does that mean the Matrix is hidden out there somewhere?"

"Of course, but I'm really not sure I should tell you where, Master. You've shown an unfortunate fondness for taking it over in the past."

"If you're going to tell the Doctor, you might as well tell me."

"I don't see why." Romana's brow creases slightly. "The Doctor's quite capable of keeping his own counsel."

"Er," the Doctor manages before the Master interrupts.

"Not any more. Now, when you speak to one of us, you speak to both." He smirks at her, looking far too pleased with himself for the Doctor's comfort.

Romana looks rapidly between them both, finally settling with a worried gaze on the Doctor. "Surely he can't mean..."

"'Fraid so, Romana. That's exactly what he means." He tries hard not to wince. He's not ashamed, far from it. It's just that it feels a little awkward having to explain. "Can't you sense it?" She nods grimly, and he tries for an engaging smile. "We made a deal. Really, it's a good thing if you think about it."

She stares at him. "The two greatest rebels the Time Lords have ever known, who also happen to be two of the greatest minds we've known, in an entrelacement bond? In what way, precisely, is
"Aww, think about it, Romana! We'll each stop the other's excesses, and working together, think what we'll be able to do for Gallifrey!"

"I am thinking about it," Romana says, looking far from reassured.

'Ooh just lie to her 'til she hears whatever she needs to hear,' the Master sends privately. 'Come on. I want to know where the Matrix is.' Aloud, he says, 'I'm a reformed character now, Lady P. No more taking over the universe for me. Us married men have to be responsible, after all.'

"Married?" she says faintly. "Well, yes, I suppose you are, symbolically speaking. Oh dear. This was not at all how things were meant to happen."

Ignoring the Master, to whom he isn't married no matter what the pest wants to claim, the Doctor waits 'til Romana meets his eyes. Then in a calm, cool tone, he says, "Trust me, Romana."

She takes a deep breath, which has to be pure mannerism considering her current lack of lungs. "Oh, well, I suppose I haven't any choice about that, not if you're the only two left, and it certainly seems that way. I really can't say I'm pleased by this development though, Doctor. It seems so unlike you. I've never known you to be so..."

The Doctor's relieved when Romana's sentence remains unfinished as he can't imagine it was going to end in anything he'd want to hear. "So, the Matrix?" he nudges. Like the Master, he's gagging at the bit to know the answer to this one.

She looks worriedly at the Master, and he laughs. "I promise you, I can't do anything without the Doctor knowing about it. If you trust him, then you've nothing to worry about."

The Doctor makes a mental note to chat to the Master about the strict accuracy of those statements later. The Doctor has to sleep sometime, and then... hmm. Maybe he'll dig out those electro-bracelets, after all.

Romana sighs heavily. "Very well. The Matrix has been disassembled and dispersed into millions of pocket dimensions located outside space-time. There's just a single way possible to gain access to them again, and without it, the pocket dimensions will remain stable and impermeable until the end of this universe and even a little beyond. This 'way' is by the use of a key, which is also an index, listing which pocket dimension package to access for any given query, and an interface, allowing such queries to be made."

"Ooh, clever, Lady President. Did you design this yourself?" the Master asks, and though his tone holds some irony, the Doctor can feel the genuine admiration in the Master's thoughts.

"I had a lot of help with the execution as we had so little time, but the outline was mine. Thank you." She beams at the Master. "Rassilon left us protocols, of course, but they were no longer usable with the modern Matrix. Things had changed too much. Thanks, I must say, to people like you, Master, repeatedly breaking into the Matrix and showing us its security flaws."

"Glad to be of service," he says with a wry smile. "So this key is where?"

Romana holds her hands up and open. "I've no idea, I'm afraid. Considering how long it's been, I would have thought it would already have found its way here, actually."

"To my TARDIS or to prehistoric Gallifrey?" the Doctor asks, bemused.
"To you, Doctor. I programmed him to find you a given amount of time after the War ended."

"Him?" the Doctor and Master ask together.

Romana nods. "The key is a living being, a human time traveller I seconded for the task. Obviously I couldn't use a Time Lord; the Daleks would have found him too quickly, and anyway, the extinction would have hit him just as it did the rest of us."

"Er," the Doctor says, starting to get a bad feeling about where this was going. "Tell us about this time traveller?"

"I selected him from various genetic profiles and reports," Romana says, "and had him brought to Gallifrey. A rather gallant man, he was happy to volunteer once I explained the situation, so we started the process of reassigning areas of his mind over to the index. He lost quite a few memories as a result, but he chose which ones to lose and didn't seem unhappy to see them go. Once the process was complete, we wiped his recent memory of his time in Gallifrey and sent him out into the wilds of space-time. A kind of sleeper agent, I suppose. He'll have no idea what lurks in his mind until I trigger him." The Doctor and the Master share a long look and a great many rapid thoughts before the Master turns back to Romana and asks, "A human? But surely he could've died five minutes after leaving Gallifrey?"

"Oh no," Romana hurries to reassure. "You see, he can't. As soon as his body reaches a terminal state of damage, a connection will be automatically opened to the Matrix, which will restore him to his previous state of bodily wholeness. The connection won't fully close after that point and will be detectable by those who know what to look for. So I do hope he managed to avoid dying until he was as far away as possible from the Daleks."

There's a pause, and then Romana asks, "Why are you both looking at me like that?"

While the Doctor tries to think how on Gallifrey to phrase certain things, the Master says it for him.

"Lady President, good news! You'll be happy to hear we know exactly who and where our Matrix key is. Woohoo!" He pumps the air, but then puts on an exaggerated cringing pose. "The only trouble, if there is any trouble, may be that I... oh dear. Well, you see, I spent much of the last year of my personal time-line playing a lovely little game of '101 ways to skin a cat named Jack' with the nice man."
God in the Details

It's almost three in the morning. Jack's lying on his bed, but he's not asleep. Jack rarely sleeps, not these days. He spends more time than sometimes seems fair unconscious, but ordinary, eight hours a night, healthy human sleep? Not so much.

The way he figures it, it's natural for humans to sleep less when they get older. A baby spends most of its time asleep, but the average eighty-year-old only needs between five and six hours a night. Jack's the wrong side of a hundred and eighty. His sleep time has diminished to the degree he can usually get by with putting his feet up and daydreaming for a few minutes, but so what? It's natural, normal. Other one hundred and eighty year old unkillable humans would be just the same.

Yeah, right.

He should've asked Ianto to stay over again.

No, that's a pile of crap, and he knows it. It would've made four times this week, and they're already pushing the infrastructure of 'just a fuck buddy' so far out of shape it's starting to buckle; they're heading for 'stand under door frames and pray' time. He has to cut back, cut down, cut it out all together if it goes on much longer. It's not fair on Ianto.

Kid's got such a sweet mouth though, whatever he does with it. Jack could listen to Ianto talk for hours, and when he wants to stop talking? Well, that's just downright fantastic too.

Jack doesn't mind not sleeping. It's just that the nights drag by so slowly during weeks when nothing more interesting than a bent safety pin drops through the Rift. And yeah, it is just a bent safety pin, made of low grade stainless steel, probably manufactured on the Indian sub-continent around the mid 1960s and used, apparently, for diapers. They checked, did the necessary forensics. That safety pin counts as today's number one highlight.

Weeks like these, he wonders why they need a Torchwood at all.

Of course, then there are the other weeks when the Rift decides to rain aliens like streamers at a new year's party, and he always thinks he's going to be glad for peace after all the running around and yelling is over. It's not true though, not even slightly. Sometimes he thinks he's never really alive unless there's an imminent likelihood of him dying. A chance that, this time, by fluke or by some unknown purpose, it'll finally stick.

He's kind of like an adrenalin junkie, he guesses, but it's not really adrenalin he craves.

When he dies, Jack sees nothing, feels nothing. It's like falling asleep at last. But when he returns to life, he feels plenty. Just for a second, an endless, impossible second, he feels like God. Like he knows everything, and more importantly, understands it all. During those moments, it all makes sense. His existence isn't a mystery; nothing is. He even understands how the TARDIS works. Not just the electromechanics of it, but the heart of it, the living machine.

The peace he knows in those precious seconds makes it almost worth dying.

But then he's propelled, cannonball style, up that tunnel towards the light, and the sounds and warmth and smells, and his body's dragging in air like it hasn't so much gone out of fashion as gone right around the style circuit and is having a revival. And the all-knowing moment's over, splintered into nothing but the memory of knowing, the memory that it does all make sense somehow. But he can't remember that 'somehow', not even a glimpse of it.
Then he has to smile and reassure his friends that, yes, he's alive again. Everything's normal. Everything's just peachy. And did he kill the monster A-OK this time before keeling over?

Those moments of, no doubt, deluded omniscience are what got him through the year on the Valiant as the Master's executive stress toy. That and the fact he had to keep going - for Tish and Francine, even for Clive, but most of all for the Doctor.

While the Master seemed to genuinely enjoy the 'Jack in the box routine' as he called it, it was clear he only put so much effort into his abuse of Jack because it hurt the Doctor. So it was important to stay above it. Scream when he had to, die when he had to, but always be ready with a quip and a grin the next time the Master came calling, wheeling the Doctor in ahead of him like he was bringing a little kid to see a puppet show as a treat.

And every time Jack died, just before the cannon shot him back to life yet again, his inner eyes would open, and he'd find he even understood the Master. Understood why the Master was the way he was, see it all like he had the blueprints to the Time Lord's soul. And even though he forgot it all sooner than his real eyes took to flicker open, he remembered knowing well enough to let him smile gently at the Master with pity in his gaze... and laugh inside as he saw the pity hit home like a hollow point bullet making bolognese of the Master's hearts.

If Jesus had at his beck and call the kind of knowledge Jack has at those moments, no wonder he could turn the other cheek. Jack's no Jesus though. No illusions there.

Jack guesses the Doctor understands the Master that way, the way that makes the madman make sense. How else could the Doctor forgive the Master like that after everything he'd done? How else could the Doctor's hearts fracture so obviously when the Master refused to regenerate? Well, Jack stole that little victory from the Master. He likes to think he did it for the Doctor 'cause of all that pain the Doctor was emoting in high fidelity sound.

It had felt so good though, doing it. When the Master said, 'How about that, I win!', Jack'd stalked over, knelt down, and kissed the bastard. Kept kissing him, pumping him full of human lifeforce, 'til no amount of willpower from the Master could force his body to die. Then Jack had pulled back just a little, grinned down at the surprisingly small man in the Doctor's arms, and whispered, 'How about that, you lose,' before leaving him for the Doctor to handle.

The Doctor. Speak of the... Jack jumps to his feet, suddenly alert, his heart beating fast.

He tells himself it's a coincidence, or maybe even a touch of the psychic, that he happens to be thinking of the Doctor just when the sound of the TARDIS fills the Hub. The fact is, though, he thinks of the Doctor all the damn time. It's his idling mode, the engine just ticking over. It got to be a habit over the century and then some of waiting, and it's a habit he can't seem to shake even now he knows that the Doctor has no answers.

He pulls himself up the ladder to his office and stalks out into the Hub, where he watches papers go flying as the TARDIS slowly materialises. Myfanwy swoops down to have a look, doesn't seem to like what she sees and screeches angrily at Jack before heading for a higher perch. The TARDIS door cracks open.

Jack pulls his gun from his holster and takes casual aim. Two Time Lords left in the TARDIS last time Jack saw it, and he can't be sure whether friend or foe is going to come through that door now.

To start with, no one comes through it at all. Jack's just thinking that maybe he should go knock, when the blue door opens further, and the Doctor backs out a little way.
Now, it's not that Jack minds an opportunity to stare at the Doctor's ass without complaint for an extended period of time, but he can't help but lift an eyebrow as the Doctor argues with someone - no prizes for guessing who - inside the TARDIS.

"No, absolutely not," the Doctor's saying. "Yeah... Nah-uh... No, I'm sorry, but... No. Just no."

Jack can't hear the other side of the conversation and doesn't need to. He puts his gun back in its holster and leans against a desk. The Doctor's wearing his blue suit, but he doesn't have the jacket on, and his shirt isn't fully tucked in to his pants. His hair looks kind of wild too. That's not like the Doctor, who usually only manages to get this dishevelled when he's in one of his mad scientist phases.

"Yeah, I know," he's saying. "But if you think I'm letting you set foot on... Yeah, makes no diff... Oh, come on!"

"Want some help there, Doctor?" Jack calls out.

The Doctor looks over his shoulder, sees Jack, flashes up a couple of fingers and tells him, "Two secs!" before vanishing back inside the TARDIS, the door closing behind him.

Shaking his head to himself, Jack thinks about wandering upstairs for some coffee. In the end, he just claims salvage rights on some Licorice Allsorts on Tosh's desk and puts his feet up.

It takes ten minutes for the Doctor to reappear, and when he does, he's wearing his jacket, but he somehow manages to look more dishevelled than ever. His cheeks are kind of flushed. "Jack!" he exclaims as if he's only just materialised.

"Didn't he want to get back in the box?" Jack asks, standing and smiling wryly.

The Doctor winces a little, rubbing at his forehead. "Something like that." Then he's suddenly grinning. He strides forward, holding his arms wide. "How are you, Jack, my lad?"

Well, Jack's not about to turn down a hug; he wraps his arms around the Doctor and squeezes. The Doctor smells like shampoo and something else Jack decides he doesn't want to identify. "Doing good. How about you?" he asks as he pulls back.

"Doing, hmm," the Doctor looks thoughtful, "surprisingly good myself actually. Well, apart from the odd headache." He looks around the Hub. "Nice place. Very fallout shelter meets air traffic control."

Jack snorts. "Thanks." He nods towards the TARDIS. "So how are things going with your evil twin in there?"

The Doctor raises his eyebrows. "Less of the 'twin' thing, please. We're nothing alike."

"Except in the way that he's the person most like you in the whole wide universe?" Jack winks at the Doctor, who's still frowning.

"Well, same species, be fair. Doesn't mean we're alike by our own terms."

Jack decides to stop teasing. "So he's not giving you any trouble?"

"Oh, some," the Doctor says breezily. "Wouldn't be him otherwise, would it? Nothing I can't handle though."
"Got him tied up somewhere nice and secure?"

"Nah, no need for that. Got the TARDIS on enhanced isomorphic mode. He can't make her do anything I don't want her to do. Right now." The Doctor looks quickly between the various workstations. "Somewhere we can sit and talk, Jack? 'Cause we need to. We really need to."

"We do?" Jack's not sure he likes the sound of that. He gestures at his office, and they walk towards it. "Problem?"

"Not as such. Nah, wouldn't call it a problem so much as a... an opportunity." The Doctor takes Jack's chair when he's offered it.

Chuckling, Jack sits on the edge of his desk. "What're you trying to sell me? Timeshare property in ancient Pompei? Questionable investment portfolios on Alpha Centauri Prime?"

"Nah, something much more fun than either of those." The Doctor spins a little from side to side in Jack's chair. "In fact, to start with, what I have is info. Info I know'll be right up your alley."

"Oh yeah? My alley's kinda fussy these days, Doctor."

"That's not at all what I've heard." They make a substantial meal out of each other's cheesy grins, but then the Doctor gets on with it. "Remember telling me about the two years missing from your memory? You said the Time Agency took them, that you wanted revenge."

Jack nods. "Yeah, I remember. Long time ago now, for me. After you've retconned a few dozen people yourself it starts to feel hypocritical, holding a grudge over that kind of thing."

The Doctor frowns, radiating disapproval, and Jack's just waiting for another snide Torchwood comment, but in the end all the Doctor says is, "But you'd still like to know what you've forgotten, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would. What've you found out?" And how, for that matter.

The Doctor leans forward. "To start with, it wasn't the Time Agency."

"No?" Jack frowns, not having expected that. "Who was it?"

"My lot, I'm afraid. Back before I... Well, before."

"You're kidding me!" Jack stares open-mouthed at the Doctor.

"Nah, really not. And what's more, they did it with your permission."

"You're telling me that Time Lords stole my memories? Why? What the hell would Time Lords do that for?" From anyone else, Jack'd be sure this was a stupid joke. "And why the hell would I let them? I never met a Time Lord before you; I'd swear to it."

The Doctor shakes his head. "They took those memories too, I'm afraid. Important you didn't remember your time on Gallifrey, apparently. Jack, there's someone I want you to meet. Will you come into the TARDIS with me?"

"Sure, but you wanna tell me what's going on first? I was on Gallifrey? How? Why? You've gotta tell me, Doctor!"

The Doctor makes a face. "If I have to, but it'll all make a great deal more sense if you meet her first." He tries a wheedling smile. "You'll like her. Promise."
Jack raises an eyebrow. "Hey, I'll follow you anywhere, handsome. No need to overdo the bait." He stands up and grabs his coat from the stand. "We going somewhere or just into the TARDIS? I need to know whether to leave my gang a message."

"Er, yeah, probably better. Just in case."

In case what? Jack wonders, but he just finds a large post-it pad and leaves a brief note stuck to Gwen's central monitor. No point in leaving it at Owen's workstation. Might be days before it's noticed there.

The Doctor's waiting by the TARDIS door, and as Jack walks over to him, the Doctor says, "The Master promises to be on his best behaviour. I'd appreciate, er..."

"I'm to be on my best behaviour too?"

The Doctor smiles. "Yeah."

Jack holds up the three-fingered salute. "Scout's honour."

"You were never a scout!"

"Was too. Eagle scout, first class, Boeshine Number Three Troop." Jack chuckles, remembering. "The camps were great - tiny little tents crammed full of adolescent hormones and convenient darkness. Oh God, we had some fun. I remember one time, this girl scout, Jaya? She had the most amazing fingers, six on each hand. She and I were working on our pioneer badges, and she decided she wanted to conquer some new territory -"

"Jack? Words 'time and a place' mean anything to you?" The Doctor's giving Jack one of his looks.

Jack shrugs. "You're the one standing in front of the door."

"Oh, right. Sorry." The Doctor turns and puts his key in the lock, but he hesitates again before turning it. He stands stock still for a few seconds, saying nothing, but then he snaps back into motion and opens the door. "In you come."

There are two people already in the console room. Jack gives the Master the barest glance, his attention taken immediately by a gorgeous human-looking woman who's smiling enchantingly at him. She's dark-skinned with fine, almost feline features, the most incredible mouth he's ever seen, and wonderful, wonderful breasts bulging just perfectly from the corset-style bodice of her elaborate dress.

"Hello there," he says, giving her his most charming grin, the one that not only could charm the birds from the trees, but make them pluck themselves and hop cheerfully into the roasting dish. He strides towards her, holding out his hand. "Captain Jack Harkness." Wonder of wonders, the Doctor doesn't tell him off.

The incredible woman doesn't take his hand, but if anything, her smile becomes even warmer. "Lady President Romanadvoratrelundar of Gallifrey, but please call me Romana in informal situations. It's very good to see you again, Captain."

That makes him pause. "Again?" Then, "You're a Time Lord?" He shoots a look at the Doctor.

"I prefer 'Time Lady'," Romana corrects gently.

"Perhaps we should all go somewhere more suited to a conference, Doctor." That's from the Master
who's leaning against the railings at the side, still dressed in immaculate designer business wear. He straightens as he talks, however, and gestures towards the stairs.

The Doctor shrugs. "Could do. There's a lounging room around about somewhere. Not seen it in a while though."

"Good idea," the Master says, walking over to stand by the Doctor. "I suspect our friend here will be glad of a comfy chair before long." He smiles at Jack. It's a perfectly pleasant smile, but Jack's seen that exact same smile way too many times. Usually just before something agonisingly painful and gross was done to him. It's a smile with a promise.

He decides to ignore it. "Well, unless it's gone for a stroll, I know where lies the lounge. Rose and I used it a few times." Watching the crease form in the Doctor's brow, Jack hurriedly adds, "For chats! Innocent human chats!"

Well, human chats anyway, and the Doctor really doesn't need to know how risqué they got. It's probably better not to mention the dancing lessons either.

"Lead on then, Captain," Romana says. "The TARDIS and I can't quite manage corridors yet, so we'll see you there."

He doesn't have a clue what that means, but he bows his head her way and gifts her with another of his best grins before heading downstairs, the Doctor and Master behind him.

"So Doctor," Jack starts as they head off for the lounge. "How come I'm allowed to flirt with your stunning president back there?"

"Oh, Romana's more than capable of looking after herself," the Doctor says from behind Jack as they walk. "Besides, even you couldn't get into trouble with a holographic projection."

"She's a hologram? Aww, that's a tragedy!"

"Not for much longer, we hope," the Doctor says.

And Jack doesn't know what *that* means either. Oh well, he's used to this around the Doctor. "And she's really your president?"

"Oh yes. She's very much our president. As well as an old friend."

"Speak for yourself," the Master mutters.

"I was," the Doctor says, and when Jack flicks a look behind him, he sees the Doctor grinning in a way that seems decidedly affectionate at the Master.

Jack hopes his little shiver doesn't show. "Here we are," he says and opens the door into a cosy old-fashioned living area that seems unchanged since he and Rose last used it. So unchanged, in fact, there's still the bowl of what must now be mummified rice snacks on the central coffee table. "You need a cleaner, Doctor," he says, grinning back at him.

His grin drops when he sees the Doctor and the Master pulling apart hurriedly from an obvious embrace. The Doctor looks shifty, but the Master gives Jack a smirk so pleased with itself it could lead self-esteem workshops all on its own.

Jack makes a mental note that whatever else happens during this visit, he and the Doctor are going to be having a little talk without any other Time Lords present.
There are three armchairs and a two-seater sofa. Jack strategically takes the sofa, but his plan fails when the Master sits down in the rather grand high-backed armchair near the fire, and the Doctor parks himself on its arm, his leg touching the Master's.

Romana appears in the middle of the room, her legs bisected by the coffee table. She frowns down at it, and gathering up her skirts, rather fastidiously steps out. "Oh, I remember this room, Doctor. It's where we played temporal mah-jong while we were stuck in E-space together. Do you recall?"

"Yes, of course." The Doctor beams at her, but Jack notices Romana's slight frown when she spots how the other two Time Lords are sitting, and he thinks he might not be the only one with issues here.

Unexpectedly, Romana sits down next to Jack. The sofa, of course, doesn't react at all to her presence, but Jack feels flattered anyway. Or at least he does until she turns to him, lifting her hands towards his head, and asks, "Are you ready for this, Captain Harkness?"

"Ready for what?" he asks, moving back out of her reach, though what exactly a hologram can do to him, he's not sure. "And call me Jack."

"The return of some of your memories," the Doctor says.

"Among other vastly more important things," the Master adds cheerily, and Jack watches the Doctor frown down at him.

Jack rubs his face. "I'm getting the impression that I'm the only one here not in on a big secret."

"Hasn't he told you, Captain?" Romana asks, her hands dropping back to her lap. "Oh Doctor, you are a pest at times."

"He knows it was us," the Doctor says defensively, and Romana shakes her lovely head, ringlets moving inside her huge, rigid collar.

She smiles at Jack. "Let's see, how best to summarise this. During the great Time War, you generously agreed to help the Time Lords in a really rather vital way. Part of providing this help meant that you couldn't be aware that you were providing it, so we had to block those memories until now. Mental receptors have been implanted, and when I trigger those, you will remember."

Jack nods. That all makes at least some kind of sense. "How was I helping you?"

"You volunteered to give up a portion of your mind to store some information absolutely vital to the future of the Time Lords in this universe."

"I did?" Why would he do something as stupid as giving up mental real estate? His missing memories pre-date meeting the Doctor, and before Jack met the Doctor, he wasn't half the man he is now, that's for sure. "You must have been paying me really well."

She smiles. "We offered no payment, although of course we're very grateful. You couldn't take anything of Gallifrey with you other than what's stored in your head, you see, otherwise the Daleks might have grown too interested in you. Let me give you your memories back, Captain. Then, hopefully, it will all make more sense to you."

"Call me Jack, please." He looks at her and then shrugs. What the hell, he might as well. With a cheeky grin, he asks, "I don't suppose this sleeping beauty gets awakened with a kiss?"

Romana laughs, and her laughter is as enchanting as her smile. The Doctor really does have
amazing taste in women, which makes his current attentions even more questionable. "What would you say, Jack," Romana asks, "were I to admit that you already insisted on that particular clause to your informal contract with me?"

"I'd say that was the best proof you've offered me so far that this story is true." He winks at her.

The Doctor snorts with laughter, but Jack doesn't look around at him, preferring the vision of the Lady President to what he risks seeing looking the other way.

Romana holds up her hands again. "Come closer then. You won't feel anything physically, I'm afraid."

"I've got a very good imagination," Jack says, leaning towards Romana's puckering lips.

Whether or not he feels anything physically, he'll never know since his head is suddenly on fire. Parts of himself, so long the dark matter of his private universe, are filling in with substance and colour that follows a bright and ferocious flame spreading across his mind. It's agonising, worse than anything he's ever known, and he's known so many different kinds of pain. He must be screaming, but he can't hear himself, can't perceive the outside world at all. He's pretty sure he's dying.

No, not dying, dead. For as the pain fades, his inner eyes are opening like they always do, and suddenly he remembers.

Reeling from lost love and betrayal, Jack was five days drunk in a scum-laden bar on Thorseus Three when the messenger found him. A summons to Gallifrey interested Jack enough to get in the man's TARDIS. More for the Lady President's sake than his own, he was allowed time to sober up and get clean before they rematerialised, but he was grateful nonetheless for that time once he met Romana.

Gallifrey was a contained madhouse, the red skies filled with warships. The shooting stars that scrawled the night with cuneiform messages were the wreckage of warships gone before. Inside the Citadel, the heaviness of loss and war trauma was everywhere, draping every room like sound-muffling curtains. But Jack saw no tears, heard no screams. Time Lords, it seemed, mourned in private if they mourned at all.

And there, in the domed city, an incredible woman, the queen of her people, stood tall and proud as she asked Jack to save her world, and he said, 'Sure, beautiful, whatever you need.' All he asked in return was a kiss from her perfect lips.

In truth, he had no idea what he was agreeing to and didn't much care. Jack had been feeling just about ready to give up on life when the Gallifrayan messenger had found him. In the spirit of 'what the hell', he happily volunteered the space taken up with his memories of - who? That, it seems, is truly gone - and lay back on a table as they rewired his brain in its entirety. No, not rewired, reencoded.

Physically, Jack's brain is no longer human, though it rests in a human body and is shielded in such a way that it appears human to all but the deepest scans. The Time Lords used their transgenetic technology to make his brain way, way more efficient.

Amplified panotropic techniques extend the real estate of his mind into seven more dimensional planes than the normal four. This allows his own needs for mental space to be compressed into a vastly smaller physical area, without loss of data or function, other than those volunteered memories. The neurons where the lost memories once lurked now form the semi-physical shields
that protect Jack from the raw power of the Matrix whenever he connects to it. The cavernous spaces in the rest of his brain are filled, of course, with the multidimensional indices for the Matrix.

And when Jack, in his special seconds, feels like he's omniscient, he's almost right. Because he holds the access to the mind of every Time Lord who ever lived before the end of the Time War, as well as data collected by TARDISes and many sources around the Citadel throughout Gallifrey's existence. With all that at his mental fingertips, Jack's knowledge of the universe is, potentially at least, comprehensive.

When Jack opens his eyes, the knowledge doesn't leave him. He's alive; he's lying, apparently, on the floor. The Doctor is leaning over him, looking freaked out, and Jack can't even look back at him without automatically knowing exactly how to access the Doctor's memories from past regenerations. He shuts his eyes again in a hurry, but not before his mind flash-fills with images of the Doctor wearing many different faces, all of them worried about some friend of theirs.

"Oh God," he groans.

"There you are, Jack, my boy," the Doctor says, and he probably sounds relieved, but Jack's damned if he can tell with many other voices echoing the same sentiment in his head. "Knew you'd come back to us."

"Tell me this is going to stop," he begs, keeping his eyes tightly shut.

"What precisely is it you're experiencing?" asks Romana's voice. There are fewer echoes for her, but still too many. A hectoring voice starts lecturing him about neuro-dimensional finesse and his shameful lack of it.

"Argghh. I know too much." Jack rolls to his side, curling up. The Matrix tells him the exact fibre content of the rug beneath him, its likely place of origin and the sources of the dyes used. "Can't stop knowing it. When you talk, I can hear all your other selves saying the same words."

"Oh dear. That's not good at all," Romana says. The Master laughs, the noise ricocheting around Jack's head like some kind of cackling bullet.

"Looking was worse than hearing," Jack moans. "I'm told stuff. Stuff I don't have a right to know. I can't control..." His hands clench around his skull as every word he speaks spiderwebs out in every direction, forming associations, sparking voice after voice telling him things he doesn't need to know and can't distinguish anyway in the cacophony. "My head's not big enough for all of this!"

"Let me help," the Doctor choruses, and Jack feels strong hands firmly removing his from his head and replacing them. Jack slips quickly into beautiful, silent darkness.

The next time he wakes up, he's elsewhere. In one of the TARDIS medical rooms, judging by the bright lights and décor. Romana stands beside his bed, hands clasped in front of her. "How are you feeling?" she asks softly.

Tentatively, he pokes around in his head. The Matrix is still there, but no longer spewing out information like lava from an angry volcano. "Better, I think."

"The Doctor improved the controls to the indices; they were a little too responsive for the blunt nature of human thought processes. Now you should only access information with a conscious decision to do so."

"Thank God."
"It must have been deeply unpleasant. I'm so sorry." She gives him a pained smile.

"Not your fault, Lady President." He tentatively lifts himself up into a sitting position, surprised to find he doesn't even have a headache. "So, um, how long is this all going to be staying in my mind? Was that ever mentioned?" He knows it wasn't. His memories of visiting Gallifrey seem complete if strangely dreamlike. "And, uh, the immortal thing? That was definitely never mentioned."

It's possible for a holographic projection to fidget. Jack knows this because that's just what Romana's currently doing.

"Why do I think you have bad news for me?" he asks.

She smiles weakly. "A lot of beings wouldn't think immortality was bad news."

"A lot of beings are completely lacking in imagination," Jack replies.

"Well, in that case, the good news is that you can die. If we remove the Matrix from your head, you'll do so. Changes were made to accommodate it that can't now be undone."

"Ah." He nods. "When will removing it be possible? Just so I know."

"Hmm, well, that's a tricky question to answer with any level of accuracy." Romana pushes a few curls back from her eyes. "We're having to start again, you see, Jack. Rebuild our great civilisation from nothing but the four of us and this TARDIS. We'll have to manipulate many forces, including time, in some rather dangerous ways to succeed, so while, in some ways of looking at things, it may be we can take the Matrix from you in next to no time at all, in other ways, it could be many millennia."

"Oh, you're a Time Lord all right."

Romana frowns, looking confused. "Were you in any doubt about that?"

"I didn't mean it that way." He swings his legs from the bed. "Where's the Doctor?"

"Oh, he and the Master were having a telepathic tiff about something or other so I sent them out. I didn't know if you'd be able to pick up anything or not, but I thought a calm atmosphere could only help your recovery."

"Thanks." He manages a tight smile. "Do they argue in their heads a lot?"

"I've only been with them myself for just over two days, but they do seem to squabble a lot, both inside their heads and out. It's only to be expected, I suppose."

"The Master's not adapting well to life in captivity?"

Romana chuckles. "You could indeed put it that way. I never would've thought he'd agree to such a bond."

Jack, who's been wondering where his coat and shoes are, pauses at this. "Bond?"

Romana frowns. "You didn't know about the... well, what did you mean about captivity?"

"The Master is the Doctor's prisoner... isn't he?"

"I've seen no evidence of this," she answers slowly. "Well, I suppose the Doctor's been a little more bossy than normal, and the Master a little less obviously conniving, but they seem to be working
together as equals. Prisoner why? What did he do this time? Oh dear, I'm almost afraid to ask."

"In short?" Jack quirks an eyebrow. "He created a year-long paradox on Earth by messing with the TARDIS and bringing back the last surviving humans from the end of the universe - who weren't very human anymore - and using them to decimate and enslave their own ancestors."

"Ah, that. Yes, I was told a little about that, although I didn't realise how far it had gone. Why does he do these things?" She shakes her head, obviously exasperated. "Still, with the TARDIS in fine fettle, I have to assume the Doctor got it all sorted out in the end. He always does. I remember Flavia once saying that the universe had to invent the Doctor in order to counteract the Master... or was it the other way around?"

"I wouldn't know. And the Doctor didn't sort it on his own. Without Martha Jones, human medical student and all-round hero, we'd all still be stuck in that paradox now."

Romana looks up sharply. "You sound cross, I think. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to diminish what you've experienced. My emotions are limited without a body, and I think I may be missing cues." She winces. "I do hope I'm not coming across as horribly computerish."

What was that? Does my bum look big in this holographic projection? Jack smiles reassuringly. "No, you're doing just fine. I'm kind of worried about the Doctor, that's all. What's this bond you mentioned?"

"Really, it's their business, and I shouldn't have mentioned it. I thought you knew, you see. I am sorry."

"In other words, I should ask the Doctor myself?" When she nods, Jack goes on. "In your opinion, Lady President, could the Master be manipulating the Doctor in some way?"

"Oh no," Romana says, looking a little bemused at the thought. "I shouldn't think so. The Doctor's always been the one of us most able to see through the Master's ploys. It's almost impossible for the Master to plot something nefarious now anyway, not without the Doctor knowing."

"Mind you, if anyone could bypass such constraints, the Master could, but the Doctor will be watching, I'm sure."

All in all, that little speech didn't do much to reassure Jack. "Constraints?"

Romana shakes her head, a regretful smile curving those delectable lips of hers.

Right, more of 'their business'. Jack tries another angle. "They seem very close - physically, I mean."

"Yes, they do, don't they?"

Romana's expression makes it clear she finds that almost as disturbing as Jack does. Not necessarily for the same reasons though, he reminds himself. What does he know about Time Lord traditions and social standards, after all? Well, technically he could know all there is to be known, but he doesn't want to go there, not yet. Doesn't really want to think about that thing nestling in his brain at all.

To be honest, he's frightened of setting it off again.

"I think I'll see if I can find the Doctor," he says eventually, restarting his search for his shoes. He finds them under a nearby chair, his coat laying over the top of it.
"Try the Console Room. We're back on prehistoric Gallifrey now according to the TARDIS. How I wish I could see it with real eyes."

"The Doctor seemed to think you'd be able to soon. At least, I think that's what he meant."

"Oh yes." She beams. "With your help, it shouldn't be too long now." Romana reaches out to Jack, stopping her hand's movement with a wry expression, clearly realising the pointlessness of such a gesture. "You will stay, won't you? We'll try to sort out something more convenient for you as soon as we can, of course, but to start with, we really will need to have you with us."

He smiles at her, trying to project considerably more confidence than he feels. "I seem to remember already promising you that in the far future. I wouldn't want to make a liar of myself. Anyway, do you think I'd miss out on a chance to collect that kiss for real?" He runs a finger through the air where her cheek appears to be and winks at her.

"I rather suspect I should be on my dignity about comments such as that, Captain. I am the president of the greatest and oldest civilisation in the whole of this space-time, after all."

The twinkle in her eye belies her words, and Jack just grins. "Somehow, I figure I can get away with it." Sketching a little bow, he then picks up his coat and heads out into the TARDIS corridors, starting for the Console Room.

Well, he has his answers now. In fact, he has too many answers, billions of answers to questions he'd never consider asking, not even in all those millennia Romana mentioned. But yeah, he knows the hows and whys of his personal mysteries too. He knows why he can't die, but that he will be able to at some undetermined point in the future, and that's good. That's such a relief he can't even begin to process it yet. He knows where his missing memories have gone too, if not what they were. He even knows what's behind his intense attraction to the Doctor; his newly restored memory tells him he was preprogrammed to find the Doctor after the end of the War.

Though he's pretty sure the Doctor would still get him hard, Matrix or no Matrix. The man's just hot. Supernova hot.

He laughs to himself as he realises his ambition to be important to the Doctor has also been fulfilled. He's the key to the Matrix; that makes him pretty damn vital to every Time Lord, and it's a big digitus impudicus to the Master, that's for damn sure. Not so much a freak now as a wonder of the known universe.

He probably should feel happier about it.

He's just not sure he wants to be a... a library indexing system and search engine. While the Matrix may represent the greatest store of knowledge that exists, that's ever existed, it's still, well, clerical work. Jack's many things, but he's pretty damn sure he's not a clerk. He can hardly go off adventuring if he needs to stay in one place to answer queries as they arise.

Oh, but Ianto would love this, not that Jack can tell him.

At least he doesn't have to worry about deserting his team. He could spend centuries with the Time Lords as their pet archive service and still be home for breakfast with the Doctor's help. He'll miss them though. Strange how fond he's gotten of his little gang of four, even Owen, and Jack doesn't normally bond well with people who shoot him.

Well, there was that one time... but that was a totally different situation.

Jack climbs the stairs to the Console Room slowly and loudly. When he gets to the top, the Master
and Doctor are at opposite sides of the console island, but Jack's not fooled. He heard their feet on the metal gangways as they moved hurriedly away from each other.

"Jack!" the Doctor exclaims. "You're looking much better."

"Yeah, thanks for sorting out my head, Doc." Jack looks between the two Time Lords before settling back on the Doctor. "Any chance of a little talk? Just the two of us?"

The Doctor raises his eyebrows but then nods. "Fancy a stroll outside? I've got the TARDIS emitting an ultrasonic pulse that'll keep any hungry dinos away. Set up the sonic screwdriver too for if we go further afield. Let me show you about the old place, eh?"

Dinosaurs? Jack laughs. "Sure. I always thought all that running and screaming in Jurassic Park was a lot of fuss over nothing, anyway." Maybe he can get Myfanwy a mate; that would please Ianto.

The Master tips his head to one side and forms a moue. "Aww, how charming. I'll just head to the galley, shall I? Cook and clean like the good little wifey?"

"Don't start," the Doctor warns him.

Jack shakes his head. "Don't bother on my account. I'm fussy about where my food comes from."

"Really?" The Master raises an eyebrow. "And there, I'd thought you'd rather enjoyed the things I put in your mouth in the past."

Taken by surprise, Jack suddenly can't see past the rage that cloaks everything. His fists are clenched and his whole body ready to charge. Closing his eyes tight, he forces a deep breath into his body. It's just words. They don't matter. They don't change anything.

When he opens his eyes, he's back in control. The Doctor and the Master are locked in a staring contest. The Doctor looks furious and the Master resentful, but neither seems to be dropping their gaze anytime soon.

Maybe it's time to grab that unfair advantage of his with both hands. Jack asks a question of a particular part of his mind.

"Well, Koschei," he says after a few seconds, giving a highly ironic emphasis to the childhood name he's uncovered, "maybe you should consider what I have ready access to now before taunting me again."

The Master breaks the locked stares immediately to turn his glare on Jack, who grins happily back in response, just willing the Time Lord to run at him. Fury contorts the Master's face... Then, with a slight whimper, the Doctor wobbles on his feet and has to lean heavily on the console, his other hand clasping his head.

"Doctor?" Jack asks, alarmed.

"Now look what you've done!" the Master spits at Jack, and he hurries round to support the Doctor with what looks like genuine concern. "Leave us. Now!"

The Doctor's ashen. Jack stares uneasily. "What's wrong with him?"

"Go back to Romana," the Master orders coldly.
"Fuck that!" Jack moves closer, but hesitates before attempting to interfere. "Tell me what's wrong with him."

"Look, freak, will you please just bugger off?" The Master has the Doctor's arm around his shoulder and is trying to get him to let go of the console. "I need to calm down, or they'll keep hurting him. And right now, your presence is making that impossible!"

"What will keep hurting him?" Jack says, but his words are almost drowned out by a loud groan from the Doctor, who's clinging to the Master. The Master's doing a fair amount of clinging right back.

"The drums," the Doctor whispers eventually, barely audible.

The Master helps the Doctor to sit down with him on the chair. "Just go," he says bitterly to Jack. "Get gone. Fuck off out of here. There must be some bloody Earth phrase you recognise! Can't you see every second you're in here you're making it worse?"

"He's hearing your drums?" Jack asks, horrified. "What the hell have you done to him?" He's just about ready to haul the Master away from the stricken Doctor and punch him 'til he gets some answers.

"Done?" The Master makes a very visible effort to calm himself and looks away from Jack. "We're entrelaced, you idiot," he mutters. "In permanent contact." He pulls the bent over Doctor into his arms, closes his eyes, and starts massaging the Doctor's temples.

Jack stares at them, feeling useless. "What does that mean?"

The Doctor lifts his head and looks blearily him. "We share a permanent telepathic bond now," he says in a ragged voice. "What he feels, I feel, and I'm not... not very practised at these bloody drums yet. I'm sorry, Jack."

"Oh God." Jack feels his mouth hanging open and rubs at his face, trying to make sense of what he's just been told. "Oh God, Doctor, why?"

The Master looks up at him. "I'm sure you have all sorts of worthy objections to this, Captain Marvel, ranging no doubt from 'Why him and not me?' to 'And you didn't even invite me to the wedding'. Keep them to yourself! Do I really have to say it again? You're hurting him."

"Wedding?"

"It's all right," the Doctor says, pushing himself up straight while answering the Master. He leans back in his chair and pants for a few seconds before adding, "We'll head outside as I said. The drums were quieter out there. With you two apart, there'll be a few less Roman candles."

There's another long pause, during which Jack feels sure some telepathic debate is going on. He watches their faces as emotions flicker over them like a silent movie. Then the Doctor seems to pull himself together. He staggers as he tries to stand, and Jack moves forward quickly to catch his elbow.

The Master frowns hard at Jack's hand and looks like he's about to start arguing again, but then he closes his eyes, leaning back in the chair and stretching his legs out to rest on the consoles. "I'll practice 'chilling out'," he says only a little acidly, feeling around his belt and coming up with what looks like iPod headphones. "Apparently it's a much needed skill lacking in my repertoire."

Sitting back on the edge of his seat, the Doctor shuts his own eyes briefly in apparent relief.
Gripping the Master's upper arm, he murmurs, "Thank you," before standing. He seems unsteady, but he shakes his head at Jack's offered hand and heads for the TARDIS door. "Come on, Jack. Let's have this talk of yours."

The red grass doesn't come as a surprise to Jack since he's been here before, but this young planet is different from the war-torn Gallifrey he visited in the far future, very much more vibrant. After his eyes fill with the reds and oranges everywhere, the next thing to hit Jack is the dry heat; it's almost desert-like. He's glad he didn't put his coat back on.

A quick check of his wrist computer tells him there are high ultraviolet levels. This isn't a healthy place to be out in for too long, but he can't resist rolling up his sleeves anyway. He's always loved bright sunlight; it brings him out in spontaneous chain-grinning and makes him permanently on the edge of horny, ready to topple over with the least provocation. Strange how much time he's been spending in the dark recently, considering.

The TARDIS is parked close to the edge of what he might as well call a forest, though the silver 'trees' are distinctly different organisms from Earth trees. Their flexible trunks sway to some inner rhythm; there's no breeze to cause it, and their leaves and branches have a metallic shine to their prominent veins. The trees seem more like giant exotic coral fronds than oaks or spruces to Jack.

Even though he didn't consciously ask, he clearly wanted to know more since the Matrix responds, telling him that his instincts were right, and that the trees are, just like coral fronds, colonies of single-celled animals. He's offered more data: biological, geographical, agricultural and more, but he refuses it, and that works. The control gauges in his mind, or whatever they are, work.

"You have a very beautiful planet, Doctor," he says, when the Doctor, still rubbing absently at his head, leads them through the tree-line and into the coolness beyond.

"Yes, we do, don't we?" The light of two suns through the leaves casts a complicated chiaroscuro on the Doctor's face as he smiles softly. Jack doesn't know if it's just the shadows, but despite the smile, the Doctor seems more worn and weary than before, like he's aged a little. "And this time round the block there'll be no industrial eco-disasters to mess with things," the Doctor adds.

"So you're really starting again?"

"With your help."

"Huh. Won't that, you know, cause a disastrous universe-destroying paradox?"

"That's what I said. Repeatedly. But I've been persuaded to look further." The Doctor grins. Weary or not, he seems much better now. Presumably that means the Master's calming down away from Jack.

"So you really think you can do it? Remake Time Lord society and rebuild Gallifrey?"

The Doctor nods. "If we follow our plan to the letter, then maybe. Yeah, maybe we can do this. We've been working the maths, running primitive mock-ups, the best we can manage without the APC-Net. Things are looking good, promising. Promising but no promises, if you like. Early days yet, of course. The data you're carrying will let us get further with our projections." He frowns slightly, obviously thinking. "We'll rig up some kind of headset interface for you before we do anything else. The huge amounts of data we'll need would take centuries to transfer verbally."

"But Gallifrey's gone in the future. You said..." Jack rubs at his face. "Actually you implied it was wiped from history, so how come it's still here now?"
The Doctor shrugs. "Every bomb has a blast radius, even the Extinction Device."

Jack's about to ask who thought up that happy little name when the Matrix tells him. It tells him in a deep and highly amused voice that seems overly pleased with itself, and Jack frowns. "Okay, this is gonna take some getting used to."

"What is?"

"Well, as an example, having some guy called Rassilon doing his best Brian Blessed in the back rooms of my skull."

"Oh. Eww. Yeah, I can see why that would be off-putting. Want me to tighten up those screws still further for you?"

"Maybe. Let's see how much control I can learn for myself first."

The Doctor scratches the back of his head. "While we're on this rough area of a subject, I'm pretty much willing to get down on my knees and beg if it'll stop you ever using that name in his hearing again."

No need to ask who 'he' is, of course. "Doesn't like it much, does he?" Jack says, biting his lip and agreeing to nothing.

"Jack."

"Aren't I entitled to at least one effective weapon, Doctor? You heard what he said to me."

"I heard." The Doctor stops walking and leans against one of the larger trunks. "He's been really very mentally ill, Jack, and he's got a long way to go yet." He sighs softly. "Sorry, sorry."

Jack isn't so sure those 'sorry's were aimed at him. "So I'm just supposed to forgive him? Everything he did to me? Everything he did to... people I care about? Because he couldn't help it?"

The Doctor shakes his head. "I can't tell you who to forgive."

"But you forgive him."

"Yes, I do. I'm sorry."

"And you're... married to him?"

"Aww, don't you start that too!" The Doctor looks thoroughly disgruntled. "Get enough of that from him. Apart from anything else, Gallifrayan marriage is an appalling affair involving large numbers of bloody expensive officials and enough hand-pressed parchment to print four or five complete Shakespeares. Never again, far as I'm concerned. Told you before, I don't do domestic."


The Doctor frowns. "This, him and me, it isn't a romantic thing. You mustn't think that, Jack. It's not some torrid human passion."

Jack rolls his eyes. "No, of course not, 'cause you're above that kind of thing, aren't you? Pull the other one, Doctor. I know exactly what was developing the last time I saw you and Rose together."

Before the Doctor can say whatever he's opened his mouth to say, Jack bulldozes on. "The only reason I brought that bastard back for you on the Valiant was because you love him. So don't you dare tell me now that you don't."
The Doctor turns and starts walking again, faster now, pushing through the undergrowth. Jack follows, expression grim, and neither speak.

As they walk, he asks the Matrix what 'entrelaced' means.

An elderly, dry voice tells him, "Entrelacement is a potentially permanent telepathic contact between two or more Time Lords. It facilitates a networking of minds that allows Time Lords to think as almost a single unit. The arrangement can be dissolved, but only with the agreement of both parties; it's therefore not something undertaken lightly. Most often found within the close working relationships of scientists or researchers, it's also used more rarely by partners in secondary marriages, those made for love rather than genetic contracts. During the Great Time War, genetically entrelaced cadres of Time Lords were loomed as shock troops and proved most effective as -" "Enough," Jack mutters. More than enough, in fact. He raises his voice, aiming it at the Doctor's back. "So whose bright idea was this entrelacement?"

"You're not my keeper, Jack," the Doctor says, not turning around.

"Did I say I was? You ask me, someone's got a guilty conscience." Suddenly something becomes alarmingly plausible to Jack. "Is he hearing all this? Is it even possible to have a private conversation with you anymore?"

"Nah, not really. Sorry about that." The Doctor slows down and allows Jack to catch up. "Well, I suppose there are things I could do to block him out, but it'd hurt us both. Really rather not try, if it's all the same. Be fair, anyway, Jack. You've access to both our memories up until the end of Time War. That's way, way more of an invasion of privacy than him simply listening into a chat."

"I won't pry, Doctor. At least, not into your memories. It's kinda freaky having some of your old selves in my head though. I could talk with them if I wanted."

The Doctor shoots him an indecipherable look. "Do you want to?"

It could be kind of cool to talk to the Doctor's most recent previous incarnation again. Mind you, if the stored memories stop at the end of the Time War, then the Matrix version of that Doctor wouldn't remember Jack.

He shakes his head. "I'm not sure. Would it bother you if I did?"

"Nah." The Doctor snorts. "You might find some of them a bit of a handful though."

"And you're not?" Jack laughs. "A handful of you sounds just perfect, anyway."

"Naughty," the Doctor warns, but he's smiling.

"Do I still feel wrong?" He's been wanting to ask that since he woke up in the medical room.

"Not sure you ever did now. Think it was me that was wrong." When Jack gives him a questioning glance, the Doctor grimaces and continues. "I felt the same way about the Cloister Room where Romana's data was stored, had I but known it. Think I was having an instinctive reaction against things that tasted of Gallifrey. Guilt, I suppose."

They're emerging out of the other side of the trees, and Jack's attention is temporarily stolen by the sight of a huge lake, fiery with reflected orange from the sky and rimmed by the silver trees. "Wow."

...
"This didn't exist by my day," the Doctor says quietly. "Lots more water around this far back."

They watch yellow birds or large insects fly across the lake, skimming the surface. They're beatitude flies, the Matrix tells him. Their colour comes from actual gold-based pigments in their iridescent wings.

"This entrelacement thing hurts you," Jack says after some quiet moments.

"We feel each other's pain to a degree. Other things too." There's a weird little smile hovering around the Doctor's lips as he says that last sentence. "It's not all bad."

"You are symbiotically joined to a psychopath." Jack thinks this needs pointing out.

"He's improving," the Doctor says. "I just need to sort those drums out for him; then we'll see major progress, I'm sure. Oh Jack, if you could feel what they're like, then you'd understand. So many centuries he's had them, dominating his thoughts, driving him like a... Oh, a whip on his back would be kinder."

Jack shakes his head, folding his arms. "I know what makes the asshole tick." And he does. He doesn't even need to ask the Matrix since it's already told him, back on the Valiant, and he can remember it now. "I'm not as forgiving as you, Doctor."

Jack recalls forgiving Owen his crimes, holding him as he wept; remembers feeling like that was a very Doctorish moment, that he was growing, getting somewhere, being able to forgive like that. But Owen was sorry, and the Master's not. The Master never will be, unless he somehow changes so much he's no longer the same person.

Jack sighs, long and heavily. "Why are you sacrificing your life, your freedom, to this madman? I thought you were one of the runners. How can you run now, with him chained to your ankle?"

"Maybe I'm tired of running," the Doctor says, and he looks it. "The Master's my responsibility. Even with the prospect of many more Time Lords returning to existence, he's still my responsibility."

"Why?"

The Doctor gives him a helpless look. "Everything the Master does, every atrocity he commits, they're all about me. Can't you see that? Impressing me, defying me, hurting me: the motives change, but the ultimate target remains the same."

Jack would love to deny this, but the truth of it was palpable during the year that never was. "The fact he obsesses over you still doesn't make him your responsibility. Unless you're obsessing right back, in which case we're not talking responsibility so much as co-dependant and dysfunctional relationship."

The Doctor doesn't answer. Jack listens to the sounds coming from the trees behind him, birdsong and a rustling that suggests small animals. There's a complex smell in the air, cut grass and spices, and perhaps a touch of honey.

"What's he saying about this conversation?" Jack asks in the end.

"That's our business, isn't it?" the Doctor asks, and Jack agrees, nodding and feeling a little ashamed.

"Doesn't it bother you?" he asks instead. "The lack of privacy in your own mind."
"Nah, surprisingly, it doesn't. You'd expect it to, wouldn't you?" The Doctor gives Jack a sheepish grin. "He and I always had rather compatible minds though. You weren't wrong, not really, with that 'twin' thing."

"You're not alone anymore," Jack says, almost in a whisper, as the reality of that hits home. The Doctor may be tired; he may have agonising headaches whenever the Master's angry, but the Doctor's not alone anymore, and he's... happy.

He really is.

Just for a moment, Jack wonders if he might be able to forgive the Master after all, for granting the Doctor this. But no, that's bullshit. This happiness will only last until the Master does something despicable again, and he will. Jack has no doubts on that score.

"You're going to have to trust me, Jack," the Doctor says eventually.

"I always trust you," Jack answers easily enough. "I just don't trust him."

"You don't need to."

Jack turns to look hard at the Doctor. "You're that confident you can catch any mischief before it mushroom clouds into disaster?"

"Yes."

Jack watches the Doctor closely a little longer and then lets out a loud breath. "Okay." He turns back to the lake. "I still can't agree to not giving as good as I get. I've had enough of grin and bear it to last even a lifetime as long as mine."

"I know. I'll keep lecturing 'til he understands that winding you up doesn't do any of us any good."

"I think he might already be getting that." Jack thinks about the scene back in the Console Room. The Master had seemed genuinely upset by the Doctor's pain. Well, of course he would be, since he'd have felt it himself. Would the Doctor feel his own pain reflected in the Master's mind? Hell, their bond could become a torturous echo-chamber so easily.

Jack shivers.

There's a large, skinny-framed lizard, or maybe a small dinosaur, nearby, drinking the water. It has a colourful ruff on its head, and it trills softly at Jack as he watches it, like it's questioning him. He crouches low and ponders saurian body language, but the lizard skitters away, back into the trees.

He can't help but wonder if it's gone to get all its pals for an all you can eat fresh meat buffet.

"You'll stay, won't you, Jack?" the Doctor asks after another long pause. "At least 'til we've got the looms going. Then we'll be able to set something up for you. Some sort of transtemporal interface thingummyjig."

"I already promised Romana I'd stay." Jack straightens up again.

It's going to be lonely though. The only human amongst a race that rightfully considers itself above such primitive mortals. But Jack's neither mortal nor exactly human any more. He'd like to think that'll win him more acceptance here, but he doubts it. Oh well, he's always been skilled at turning indifference into warmth. He'll just have to work hard at it. It'll give him something to do when he's not playing Wizard of Oz.
"So what's the schedule?" he asks.

"Roughly speaking?" the Doctor checks. "Discover through some fussy temporal echo location the exact edge of the event horizon from the ED explosion. 'Cause that's important. It's our deadline, if you like. Get the looms going, of course. Bring back some key minds and get them working with us. Many as poss. We really, really need you for that one."

Jack nods, smiling. "Got that already."

"Right. Then find a spare type II or better star going begging somewhere and build the gadgets we need to artificially age it and then collapse it to a singularity."

"You can do that?"

The Doctor shrugs. "Did it before. Well, that bloke in your head and his mate did it before. We'll probably need you on hand for this bit too, Jack. But that'll be all right, won't it? Pretty exciting stuff, collapsing stars."

"Yeah. Gotta admit I'd love to see that."

"And so you shall, Captain! And then we wrangle the black hole into a new Eye of Harmony. That'll be the best fun of the lot, if you ask me, so stay for that one too. Looking forward to that bit so much."

"Anyway, once that's all installed, some of us'll work on rebuilding the Citadel and its facilities, while the rest'll work on the flippin' huge planetary transmat devices needed to move New Gallifrey away from the event horizon before it hits, and ooh, off, off and away into the future."

"Just like that," Jack says, chuckling. "Not much to do then."

"Nah, piece of cake," the Doctor says and winks at Jack.

"Right." Jack claps his hands together and looks around. "We better get started. No time like the primeval."

The Doctor puts his arm around Jack and pats his shoulder. "That's the spirit. Marathons to run. Midnight candles to burn. Fancy helping me locate a nice spot around here to build the loom hall?"

"Oh yeah. Sooner we get Romana clothed in some real flesh the better."

"Behave!"

"You said she could look after herself! Anyway, from what I've just been told by a nice woman in my head, the President has a special relationship with the Matrix. Intimate, you might say. She did, anyway."

"Not that kind of intimate."

"I think I'll make some helpful suggestions to Romana about the best way to interface now the Matrix has a human face. And a fine looking human face it is, don't you think?" He winks at the Doctor.

"Did I ever tell you I was president once?" the Doctor says, eyes twinkling.

"Oh yeah? Well, I'm sure I can suggest some neat interface styles for you too, Doctor, as a retired
head of state."

"I'm certain you could," the Doctor says, trapping his tongue between his front teeth as he grins.

"Anything you want to know right now? My indices are primed and ready for action." Jack puts his hands on his hips and does his best to look, well, primed.

The Doctor rolls his eyes, but then he smiles warmly at Jack. "I'm glad it's you, that you get to help us remake history. You and I are gonna be mates for a very long time, Jacky, my lad. A very long time indeed. It's good you're here to see this. Better than good."

Jack feels himself filling up with an astonishing warmth at the Doctor's words. He's not 'wrong', and better than that, he's wanted here. The Doctor wants him here. Not because he's the key to the Matrix, but because he's *him*. The Master can say anything he wants to Jack so long as Jack can hold on to that.

Grinning stupidly, Jack dips his head back, light from the suns painting his vision gold. His laughter echoes over the lake like the call of something just a little bit wild.
He Who Writes in Blood

Some months later...

The Master's just completing his fifth run-through of the oh so vital genebuild calculations, when the nifty little warning system he's set up in his mind lets him know the Doctor's beginning his slow clamber back to consciousness.

Time Lords sleep less often than many species, but when they do sleep, it's deep. Stage V sleep mostly, during which the Rassilon Imprimatur in their every cell becomes active, and their brains enter zeta rhythm. Rousing quickly from zeta rhythm is tricky, painful, and the Time Lord's body, when allowed to wake naturally, takes it slowly.

This means the Master has five minutes, give or take the odd ten seconds.

Five. He adds a brief line of coding to a strand that's proving a little ambiguous in the projected trials. Some annoying lack of finesse in his original build is introducing a dangerous random element, and he can't be having that. Exactitude is king when plotting diabolically. Every little possibility needs to be predicted and factored in. It's exactly like playing multidimensional chess, only actually fun.

Code added, he saves and closes the genomap, moving the file back to the 'Jesus and Mary Chain' folder with a little giggle, stifled quickly for fear of speeding up the Doctor's return to the waking world. Once in the folder, it's automatically broken down and reprocessed, using the Master's own algorithms, into a few albums worth of MP3s, each a near-on identical drone of distorted guitar noises. They can only be reverted back to his wonderfully clever genebuild via a special key based on Just Like Honey.

Sometimes he's so brilliant he even impresses himself.

The process takes a few seconds to complete using the primitive tech of the iPod, for all that the Master's enhanced it beyond recognition, but he doesn't mind waiting. Even genius like his requires a little time to do things well. The Doctor won't be able to work this one out in millennia.

Four. While he waits, the Master casts a quick look towards the bed. The Doctor's sprawled naked across it on his front, looking just like a big old squished spider: long arms and legs akimbo, fingers twitching slightly, hair wild. Despite the restorative sleep, there's still a prominent red mark low on his left shoulder where the Master bit him last night. Maybe the Doctor doesn't want it healed. Maybe he likes it.

The Master catches his lower lip between his teeth, remembering. He'd had to bite the Doctor to stop himself shouting out as he came. Bad enough he finds himself claiming the Doctor insistently inside their heads, without yelling 'Mine!' at the top of his lungs with the one-man freakshow only a few doors away down this TARDIS corridor. Jack-the-lad has far too much high explosive ammo already without adding that to his payload.

The Master doesn't mind Jack knowing he and the Doctor are shagging. In fact, the knowledge that Jack's almost certainly listening often spurs the Master to greater and noisier efforts, just to rub it in that much more. It's a bit embarrassing though, this need to claim the Doctor as his so emphatically. Shouldn't need saying, should it? No, it shouldn't. If it were true, it wouldn't.

Well, it is true, somewhere in the not so distant future. They're nearly there now; the Master can
sense it in their combined time-line. He's just being preemptive, that's all.

Three. He notices he's tapping out the inevitable rhythm on the hard plastic of the iPod's case. Not good. Too much of that will wake the Doctor in more pain than is good for him.

They both knew before going in that the entrelacement would mean sharing the drums. What the Master doesn't understand is why this means the Doctor receives most of the pain, far more in fact than the Master's ever received. The Master, however, still gets the mind-numbing volume and the driving onwards, the compulsion to do all those things that the rest of the universe seems to find so objectionable. He'd be suspicious that the Doctor was purposefully taking the pain into himself to help the Master, but there's no sign of that in the Doctor's thoughts.

It makes even less sense when he considers that normally, when one of them hurts, the other receives a strong echo of it too.

Over the months since the joining, they've worked out some coping strategies. Gallifreyan sunlight seems to help, for instance, though neither of them has the foggiest why. (The Doctor wants to look further into that, but there's no time for side projects currently.) Mildly tense moments can be eased by quiet time together, actively soothing each other's thoughts, and as these quiet times often turn into the far more effective drum-easer of a good hard shagging, the Master's not complaining.

The Zero Room is a complete if temporary cure for when things turn a bit too Armageddonish for comfort. The Master's still uneasy about the room, but it's saved them too often now for him to really hate the place.

Despite these options, there's been a few tricky moments, including once when, for a fractured second or so, the Master thought he'd actually killed the Doctor with the force of his anger. Not that his anger wasn't completely justified, but better not to even think about why right now. Jack'll pay for it one day; that's enough.

The worst times are when the drums seem to explode on the Master's consciousness from nowhere, like a flash flood caused by a tempest miles up river. He can be at peace, as much as he ever gets, then suddenly, wham! No warning, no way to get to safety. Why the hell does that happen? If he could only work out the mechanism behind the drum phenomenon then... well, he's had a thousand years near enough to do that and hasn't managed it. Hasn't in fact tried to after his earlier stubborn attempts led only to the drums becoming more entrenched than ever.

Rassilon, he hates to fail.

The Doctor keeps saying he's going to spend a few days, or a few weeks, or however long it takes and truly rid the Master of the drums. The Master just nods and doesn't argue, knowing full well that, with their workload here, it's not going to happen anytime soon. He needs it not to happen 'til his plans come to their perfectly splendid fruition, anyway.

Not that he wouldn't be glad to wave a swift toodle-oo to the constant pulse of the drums. After so many years of their accompaniment to his every action, it's a little unnerving to imagine permanent silence, but they're so much worse now than when they started. He'll end up mindless at this rate, a dribbling vegetable. Not so much the Master as the, oh, the Cauliflower. Is there a fate worse than that? His mind is everything.

The Doctor's right; they have to go.

Screwing his face up in irritation at his thoughts, which are neither new nor fun, the Master detaches his special adaptor from the iPod and replaces it in the hidden central canister of his
otherwise genuine tub of Lock, Stock and Barrel's 'Pucka Grooming Creme'. This is the brand he insisted the Doctor stock up on in bulk before leaving Earth, and the one the Doctor already knows never to touch unless he wants a five star paddy landing on him from height.

The Master throws a great paddy, if he says so himself, and who better to judge? One thing he made sure the Doctor got plenty of experience of during the early weeks of the Master's captivity in the TARDIS was tantrums. Partly because it was fun and got the Doctor's attention nicely fixed on the Master where it should be, and yes, it helped a lot when his head was feeling particularly... rhythmic, but it was also Doctor-training. Fear of a tantrum won't stop the Doctor if he's determined, but it makes him think twice about, ooh, a whole load of apparently trivial things. Like touching the Master's hair products. Mad the Master might be according to the unenlightened, but he's got method oozing from his pores.

The Doctor's got his own nasty hair gel anyway; how else would he get his hair in his favourite 'chaos porcupine' style? That's the Master's name, but the Doctor seems to have taken to it. The Master heard him telling Jack the other day that his hair is actually a complex living fractal that helps him calculate advanced temporal trigonometry. That's why he tugs at it so much when he's concentrating on a problem. If the freak believes that one, he's even stupider than the Master thinks he is.

Standing, the Master moves quietly around their shared bedroom. An interesting experiment, this sharing, but inevitable. Technically, this room belongs to neither of them; they still have their separate bedrooms, but they've slept nowhere else for weeks now. The double bed here could do with being bigger still, but it's an improvement on their single cots at least.

The iPod goes by the Master's side of the bed, and the Pucka creme on the desk and mirror thing that serves as a vanity unit for the two of them until they find something better on which they can actually agree. Currently, the Doctor refuses even to think about it as he 'doesn't do domestic'. And the Master does? He just likes to have nice things that reflect his importance to the universe.

Two. The Master switches off the anglepoise lamp he had focused on his work and bends it back from the armchair so the Doctor can't accidentally brush against it and feel heat in the bulb. His robe goes to the hook on the back of the door. Then he slips naked back into bed by the Doctor, carefully moving under a couple of the spread limbs and pulling a single sheet half over their bodies.

Closing his eyes, the Master focuses internally, methodically packaging up and putting away the memories, plans and more generalised thoughts concerning his pet project. It's beyond vital he doesn't consider his plans consciously while the Doctor's awake. That would ruin everything, and he's damned if this wonderful and oh so genius plan of his is going to fail due to a careless thought. So in it all goes into the safebox in his mind, which is locked and locked again. The Master casts the mental equivalent of a strong perception filter over it and then brushes it under the carpet...

Well, under the drums and far far back in his head, back with his deepest, oldest memories. He places a hypnotic trigger in his conscious mind to remember the plan's existence the next time the Doctor falls asleep, but until then, the memory will rapidly fade from his headspace.

One. That done, the Master concentrates on filling his conscious mind with more Doctor-friendly thoughts. Not exactly hard when he has the man himself naked beside him. Or rather it will be hard and very soon as the Master turns onto his side in order to press close and stroke his hand over the Doctor's back and arse. God, it was some seeing-to he gave the Doctor last night. Ooh yeah, they'd given handsome Jack plenty to wank to in his lonely single room.
The Doctor starts to stir as the Master's fingers slip between his arse cheeks. Twenty seconds early, at least, but whatever it is the Master's meant to be forgetting will be completely gone by the time the Doctor's truly compos mentis. The Master presses his fingers inside, and the Doctor grunts, pulling his limbs in closer to his body.

"Master..."

"Present."

The Doctor says something that might as well be non-verbal for all the sense it makes and pushes up to meet the Master's fingers.

"Mmm?" the Master inquires, removing his fingers after discovering there's just enough lubrication left from last night. He rolls on top of the Doctor, pushing the Doctor's thighs further apart. "Did you say something?"

"Important day," the Doctor mumbles.

Ah yes, the delooming of their Lady President awaits them later on, providing all goes to plan. She'll be the first of the new Time Lords, though others will be ready in a week or so. Thrills and spills and jammy wagon wheels. The Master spits on his fingers to add a little extra makeshift lube to his cock and then presses inside before the Doctor wakes up too much.

Oh yeah, that's good.

The Doctor groans deeply. "Was meant... ahh, I was meant to be getting up early."

"Well, I've got up early instead. Shut up and do your thing, there's a good Doctor." The Master smiles as he feels the Doctor start moving a little sluggishly through their minds, sparking and setting their thoughts rippling together. "That's the spirit."

As the Doctor stirs things up mentally, the Master starts to slow-thrust. Important to make the most of these early moments as, later on, when the Doctor really gets going, they'll barely be aware of their bodies. Even now it's hard to tear his attention away from the link.

"Ooh, Doctor, I like it when your mind is full of nothing but me."

'Mind and body both.' The words arrive telepathically, on a wave of pure pleasure that makes the Master gasp, but a real world chuckle shakes the Doctor's body beneath the Master. 'All yours, Master.'

The Doctor doesn't actively project the addendum 'for now', but the Master sees the words in his thoughts. He decides not to care, to relish the rest of the words anyway. Today, just in this bed; tomorrow, the universe. 'As you should be,' he sends back.

He gets no further with the concept as a series of tiny mental explosions fills his head with fireworks, cascading light, colour and incredible feeling, each 'pop' a repetition of his name in the Doctor's voice, his tone almost reverent. 'Master, Master, Master, Master...'

The Master can do no more than shudder helplessly until the display is over, and he can finally hear himself muttering, "God, oh God, oh fuck, oh..." He shuts that up quickly. "Doctor, ooh, that was..."

"Rather flippin' good, if I say it myself. And don't I know you well, my friend?" The Doctor sounds beyond smug. Well, two can play at that game.
The Master puts his weight onto one elbow and then stills his movements long enough to key himself into the Doctor's central nervous system. Very slowly, he runs a flat hand down the Doctor's spine, setting off somatosensory receptors with his touch and enhancing the neural messages in the Doctor's dorsal root ganglia, translating them into intense sexual pleasure. The Doctor arches against his touch, moaning loudly.

"Master!"

Grinning, the Master lets his hand complete its slide down to the Doctor's coccyx before putting it back on the bed and starting to thrust again, hard. He's still in touch with the Doctor's nervous system however, and his every movement inside the Doctor ignites a shockwave that spreads rapidly out from the point of impact, setting the Doctor's whole body on fire.

Lots of gratifying, wordless noises are coming from under him, the Doctor's body squirming and bucking, but the Master's grin becomes something closer to a rictus as suddenly he's feeling every sensation the Doctor feels, not just the normal echo but a full-on mirror image.

He hears himself roar out his reaction. Oh, he hopes the freak's still in bed to hear it too. Then he stops his own highly distracting thrusting and starts playing with time, or rather the Doctor's temporal sense, drawing seconds out so that they'll seem to last minutes for him. He starts slow-fucking the Doctor again.

By the time the Master decides 'enough', the Doctor's whimpering, shivering, his fingers uselessly pawing at the bed and his heartbeats out of sync. 'Master... Master, oh...' The Doctor's mental voice is barely audible.

The Master laughs. Oh yeah, he's good. Isn't he good? He's better than good. Game, Set and about to get Match, he's certain. But then the Doctor presents his big finale...

Blooming like a rapidly unfurling rose in the interlacing between them is everything the Doctor feels for the Master, unedited.

For a second or two, the Master's angry. Hitting him with all this soppy stuff at a moment like this, his defences down, is... exactly the kind of stunt he'd pull. He doesn't expect it from the Doctor. But then he's too awash in the Doctor's desire, in his fear, anger, admiration, need, regret, passion, horror, guilt, joy, and absolute love to feel any emotions of his own. Every emotion of the Doctor's is overpowering, all of them all about him. 100% pure grade Master.

He comes so hard it's like his head has turned black hole, sucking in everything the Doctor is.

It takes a long time for them to recover, the Doctor's orgasm having been simultaneous to the Master's as is usual since the joining. Eventually the Master manages to roll onto his back, but then there's another long gap before he says, "Grats then."

"Huh?" The Doctor turns his head slowly to look at the Master. "You what?"

"Congratulations. You won that one."

"It was a competition?"

"Don't be disingenuous."

The Doctor laughs. "Wasn't playing to win; I wanted to give you the best prize I could."

"Non-zero sum." The Master quotes the Doctor's favourite bit of game theory jargon.
"Exactly. No losers here."

The Master smiles and closes his eyes. He's very sleepy for some reason despite having only recently woken up. Maybe he had nightmares he can't now remember; it happens sometimes. He's been tired a lot lately; are they getting worse?

It's no good though; the Doctor'll never let him have more of a lie-in, not today. He decides to strike pre-emptively. Opening his eyes, he slaps the Doctor on his nearest buttock. "Come on, Tinky Winky. Up you get."

"Oi!" The Doctor rolls to his side and mock-glares at the Master. "That's the one with a handbag, isn't it?"

"Yeah, you to a T."

"Bugger off!"

The Master grins. "Just did, and very nice it was too. Which one do you think you are then? Dipsy, I suppose."

"Which one's that?" the Doctor asks suspiciously. "The secretly alcoholic tubby?"

"The green one."

"Nah, he's boring. Ooh, I know who I am!"

The Master holds up a hand quickly. "Stop! I can already see the thought. You're the laughing sun-baby, aren't you? How revolting is that?"

The Doctor grins and runs his hand over the Master's shoulder and upper arm. "So all those thoughts I've picked up from you about how good I look in Gallifreyan sunlight are...?"

"None of your business," the Master says dismissively. "Was Jesus not enough for you? Now you have to be Buddha too?"

"You're the one who wanted to be Rassilon."

"At least Rassilon had the balls to really use his power."

"Legends have him as an autocratic dictator by the end, so yeah, can see the appeal for you. They stick their tongues out at each other and then get distracted by a kiss for a few moments. Eventually, the Doctor continues. "We could ask Jack for the truth of the legends. Get him to channel old Rass for us."

"There's only one problem with that."

"Let me guess, having to speak to poor Jack first?"

"Got it in one. Give that man a prize."

The Doctor shakes his head sadly before sitting up and rubbing at his face.

"What, no lecture about how we should all just try to get along and the merits of 'saying sorry'?", the Master asks, surprised.

"What would be the point?" The Doctor gets out of bed and grabs his disgusting old man's dressing...
gown from the back of a chair. It apparently has some sort of sentimental value to him, which the Master discovered when he tried to stuff it down the recycling chute a few weeks ago. That was the closest he's yet seen to the Doctor having a proper paddy. The drums stopped it before it reached its full potential though. Shame, really. There was something just a little magnificent about it.

"The futility of lecturing me has never stopped you before." The Master remains lying down for now and concentrates on the Doctor's thoughts.

The Doctor shrugs and does up the tie-belt of his dressing gown. "You know, the Matrix is potentially far more accessible to us now than it ever was before. Remember all the rigmarole we had to go through just to get one silly little question answered?" He huffs softly. "Only, you didn't, did you? Just broke in and changed things to the way you wanted them."

"I'm hardly the only Time Lord to have done that over the years," the Master points out, quite reasonably, he feels.

"Oh yeah. Bound to happen really when you restrict access to information so... so resolutely. Can't do that now though, can you? It's not just a question of stealing a key anymore."

The Master can't be bothered to talk to the end of a dialogue that gives new meaning to the word 'tedious', so he takes the punchline straight from the Doctor's head. He counts the points out with his fingers tapping his palm, listing, "Yes, it would be a Very Bad Thing to lose access to the Matrix all together. Yes, I'll try to stop upsetting our delicate little flower of a human interface. Yes, I'll even try to get along with him if he gives me half a chance."

The Doctor stands at the edge of the bed and stares down at him. "That's great, Master. Really great. But, have to say, it'd be a whole lot greater if you meant one word of it."

The Master grins, putting his hands behind his neck. "Now, just think how much happier you'd be if you'd stayed out of my thoughts just then."

"Wasn't in your thoughts. I just know you far too well."

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"Push," the Doctor instructs firmly, making the Master giggle. "Harder."

Jack twists his head around to share a dirty look almost equally between the two Time Lords. "If I push any harder, something will break. Square peg, round hole. Not going to happen. Blame the... the person who made this loom."

"I'm a genius of universal renown, not a factory hand. Oh, let me do it," the Master says, stepping forward. "Clearly this requires a level of finesse beyond clumsy human hands."

Jack pretty much growls at the Master. "I'll do it. She asked me."

"Down, boy," the Master says, genuinely trying not to laugh in the lovestruck freak's face, but failing. "Did you think I was trying to take your precious bone away?" The man's transparent. He can't have the Doctor so he's going to try for the president instead? As if Romana would.

Romana herself is not available for comment. Her body lies peacefully in the biplasmic mesh of the loom they're gathered around, naked but covered in a modesty sheet that someone found for her weeks ago while she was still a featureless blob. The other bodies growing in looms around her don't have such considerations.
Her mind is now back in the Little Black Box of Rassilon, which Jack is currently trying to fit into a slot not designed to take it, and isn't that the story of Captain Dumb-luck's life? The Master finds himself laughing again as he watches the epic struggle of man and box continue.

The words 'Stop it.' arrive in the Master's mind, crystal sharp.

'I can't help it! He sets himself up so, doesn't he? Wouldn't it be a crime to ignore such an opportunity?'

'If he decides to whack you one, I won't stop him.'

'Doctor, I'm hurt. Hurt and betrayed.'

The two Time Lords share a loving glare.

This box issue's really all their faults. These looms they've been manufacturing like well-behaved busy-bees are designed to work with the special headset Jack now wears almost full-time. It's discreet and looks like no more than high-tech Earth headphones when it's not connecting via a simple photonic beam to a loom. The headset allows Jack to download biodata and genemaps directly from the Matrix into the recipient circuits of the loom without it having to pass through his conscious mind.

Jack's been at it for weeks, interviewing the prospective resurrectees on Romana's elite list and downloading the ones who like the idea into appropriate looms. There are thirty looms working now in this heated chamber, all weaving adult bodies ready to be populated with the established consciousness. They won't be making any more for a while. This lot, when they're all up and walking about, will be more than enough help and no doubt hindrance too.

All four of them, 'the Founders' as they're starting to think of themselves, forgot that Romana's little home from home would need to fit into at least one of the looms too. Her genemap, a much smaller file, was transmitted via a simple data crystal at the start of the looming process, but they'd kept the Black Box connected to the TARDIS for as long as they possibly could; they needed Romana around. Only now, it seems she's a square peg. Poor Lady P.

Of course, the answer's obvious; the Master sees no reason to put an end to the show by offering it however. He's careful not to consider it either after the initial realisation, so the Doctor can't spoil things.

"Someone hand me a sonic," Jack says, holding his hand out behind him.

The Master doesn't bother offering his kiddie-safe sonic screwdriver, the only tool the Doctor will allow him. The damn thing does little more than vibrate and screw things, and not in the fun way. If he'd been allowed the proper tool for the job, they might not be having this problem now. Honestly, some days he wonders if he should feel lucky he's allowed to handle real metal cutlery at meal times.

"Jack," the Doctor says casually. "How d'you feel about becoming an intermediary circuit?"

The Master casts the Doctor a cross look. 'Plagiarist! Stop poking about in my head.'

'What makes you think I didn't work this out for myself?' The Doctor grins, apparently at Jack, but the Master knows it's really for him.

'Ooh, d'you think it might be, I don't know, the toxic levels of 'smug' coming off you in waves? Could it have been that? Hmm?'
Jack's saying something, but the Master only starts listening halfway through. "...I guess. But how can I connect to the Little Black Box?"

"There's a hole in one side," the Master tells him. "You're good at holes, so you tell us. You work it out."

Jack straightens up, the box in his hands, and he turns it around carefully, looking for the hole. Black on black, it won't be easy for human eyes to see under the lowered lights of their jerry-built looming chamber. It's little more than a warehouse really, with an office-cum-lab at one end.

"Connect your headset in first," the Doctor says. "Just in case."

Jack nods distractedly and sits down on the stool at the side of the loom. Three light beams emit from the headset, one from above each of his ears and one from the central node above the crown. The three beams meet, become one, and connect to the receptor cells in the loom's input socket.

A flicker of a smile is the only giveaway when Jack's finger finds the hole in the box.

"All right, Jack?" the Doctor asks, not sounding half as worried as his thoughts.

"Yeah, she's doing just fine," Jack answers, smiling more broadly. "I'm gonna transmit her now. It might take a little longer than usual, but I'll make sure she enjoys the ride." Sparkles of colour start to fill the photonic beams.

The Master shakes his head, wondering yet again what it is that others supposedly find fanciable about the freak. Not even the hint of true submission he sees in the way Jack acts around the Doctor does anything for the Master. Still, while the pussy-cat is busy looking at the queen, the courtiers can have fun amongst themselves. The Master takes a step back and curls his hand around the Doctor's skinny buttocks.

'Your thought processes astound me at times.' The Doctor's mental voice sounds amused, though nothing much shows on his face.

'Are you still poking about in my thoughts? I really am irresistible, aren't I?'

'Much like my bum, apparently. Your head's a good distraction. Helps stop me interfering between, er, cat and queen.'

'Again, just like your bum! An excellent distraction from, ooh, almost everything I can think of.' The Master gives the flesh in question a good illustrative squeeze. 'How's it feeling by the way?'

'Hmm.' The Doctor shifts his weight between legs. 'Future early morning bonks will involve actual lube, I hope.'

'We've run out, and you told me not to raid Matrix-boy's room anymore. Anyway, you didn't really need it. Felt good, didn't it? Eh? Don't deny it.'

'It did. At the time.'

'Your Master knows what's best for you.'

'At the time,' the Doctor repeats, his mental laughter this time making his body shake a little.

"All done," Jack announces proudly, and the Master looks around to see Romana's eyes open, intelligence clearly behind them.
The Doctor scurries around to the other side of the loom from Jack, leaning over the frame edge to beam at the Lady President. "Hello, Romanadvoratrelundar. And how are you feeling today?" he coos. The Master can feel the Doctor's joy at seeing Romana incarnate once more.

"Quite well, thank you, Doctor." Romana seems to try to turn her face to the Doctor, but of course, she can't yet. The loom technology keeps its weavings immobilised for obvious reasons. "If a little claustrophobic."

"Working on it," Jack says, pressing some of the buttons that will retract the biothreaders from Romana's body. "Get ready to take the weight of your left arm... there. And now I'll work on your delectable left leg..."

"Oh, skin and muscles." Romana stretches out her free arm, flexing her fingers, and then brings it down to stroke her face. "Touch! It seems so animal to miss such things, but to have them back really is very good."

"It's the great equaliser of us all, flesh," Jack says, taking the opportunity to grope the Lady President's flesh as he lifts up her leg, now free from the loom as well. Letting it rest on the side of the loom, he straightens her modesty cover; the Master's certain he'd rather remove it all together.

"It and the emotion it brings," Romana agrees, smiling softly, her head still held in place. "You have a gentle touch, Captain."

Jack moves around to the Doctor's side of the loom and starts pressing buttons there. "Years of practice," he says, deadpan, but the Master can hear the annoying wink in his voice. "Not long now and you'll be able to set foot on New Gallifrey for the first time."

"See it all with real eyes." Said eyes are already gaining a faraway look as Romana lifts both hands and stretches for the sky. Well, roof.

"Let me give you the tour, show you the sights," Jack says, moving around to stand behind her head, and the Master can't help his reaction.

"What was that nasty ripping noise? Oh dear, Captain Harkness, did your boots just split their leather?" The Master's voice lowers to an angry snarl. "A Time Lord doesn't need to be shown her own planet by a walking modem."

"Master!" That's the Doctor, of course.

"What?" The Master returns the Doctor's outraged glare with widened eyes. "You were thinking the exact same thing! Well, maybe not the modem bit."

Jack doesn't say a word, doesn't even look at them. Instead he completes the freeing of Romana's head, which he then lifts up slightly with a hand beneath her hair. "There you go, beautiful. Gather the cloth around yourself; I'm going to lift you up into a sitting position."

"Thank you, Jack," Romana says quietly, once he's done just that. She ties the sheet into a loose toga, split down one side. "You're very kind. I'd love a tour once I'm dressed. Do you happen to know where my choice of clothing was left?"

Of course, she has to say yes to the tour now just to be polite after the Master's insults. Sometimes the Master wishes he'd think just a few moves further ahead before speaking. The Doctor's still glowering at him too. For the sake of the Doctor's head, he's trying to stay calm himself. It's not easy.
"I have them right here," Jack says. "Let's get you out of this contraption."

The Master stares, his lips pursed, as Jack helps Romana from the loom, copping several feels on the way. Who does he think he is? Or is 'what' the better question? He's a freak, a construct, inferior human genes put to use as Time Lord emergency tech. That's all. He is not something fit to consider itself romantic fodder for the President of Gallifrey.

"Come on, you," the Doctor says, suddenly back at his side. He grabs the Master's arm. "Let Romana have some privacy to dress in."

"And _he_ gets to stay?" the Master asks as he's hauled away up the aisle like an unruly school kid.

"That's entirely up to Romana."

"Get off me." The Master twists the Doctor's fingers viciously until the Doctor's forced to let go. "I'm not your naughty toddler."

"Could've fooled me." They glare at each other in the middle of the aisle between the looms, the hum of the generators filling the silence. The Doctor rubs hard at his head, and the Master realises the drums are growing louder. He closes his eyes.

"Sorry," he says after a few moments. He sighs heavily. "Let's go and sit outside in the sun." The Doctor nods, smiling ever so slightly. The Master doesn't look back as they walk to the door together; he doesn't want to risk seeing anything that might make the drums worse.

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By the time the four of them are sitting around a campfire by the lakeside, one sun is long set and the other on its way down. The evening air is full of the song of thrummers and other insectoid life. The Master's sitting at the top of a slight slope beside the Doctor, who's lying back, staring out at the stars and munching absenty on something crispy.

It should all be rather pleasant, but the Master's feeling on edge for some reason. Keeps finding himself tapping the drums out on his teeth. Maybe the seafood bites are disagreeing with him.

They're eating from a buffet of Daxtrian delicacies purchased with fool's credit by the Doctor and the Master during a quick jaunt to the 36th century. It was the Master's first trip outside the TARDIS onto an inhabited planet since his captivity began. All previous trips to the future, to fetch necessary and highly anachronistic materials for their work here, were completed either by the Doctor alone or the Doctor and Jack.

The short trip was a reward, the Master supposes, for having 'played nice' with the freak all afternoon as Romana took charge of them all. And took charge she really did. She may not have her presidential robes anymore, but she has boss-lady attitude imbed in every cell. The Master's got to the point already that he can feel his skin crawl every time she just assumes he'll obey her casual orders to do this or that. He's never accepted anyone's authority but his own.

And just for the moment, the Doctor's, he supposes. That won't last though.

But it's still easier to obey her than to keep his mouth shut around Captain Cast-off. Somehow though, he managed both this afternoon. He certainly more than earned his reward. He continued to behave impeccably the entire ten minutes he was on Daxtria too, hopefully earning himself brownie points for a much more satisfactory trip later on.

Oh, good dog, Master, aren't you proud of yourself? Maybe you'll be allowed a slightly longer
choke-chain in the future. He shakes his head roughly, trying to dislodge those thoughts. He can feel himself getting to the end of his good-boy tether. His teeth are getting that needles-in-the-nerves feeling, and maybe that's why he keeps finding himself tapping them. This 'party' better be over soon so he can take his frustrations out on the Doctor's body.

Swallowing, he tries to make himself relax a little longer. Romana's on his left and below him, closer to the water, her face burnished by the firelight. He leans down and gestures to her with his glass of Porthau White. "Happy looming day, Lady P."

"Thank you, Master." She raises her own glass and clinks it with his. "What a lovely day it's been. New Gallifrey is breathtaking."

"A perfect backdrop for you, Romana," Jack says on the other side of her, and it takes all the willpower the Master possesses not to spit wine everywhere.

He restrains himself to a telepathic, 'I didn't know the Daxtrians included cheese in their cuisine,' to the Doctor.

'Hush,' the Doctor replies, his thoughts mellow. 'Don't spoil things now. It's lovely out here.'

'Did I say it out loud? I don't think so."

The Doctor reaches over and takes the Master's nearest hand in his. 'No, you didn't. Thank you.' The Master feels a wash of warmth and affection soak through his mind. 'Try to calm down, if you can.'

He closes his eyes and lets himself relax a little in the Doctor's mental embrace. It's easier than trying on his own. 'Do try not to wax romantic, Doctor, won't you? I know, I know. The stars, the campfire, the lap of small waves on the lake shore - it's hard to resist. But continue to make the effort, just for me?'

'Oh, and I was so looking forward to comparing your eyes to Raxish topaz, your hair to the pelt of the Alzariun mink, and your smile to, ooh, Lewis Carroll's cat's, of course.'

'Alzariun mink?' The Master runs his free hand over his hair. 'You just made that up.'

'I did not, though I'm not surprised you've never heard of it.'

"Oh, Mister Matrix? Got a question for you," the Master sing-songs out loud, interrupting what's obviously some sort of unpleasantly intimate tête-à-tête. He can't understand why the Doctor doesn't put a stop to this; Romana's clearly not thinking straight, so soon after her looming.

Jack sits forward, presumably so he can see the Master properly. "Yeah?" he says, not bothering to hide the resigned irritation in his tone.

The Master smiles sweetly. "Alzariun mink - does it appear in your index, by any chance?"

Jack's eyes roll upwards in that nauseating way that means he's accessing the bio-implants in his head. "Small mammaloid lifeform from the planet Alzarius, located in the pocket dimension known as E-Space. Its pelt is prized on Alzarius for its unique textural and biochemical properties. And that's all she wrote." Jack gives the Master an equally sweet smile right back.

"Oh, I remember that fur!" Romana exclaims. "Amazing stuff. I had a wrap made from it for ages. It was so wonderfully affectionate, liking nothing better than to curl all around me. I lost it before I left E-Space, sadly, on a nasty planet full of sentient tadpole things that wanted to 'convert me to"
edible slime'.” She shivers.

Jack murmurs something to Romana that the Master's very pleased not to be able to hear. He can feel his expression souring as the pair sit closer still, and Romana giggles. Yes, giggles. The Lady President of Gallifrey has no business giggling with freakish humans.

'Prude.' The Doctor squeezes his hand.

'Hypocrite.'

'Snob.'

'No, really. Hypocrite.' The Master lies down on his side, propped up on one arm so he can look at the Doctor and can't see Jack and Romana at all. He can't fully see the Doctor either, mind you. It's darker now, and the fire's light doesn't quite reach them up here when they're low to the ground. Time Lords have superior night vision, but they're not so skilled with the in-between times; half-light shadows confuse their eyes. "I can hear my thoughts about this ugly development echoed in your mind. You feel the same way.'

'Maybe a little bit.' The Doctor shrugs. 'None of our business though, and neither of us has a right to judge.'

'That hasn't stopped dearest Jack getting on your case about me.'

'Oh, he hasn't said anything for weeks now,' the Doctor sends, waving a hand about above him. 'I think he's got the message.'

'Only because he's given up on you as a lost cause. He's fixed his perverted attentions higher up now.' The Master resists the temptation to check on the pair below them and instead reaches out to flick something, a thrummer he thinks, from the Doctor's jacket. He leaves his hand there once it's gone. 'You know, if she's shagging the Matrix monster, she'll face insurrection from the others once they're woken.'

'He's my friend, Master, my best of mates. Do try to remember that when thinking up yet more insulting nouns and adjectives for Jack.' The Doctor sighs, rolling to his side to face the Master. 'But you're right; she will. She must know that.'

'Discussed it with her?'

'No, and I'm not going to. Neither are you.' The Doctor lifts a hand to the Master's face, his thumb softly rubbing over the Master's lower lip. 'She's never said a word about our entrelacement after her initial shock; least we can do is return the same courtesy.'

The Master's silent for a while, enjoying the little touches, but he needs something a great deal more. He asks, 'Did you ever have sex with him?'

'Jack? Nah.'

'Why not? Surveys taken in the kingdom of the blind state that nine out of ten idiots think he's very pretty, and you know he would've been ever-so willing to spread your legs or his own. Your preference.'

'Yeah.'

'He loves you.'
'And that's why not.'

'It is? 'The Master strokes his hand down the Doctor's flank, stopping at his hip. 'Scared of hurting the poor little human lambikins, were you? How touching. Why couldn't you love him back?'

'I did, do, in a way. Just not... Oh, we've had this conversation before.' The Doctor's fingers are still gently stroking the Master's face. 'It's not the same.'

'With a non-Time Lord?'

'Yeah.'

'So, better with me then?' The Master shuffles a little closer to the Doctor, so their bodies are almost touching as they lie in the grass.

'Of course.'

The Master grins. 'Even though I'm a mass-murdering megalomaniac and, oh, however all the rest of the usual tirade against me goes, you still like me best.'

'I thought we were talking about shagging,' The Doctor grins back cheekily, his teeth white in the half-light. 'When did I claim to like you?'

Grin meets pout halfway, and the Master's lips purse. 'Well, you love me when I make you come.'

'Hardly the same thing.'

'You like me too. When I'm not doing something you find unconscionable.'

The Doctor smiles fondly. 'Yeah. Yeah, I do. We get on in full house-on-fire Technicolour and Dolby Surround when not at odds over some scheme of yours. I'll admit it.' He leans forward to press a quick kiss on the Master's lips. 'But the trouble is, Master, you're always up to something unconscionable. There's always planning and scheming, the setting up of cons, the laying down of traps, or, oh, something else naughty. I can't ever allow myself just to relax and enjoy your company. Have to watch for clues, guess your moves and try to prevent them before they happen.'

The Master feels his eyebrows raise. 'But you're in my head now.' As if it really needs pointing out. 'And, I might say, perfectly relaxed.'

'Probably shouldn't be.'

'You're in my head.' the Master repeats, pushing his hand into the Doctor's hair and pulling him into a much longer and deeper kiss. 'I can't plan, scheme, lay traps and all the rest without you knowing it.'

'You're perfectly capable of hiding thoughts from me and only considering them when I'm asleep or distracted.'

That's true. Funny how it hasn't occurred to the Master to do just that. He frowns to himself; is he getting soft? Has the Doctor succeeded in taming him? Just the thought of that is enough to sharpen the edge of his already too acute mood. The drums get louder. He lets the kiss become a little vicious to encourage them to bugger off back to where they were lurking.

The Doctor tries to push him back, without much luck. 'Master, we're not exactly in private here.'

'They only have eyes for each other. Anyway, if they don't like it they can go for a nice romantic
walk all around the lake and have those smoochies they're clearly dying for. Won't that be sweet?' Instead of pulling back, the Master pushes the Doctor to his back and half rolls on top of him. 'With a bit of luck, one of the really big saurians will eat the freak. Several times, if I'm really lucky.'

The Master can feel irritation in the Doctor's mind, and there's no longer any reciprocation in the kiss. 'No, just get off.' The Doctor twists his head aside and pushes hard at the Master's shoulders. 'We're not little kids. We can control our urges 'til we're alone. I said no.'

'And I say yes.' The Master grabs the Doctor's wrists and wrestles them down to the ground using his weight to boost his strength. 'I've done everything you bloody wanted today. I've barked when you said bark, fetched when you said fetch. Now it's me-time. Now I get some of the only thing that makes all this bearable.' He tries to kiss the Doctor again, but the Doctor keeps moving his head away, so the Master just gnaws at his neck instead, pushing his legs between the Doctor's.

'So it's to be rape then?' The Doctor asks, his thoughts full of things the Master wants nothing to do with. Hear no Doctor, see no Doctor - he wishes. 'You do remember where you are, don't you?'

Rolling away, the Master then sits up, lips pursed and brow furled. The drums are making it hard to think, but he knows, he knows, rape would be a profoundly bad idea. Apart from anything else, there's the captain and Romana staring up at him, the captain all tensed, ready for action, his hand on his holster.

The Master finds his own hand at his neck, trying to tug at a collar that isn't there, that hasn't been there for months and wasn't there that long even when it was. Oh, but he should never have allowed that to happen. Collaring the Master? The universe should've ended first. The Doctor's need for him flattered him into partial acquiescence, sufficient that he didn't fight hard enough to stop it closing around his throat.

That could be a metaphor for so very much just now.

Standing, he announces to the world, "Going for a walk. On my own." He doesn't look back at the Doctor before he strides away because he knows if he does he'll see the Doctor holding his head in pain.

Pain or not, the Master doesn't get far before the words, 'Come back. You've no protection against the dinosaurs.' appear in his mind.

Normally that would be enough to stop him; the Master has had a strong dislike of saurian creatures since that riot-of-fun trip to the edges of the universe with the Rani, courtesy of the Doctor at his most infuriating. But this isn't 'normally'. It's not remotely 'normally'. 'I'll take my chances. Enjoy your nice little tea party, won't you?'

He hears rapid footfalls behind him. "I'm sorry, Master. Can't let you just walk into danger." The Doctor's voice is tense and a little breathless.

The Master walks faster and refuses to turn around. "I'm not your toy, your slave, or your child, Doctor."

"You're my responsibility."

"No."

"Yes."

"No. I'm your hairshirt, and right this moment, your hairshirt is feeling particularly itchy. Isn't your
head telling you that? Loud and clear, yes? So just sod off, there's a good Doctor."

"Master..."

"No!" It's properly dark now, so the Master can see where he's going. Even then, as he enters the silver woods, he nearly trips when his foot catches in the loop of some bramble or trailing root in the undergrowth. A hand catches at his elbow. "Oh, for Rassilon's sake, Doctor, leave me alone!"

"I can't," the Doctor says quietly as he attempts to gather the Master into his arms. "Let me help."

The Master, right now, would really very much like to kill something if it's all the same with the universe. He shoves the Doctor back so hard he goes sprawling, and the Master laughs. "I don't need your help, and I don't need you. Stay away from me or suffer the consequences." He watches as the Doctor sits up, holding his head in his hands and making little whimpery noises. The Master can feel the agony in the Doctor's mind, but he no longer cares. No, that's a lie. He likes it. He likes the Doctor's pain. It's turning him on.

Things are going very badly wrong here.

He screws up his face and manages a final warning. "If you've any sense at all in that muddled mind of yours, you'll go sit in the Zero Room for a few hours."

"And leave you out here, alone, in this state?" The Doctor moves his hands away long enough to do his big-eyed earnest look. "I've asked too much of you today, Master. I know it, and I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. Please let me help." The Doctor's begging. That's always a turn on.

The Master's head is suddenly brimming with all the delicious ways he could kill the Doctor. Ways slow enough to allow regeneration, and ways fast and final enough to end his existence forever. Oh, they'll probably just bring him right back from the Matrix; what would be the point?

Disgusted, he turns, digs his fingernails into his palms, and starts walking again.

Despite the thudding percussion in his head, he can just about hear the noise of the Doctor stumbling about in the darkness behind him. He knows he should stop, let the Doctor try to ease both the Master's barely controlled rage and the Doctor's pain. But he can't. If he stops, he might... do something he'd later regret. Oh, why can't the stupid, do-gooding idiot take the hint, see the red flag, and get out of the danger zone?

The Master roars out his rage and frustration to the forest. The trees seem full of the beat, like they're soldiers marching on a parade ground around him. Thud-thud-thud-thud; thud-thud-thud-thud... Louder and louder and louder. He roars again, or at least starts to, but that's when he realises that the scream he already hears isn't coming from his own throat.

He staggers back to the Doctor, who's thrashing about on his back in the undergrowth, his hands clasped to his skull.

"Fuck," the Master mutters. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. How stupid are you?"

He collapses more than sits beside the Doctor and tries - really tries, so very, very hard - to calm the drums down. But they're too loud, too compelling, and he hasn't got a chance without the Doctor's help. And the Doctor's too busy screaming to be any help at all.

Leaning over the Doctor, the Master tries to pull him up. "C'mon, c'mon. Got to get you to the TARDIS. C'mon, Doctor. You have to get up."
But the Doctor doesn't even seem to be aware of the Master's presence. He's stopped screaming in favour of convulsing and gurgling, and not knowing what else to do, the Master slaps him, hard, which feels utterly right and good. Should it? He can't think. He's a genius of cosmic proportion, and he can't think because his head is full of bloody percussion and the echo of an idiot's screams!

He straddles the Doctor and shakes him by the shoulders. He slaps him again, and then repeatedly as he yells, "Wake up, you stupid, masochistic, stubborn pain in my immortal genius backside!"

Then the Master really hits the Doctor with a good solid punch to the jaw. He hears the crack of bone and grins. This is more like it. He raises his fist again... which is when he hears the click of a cocked gun directly behind his head.

"Get off him and step back, right now," says the captain's voice, hard and cold.

The Master does neither thing, but he does look around. Romana is standing a little way behind Jack and both their faces are full of all the normal, pathetic animal reactions to the Master and his activities. It's like old times, this.

"This isn't like you, Master." Romana's voice informs him that, no, it really isn't like old times at all. "You're ill."

"I said get off him!" The gun's barrel jabs into the base of the Master's skull.

He lets go of the Doctor but doesn't otherwise move. "Oh dear, Doctor. Mummy and Daddy seem to have come home early to spoil our fun. How very unfortunate... for them!"

The drums pound like thunder in his head as he whirls around and throws himself on Jack, wanting nothing more than to kill him, again and again and again. The bullet hurts like hell as it passes through his shoulder, just above his right heart, but that doesn't stop him twisting the man's head hard around before the world turns black and silent.

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...It's my fault. Asked too much. Expected too much. Something terrible's coming. Tastes like the air before the Toclafane rift. God, the blood. Thought he was dead. Can't lose him, not now. In love with a monster. Rose would laugh. No, she wouldn't. Oh God, what to do with him. He's losing control. My fault. Leopards and spots. Old dogs and new tricks. Oh Koschei, how did things ever get this far? My fault. Of course it's my fault. What right have I to be happy? Jack shouldn't have shot him. What right have I to say that? What right have I to any consideration? Taking back what he gave. Regrets saving him. His right. Only human. Life warped by Time Lords. That's us: we take, we use, we discard. Wish he'd stop staring like that. Where's my friend gone? Where's my friend?...

The Master blinks slowly, trying in a vague kind of way to make the world around him make sense and wishing, in a more definite way, that someone would turn the radio off.

"There. A good few hours more healing trance, and you'll be lighter than the very best rain," the Doctor says with false cheer, finishing taping off a bandage over the Master's exit wound. "The sort of heavy rain that comes in on the end of a heatwave and washes the air clean. That kind of rain."

The Master knows the Doctor's cheer is false because he's realising that what he thought was an Earth-style radio is in fact the Doctor's thoughts. The Doctor looks haggard, his eyes are bloodshot, and there's an ugly bruise on his jaw. His head's full of something very close to panic, babbling a light year a minute.
"He shot me," the Master says, trying to make sense of the events that occurred before he woke in here with the Doctor playing... well, doctor. "People keep shooting me."

"From what I understand, Jack didn't have much choice. You were trying to kill him. You did kill him."

"Sound good sense on my part," the Master mutters. "Not like it took, anyway." He wishes most fervently he could say that and mean it. He does mean it, sort of. This is all Jack's fault, after all. But with the drums gone, the Doctor and his stupid childish moral sense are so bloody loud in the Master's head. He can still feel the crack of Jack's neck in his hands, and it... hurts.

It's always something, isn't it? Always someone or something pushing him this way or that. Why can't he just be himself? All he's ever wanted is a little control, and he can't even control his own emotions. He wants to curl in a corner and weep, and that's not him. It isn't. It's what the Doctor's doing to him, turning him soft, making him care, making him feel guilty. He never feels guilty!

"I'm sorry," the Doctor says. "Inevitable we'll rub off on each other a little bit."

"Can't say I've seen you try to take over any galaxies recently," the Master mutters.

"Well, you've not exactly been rescuing kittens from trees. I said a 'little bit'." The Doctor lets his first aid things drop to the floor and steps closer, cupping the Master's face with one hand. "Knew this would come to a head sooner or later. I'm going to start working on the drums tonight. Time we both were rid of them."

The Master pulls away from the touch. The last thing he wants right now is an even greater invasion of his head by the Doctor. There's so much of the Doctor in him currently, the guilt and even the recognition that this alien emotion is guilt is all the Doctor's. And then there's the frightened mental babble that just won't stop. It's not like the Master can even follow it, but it's filling all the spaces in his head that normally pulse with the drums.

"You're too frazzled," he says. "Not a good time for brain surgery." A flash memory of the Doctor having convulsions hits him, and he scrubs his hands over his face, swallowing down a wrong-so-wrong sob. "I don't see how you can work on them in here anyway; they're gone."

"Nah, just repressed. Took a peek while you were out cold. They're still there, just shrunken, like houseplants withered without water."

The Master isn't particularly keen on the idea of the Doctor poking around his head while he's unconscious either. He pulls his legs up and wraps his arms around them. "Can't you hear yourself? Your thoughts are like a sped-up recording. Go to bed. Tuck yourself in nice and tight. Don't forget to say a prayer to all the little angels. I'll stay right here in my bloodied cage like a good little dangerous wild animal. You'll be safe. No one will get eaten."

The Doctor shakes his head, wincing a little as he does so. "It'll block the link."

"Good." Yes, really, good. Go away, and most importantly, shut up.

"You don't mean that."
"Don't I?" The Master stares at the Doctor over his knees. "Take a look-see."

"You've overdone things, that's all." The Doctor's getting quivery around the lips, and his thoughts are so chaotic the Master gives up trying to receive them as anything more than white noise. He really doesn't care what the Doctor's thinking right now anyway.

"Go to bed," he says wearily. "Let me have tonight without you. Give me that. Lock me in here if you wish, but go."

"Master..."

"Go. Please."

"You should sleep yourself, Master. Scanned you. Your brain's full of accumulated stress chemicals like you've not seen zeta rhythms for weeks. It's no wonder you lost it tonight. Oh, the wonder is you didn't lose it before! You're like a... a Victorian chimney that no-one's swept for years. Bound to go whoosh-bang and start spitting fire at the sky. Why didn't you tell me you've been having problems sleeping?"

Lost it, did he? Yes, he really did. There was no rational mind behind the attack on Jack. No scheme, no plan, just the need to kill. That's no more him than the urge now to cry. What the hell's happening to him? "I haven't been having problems," he says dully. "The odd nightmare, nothing else."

"Then why..." The Doctor shakes his head. "Let me help you into a healing trance, and then I'll go, if that's what you really want."

"Yes." The Master pulls his shirt back over his injured shoulder and gets off the table thing. He goes to sit in the corner on the floor, pulling his legs up to his chest again. "Don't need help to enter trance-state. Why would I?" He closes his eyes. "Promise you'll leave once I'm under?"

There's a pause before the Doctor answers, and when he says simply, "Promise," his voice seems to crack. The Master doesn't bother opening his eyes.

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The Master wakes up screaming. He's alone, really alone. There's nothing but him in the whole of time and space. Nothing but him, and he's not enough. Not nearly enough. He's as empty inside as space is outside. Just the husk of him and nothing else in the whole silent universe. The rather white and soft universe...

God, it's the Zero Room. He has to get out of here.

He hurtles for the door and gets it open. Three things hit him as he staggers outside. The Doctor's back in his head, albeit deeply asleep; the drums are back and anything but asleep, and he remembers his plan and realises exactly why the Doctor found his brain chemicals out of whack. He has been overdoing it. No rest for the wicked, indeed.

He leans against the wall as the panic subsides. He must never, ever try being alone in the Zero Room again. His old fear of the place was completely justified. Oh, Rassilon's balls, his right heart feels like it's about to seize up completely.

He thinks his wound may be bleeding again, but when he feels tentatively around the bandage, there's no wetness.
After a while, his heartbeats at least calm down, but the drums don't quieten that much at all. They're a forceful god, demanding tribute, and he's going to have to give them something if they're ever going to leave him alone long enough to sleep.

The Doctor... If the Doctor wakes when the drums are this loud he'll probably have another fit, might even end up having to regenerate into something altogether less pretty and obliging, and the Master can't allow that. But he can't lock himself back in the Zero Room either, just can't, so he has to find another answer and quickly.

He pushes away from the wall and breaks into a jog heading for the med-room.

A few minutes later, with a convenient box filled with various treasures, he sneaks into their shared bedroom, where the Doctor has chosen to sleep despite being on his own tonight.

The Doctor lies flat on his back on the bed, fully dressed, limbs straight and almost rigid. His face seems so ravaged, so tense and twitchy, that for a second or so the Master denies the evidence in his mind and thinks the Doctor's already awake. But he's not, just lost in some drum-sodden nightmare.

"Sorry," the Master mouths silently. "Really." He bites his lip and forces a few breaths into his lungs during a particularly cacophonous surge of drumming.

Time Lords don't like drugs. They don't need them in the main, their superior constitution and healing abilities rendering most drugs pointless if not toxic. There are a very few drugs known outside of Gallifrey that actually work the way they should in a Time Lord body, but one of those is Psianthadene designed by the Sisters of Plenitude, a painkiller and sedative that works directly on the telepathic centres of compatible brains.

Thanks to whoever raided the med-room earlier for dressings for his gun wound, and who didn't lock up again afterwards, the Master's been able to snatch enough Psianthadene to keep the Doctor out for hours. Not that locks would've stopped him under the circumstances, but he's grateful for the error. Every moment passing could be the one in which the Doctor slams back to consciousness.

He interpolates the drug straight into a vein in the Doctor's arm, and smiles softly as the tension in the Doctor's sleeping face eases. "There. All better now. See how I take care of you?" He rubs and pats the Doctor's arm a little and then lets it drop.

While he's here, he quickly changes his shirt to one with no holes or bloodstains and finds a pair of gloves. He also grabs his iPod as there's nothing that doesn't go better with a little musical accompaniment. Then, after kissing the Doctor softly on the forehead, the Master takes his box and leaves the room.

There'll be no working on his pet project tonight; the Master needs to sleep. Before he can do that, however, he's got to appease the demands in his head, the hungry beat. No amount of Psianthadene will allow him to sleep through this pounding. He'd probably end up some kind of zombie if he tried it, lurching around the TARDIS, murdering and destroying mindlessly as he went. Far better he retain at least a little self-control.

There's an obvious solution anyway, a way to commit as much sadistic mayhem as he needs to and no harm done when it's over. No lasting harm. The Master stops outside Jack's door and wonders what his chances are of catching the human asleep and unprotected. Not good, he suspects. Therefore duplicity is his better bet. After palming a small medical interpolator inside one glove, he puts his box down to one side of the door and knocks politely on it.
It opens quickly, confirming the Master's hunch that the inhabitant wasn't asleep. Jack's fully dressed, although without his ridiculous coat. He glares at the Master with open hostility and immediately raises a gun to his face.

The Master holds his hands up quickly, taking a step back. "I came to apologise! Really truly!"

"Of course you did," Jack says scathingly. "I take it the Doctor won't let you back into bed until you've made appropriate noises in my direction."

"Something like that." The Master smiles in a way he considers to be engaging and then puts on his best sincere expression, the one that came in so useful when campaigning as Harold Saxon. "It's really hurting him, this thing, this 'you and me' thing. We need to... to make peace. For his sake. So what do you say?"

Jack laughs in his face. "That might've been possible before this evening. Probably not, but there was a slim chance. Now? You've gotta be kidding."

"For the Doctor, Jack! I'm not suggesting we become, what, mates or something? That'll never happen. Neither of us is ever going to forget what I did to you on the Valiant... or earlier tonight, though I have to say, I'm the one with the lasting damage from that encounter." He rubs over his shoulder, wincing in genuine pain.

"I should've aimed lower. What then?"

"A truce, a peace treaty." The Master holds out a gloved hand, palm up, flat and obviously empty. "A mutual non-aggression pact. Not friends, but not enemies either. For the Doctor."

"And the next time the Royal Drummers of Burundi take up residence in your head?"

As if they ever leave. "They won't. Now Romana's awake, we can afford to take the necessary time off. So once the Doctor's rested, he's going to get rid of them."

"Finally!"

"In his defence, we've all been very busy."

"Oh, believe me, I don't blame the Doctor for the delay at all." Jack uncocks his gun and lowers it. "What will you use as your excuse once they're gone?"

God, what is it about this human that makes the Master see red so quickly. The drums seem to pulse in his vision, forcing him to blink hard. It takes all his willpower to stay in 'sincere and open' mode. "I'm truly sorry about earlier, Captain. Can't you tell? It won't happen again. So can we at least call truce? Eh? Come on, for the Doctor."

Still looking unconvinced, Jack shrugs. "Sure, I guess. 'Til the next time you start pummeling the Doctor."

The Master winces. "I didn't mean... I was trying to help him."

"Oh really?" Jack's voice is hard with sarcasm.

"Yes. Things went wrong, and... and they won't again. The Doctor..." The Master looks down, allowing some of the tension from the drums into his voice and trying for something at least a little like the pity card. "I couldn't think properly. The Doctor was hurting, and I needed to get him to the TARDIS. Things... went wrong. I went wrong."
"It's a nice act, Master. Got it down pat, haven't you?"

"It's not..." The Master looks up and meets Jack's eyes, saying fiercely, "Look, believe what you will about everything else I say, but never doubt the Doctor's importance to me. There's nothing I wouldn't do. Nothing."

"Oh, now that I believe."

"Including putting my sincere dislike of you to one side. Come on, Captain. Won't you do the same for the Doctor? Let's face it, he's the one thing we have in common." The Master sticks out his hand.

Jack shakes his head and sighs. "Talk about meaningless gestures." Nonetheless, he puts his hand in the Master's, who squeezes hard. Two seconds later, Jack's dead on the floor, his heart and brain activity having abruptly stopped.

Psianthadene is deadly to humans.

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Some say you're trouble, boy. Just because you like to destroy all the things that bring the idiots joy. Well, what's wrong with a little destruction?

The Master prances around the Garden Room doing his best Mick Jagger strut to the hectoring guitar riff, whirling around the pillars and jumping over flowerbeds. As the chorus starts, he runs and deliberately skids on the wet cobbles, spinning to come to a halt in front of Jack... well, what's left of him. He turns the volume down on the iPod.

"Ah, Captain. Just like old times, this, eh? Isn't it? Can almost imagine all my lovely toclafane are still out there, waiting to kill and wreck chaos on my orders. Ooh yeah, I miss 'em. Do you miss them? No, don't suppose you do. Ah, but the power, Captain. The power. Whatever I told them, they'd just go and do it. No arguments, no qualms. They obeyed 'cause it was fun. They loved it! The more blood, the more screaming, the better. Lovely things, humans. They talk all the good talk, but if you keep cutting them down, down, down to the nittiest of the gritty, you get an angry child that just wants the universe to bleed. Because it's fun."

Hmm, no response from the not-so-handsome Jack. The Master has him strung by his arms from a bracket meant to hold planters. He's naked bar a few rags and an impressive amount of gore. The Master's been playing with scalpels again. All surface wounds, of course; he doesn't want his canvas dying on him too soon. But with all those muscles, what a lot of surface the Master's been able to wound.

He laughs aloud. Finally letting loose after so many months of restraint feels far too good to rush. The drums aren't quietened yet, but that's all right, because he's working with them now, not trying to fight their demands.

He leans forward and lifts Jack's head up by the hair. "Aren't you proud, Captain? Aren't you proud of your race?"

"Go to hell." Jack spits out blood with the three words.

"Oh, Captain, Captain. I went there long ago. Can't you tell?" The Master wipes a gloved hand over Jack's pecs, where running blood has obscured his handiwork. He's burnt the word 'FREAK' into Jack's flesh with a medical cauteriser and wants it readable. "Now, what shall we do next? Got any preferences? Nothing sexual, I'm afraid. That was just to keep the Doctor happy on the Valiant. I
don't really fancy you, you know. Well, who would? Have you seen yourself?"

"The Doctor... the Doctor will..."

"Hmm? What was that? Oh dear, I do hope you don't think the Doctor'll do anything when you go running to him. Oh, he'll shout at me a bit, no doubt, but then he'll forgive me. Don't get your hopes up for anything more; I'd hate to see them so cruelly crushed. No, that's a complete and utter lie! I'll be laughing all the way to our big double bed, where I'll give my husband a lovely shagging, so hard he'll forget who he is let alone what he's in a tiff about by the time I pull out of his delectable arse."

"He's not your husband," Jack growls.

"No, you're right. He's much more of the nagging hausfrau, isn't he?" The Master turns his iPod up again and starts spinning Jack on his bonds, this way and that, like they're dancing. "Love this album," he shouts, despite the fact Jack can't hear the music. "They wrote it for me, you know. 'I am complete, invincible. If I have one principle, then it's to stand on you, brother.'"

He giggles and lets Jack go, watches him continue to spin a little for a while, one way, then the other, head hanging. Blood gathers at the end of the man's rough quiff of hair and drips to the floor.

"Gosh, your wrists must really be hurting," the Master says sympathetically after turning the music down a little again. "Or maybe they've stopped now. Have they stopped? That'll be the nerves dying. Bye-bye hands! I know, I know, you'd wave, but..." He gives Jack his biggest, cheesiest grin. It's wasted, of course, as the man's playing unconscious. "Okay, enough intermission, on with the show. I'm bored of skin cuts and burns, how about you? I say it's time for something a lot more... juicy."

He's nearly at the end of his box of toys salvaged from the med-room, but he's saved the best 'til last. They're some sort of largish metal tongs. He found them near the steriliser; maybe they're for moving things in and out of the biovacuum.

When he turns around, Jack's watching him, glowering from under the brow of his hung head. Good, the Master won't have to get him to pretend to wake up then. "You know, the Doctor's too nice to tell you this, but you better hope your attentions to our lady prez are not reciprocated. If you care about her, I mean. You do care about her, don't you?"

"That... that some kind of threat?"

"Oh, come on, Captain. You must know by now that us Time Lords are a superior, elitist lot. If the others, when they're woken, discover you're bonking Romana, who wasn't exactly the most popular prez ever to start with, well, her career's over, isn't it? And it will be all your fault. Just the way things are with us, I'm afraid. There's a reason the Doctor and I turned renegade."

Jack manages a sneer. "You make it sound like you ran away together. Shame I already know the truth, isn't it?"

"You know nothing," the Master says, scowling and coming closer.

"I know you inside out. The only thing you're a master at is losing. Loser."

The Master purposefully relaxes suddenly tense muscles. Non-zero sum. The Doctor promised a non-zero sum. "Trying to get me angry? Tut, tut. Not precisely your most intelligent move ever, Captain. However bad what I'm doing feels, there's always worse. There is always, always worse. Don't you remember?"
"What're you planning to do with those?" Jack asks, eyeing the tong things uneasily.

"Oh, these? They'd be part of the 'worse'." The Master holds them up and looks at them. "Funny things, aren't they? What d'you think they're meant for?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not in the slightest. I know just what I'm going to use them for." The Master drops to his knees in front of Jack. "Heh, bet you wish it was the Doctor kneeling for you like this." There's no answer so the Master continues as he uses the scalpel to clear the ragged clothing from around the captain's crotch. "The Doctor kneels for me, of course, opens his mouth so eagerly to take me in... but you know that, don't you? You listen, night after night, as we shag each other's brains into jelly."

Jack makes a stifled noise, and the Master looks upwards and laughs at what he sees in Jack's expression.

"Oh, did you think we didn't know? Poor lonely Captain in his sad little single room, wanking furtively as the man he loves best screams for the man he hates most of all. It's almost Shakespearean."

Jack shuts his eyes and turns aside as the Master rises back up. Then Jack says in a cracking voice, "He'll leave you again. You're not the only other Time Lord anymore. You'll push him too far, and he'll take off."

"Wrong! Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong."

Taking a few deep breaths first, Jack lifts his head to look defiantly at the Master. "You see, the thing about Matrix personalities is that they can't refuse to answer. They can't lie either, not to me. So I know all about your time at the Academy and what came afterwards. I know all about how he refused you. And I know he'll do it again."

The Master punches Jack hard in the gut to shut him up, and because that feels so good, he aims and executes a few more hard thumps before reminding himself he's not a common thug and pulling back. Jack's gasping, heaving for breath, his big mouth gaping crudely. "God, you're a disgusting mess," the Master tells him. "If only I had my iPhone; I'm sure the others would appreciate some graphic evidence of your... humanity."

"Should've... let you... die."

"Oh yes, you should have. You ruined my victory, and there'll never be enough good wholesome torture fun to make me feel better about that, Captain Cadaver." He pushes his thumbs into already open wounds on Jack's torso as he speaks.

Jack makes a noise halfway between a snort and a sob, jolting back from the pain, but unable to escape it. "If you still... want to be dead... happy to oblige."

"Oh, don't be a fool. Did you really think I'd've let a single shot end my millennium long career of genius? From my washed out wreck of a puppet wife of all people? I'm the Master! No lesser species - and a female to boot - gets that honour."

"Backup plan? Why am I... not surprised?"

"Well, it is me we're talking about. The surprise is the Doctor bought it." The Master smiles, closing his eyes briefly as he remembers the Doctor's desperation at the thought of losing the Master, the tears and the begging. "Ooh, that was so good." He opens his eyes again and glares at
Jack. "And you ruined it."

Somehow, Jack manages a hard smile, his perfect teeth very white within the scarlet of his messed up face. "The ring?" he asks.

The Master rears back a little. "How on Gallifrey did you work that out? Oh, don't tell me, my treacherous older selves. I'm really going to have to have words with Romana about your abuse of privileges, dear, dear Captain. Well then, yes, implanted orders in Lucy's silly little mind and my ring. It fitted into that Lazlabs gene-blender. Add some biomatter - any living human body of at least the minimum mass needed would've done - and before you could say 'Vincent Price', I'd be back, walking amongst primitives again."

"From what I've heard, that machine wasn't exactly reliable."

"Oh, it was exactly as reliable as I wanted it to be. In fact, I'd go so far to say it was a work of genius." The Master chuckles.

"You use that word so much, 'genius'. Repeat something enough and people start believing it, is that it?" Another hard smile.

What a shame the Master couldn't find anything suitable for pulling out perfect teeth in his quick ransack of the med-room. He could always just break them, he supposes. "Oh Captain, my Captain. You've got big balls; I've got to give you that. Too big in fact, and it's time to do something about it." He clicks the metal tong thingies together close to Jack's face and grins.

Jack groans and turns away, twisting in his bonds. His face is already screwed up in anticipation of what's to come.

"Now remember when I do this, you've only got yourself to blame." Carefully, the Master slides the tongs under the flaccid cock and each side of the scrotum. He doesn't squeeze yet.

"How d'you figure that?" Jack asks with a violent shiver.

"Oh, tut-tut. Don't play the innocent now. You know perfectly well you've been winding me up all day. Flaunting your abusive seduction of the Lady President while she's still in her vulnerable post-looming state, deliberately playing things to get the Doctor on your side, and ooh, everything you say and everything you do. But don't think I don't understand. Like the song says, '...sometimes you just have to say it, so you don't feel so weak about being such a freak or alone.'"

"You're a textbook perfect psycho, aren't you?"

The Master chuckles. "Look at it this way. In a life as long as yours will be, you'll want to make sure you experience everything at least once. I'm just allowing you to cross castration off the list nice and early."

"What are you getting out of this, Master?" Jack faces him again. "It's not to hurt the Doctor like it was on the Valiant. I believe that you don't like him hurting, not now you get the echo of his pain. So what, exactly, is making me scream doing for you?"

The Master pauses and thinks about the question seriously, finally coming up with one word: "Medicine." He squeezes the tong handles just a little and smiles at the nice whimper.

Jack's voice sounds tight as he asks, "You can't just take an aspirin like everyone else?"

Not unless the Master wants to poison himself, no, but better not to give Jack ideas by telling him
that. In his best 'reasonable' voice, he explains, "The drums risk killing the Doctor. I... have a
certain need for the Doctor to continue to exist right now. Hurting you makes the drums quieten
down. It's a very simple equation; even you must be able to grasp it."

"Why couldn't you stay in the Zero Room? The Doctor said-"

Okay, that's quite enough chatter. The Master squeezes the tongs hard, and Jack screams. A real,
honest to God scream, his first of the session. The Master tips his head back, closes his eyes and
bathes in the sound. It's like cooling lotion on burns. He can feel the drums respond. They like this.
Oh yes, they do.

After he relaxes the grip, the screams fade to sobs. The Master waits patiently until Jack's capable
of words again, and then says, "That was good, wasn't it? Cathartic. Shall we do it again? Or not?"

"D'you want me... to beg?" Jack doesn't lift his head, just talks to the sticky wet cobbles.

"Oh, by all means. Go ahead. I'm all ears."

"Will it make... any diff'rence?"

"Maybe. You'll have to make it really good begging though, and I mean really good. To be honest,
Captain, I'm not sure you're capable of that. In fact, I suspect this is just stalling for time. That's
okay." The Master smiles. "We have all night! Go on, give it your best shot."

Jack shakes his head and starts to talk, his voice hoarse and full of unshed tears. "It doesn't matter
what you do to me. Tomorrow I'll tell the Doctor, let him take it from my head. All of it. He'll leave
you. Maybe... maybe not right away; maybe he'll need time to think, but he'll leave you. 'Cause
you're a psychopath, incurable, and the drums are only an excuse." He heaves in a large breath.
"The one defining characteristic of psychopaths of any kind is that they can't love. Ever. They're
emotionally castrated. And the Doctor? He needs to be loved."

The Master can feel himself trembling; he's suddenly so tense. The drums pound out their demand
for war and death, destruction and entropy, and he's with them, like a surfer on a wavecrest. He
asks, "Finished?" and his voice doesn't sound like his own.

"Not quite." Jack raises his head higher so he's looking down upon the Master. "There's one other
thing I'm gonna make sure he knows. Remember that mind parasite you wired up in a box and
turned loose onto prisoners? It knew. It knew exactly what to show you to make you helpless with
terror, and I'm going to make sure the Doctor knows too."

The drums explode in the Master's head, so fast and loud now they're just one continuous roar. He
makes no conscious decisions about what he does next, just acts... and acts and acts and acts... and
the world turns red and wet.

Then suddenly he's being thrown across the room and ends up sprawling in creeping ivy and a
strange silence. He shakes his head a few times, trying to remember how to think. The Doctor
appears to be standing by a bloodied mess of meat hanging from a planter bracket. The Master
guesses that must be Jack. That's certainly where he left Jack.

He blinks a few times. He lost it again, didn't he? Is a little control really so much to ask?

Still, the drums haven't been this quiet for months.

Noticing all sorts of strange pains in his body, especially where he was shot earlier, the Master gets
to his feet a bit stiffly. His nice clean white shirt is now red and soaking. How... thuggish. He
crinkles his lips in distaste as he gathers up his iPod earphones from where they've fallen.

The Doctor's murmuring concerned nothings to the hanging carcass. Can it really still be alive? Oh yes, it's making those strange animal noises; the Master wondered what those were... and he's not really thinking clearly even now, is he?

He groans. "Aww, leave the side of rancid beefcake alone, Doctor. Let it die and get better."

The Doctor's barely recognisable when he whirls around to face the Master, his face is so contorted in fury. And suddenly the Master realises what's really odd about all this - he can't feel it. He can't feel the Doctor's anger.

"What have you done?" he asks nervously, reaching out with his mind.

"What have I done? Me?" The Doctor stalks across the cobbles to him, his feet making little sucking noises as they pull away from the congealing gore. "Have you completely lost the few remaining shreds of sanity you had left?"

That's a little too close to the Master's own fears currently. He takes an inadvertent step back. "Why can't I feel you?"

The Doctor stops in front of the Master and folds his arms. "Oh, believe me, you don't want to be hearing my thoughts right now."

"Yes, I do. Stop it. Whatever you're doing, stop it." The Master reaches forward to touch the Doctor's face, but is stopped by the sight of his gloved hand covered in all sorts of unsavoury matter. He stares at it.

"You've gone too far," the Doctor says coldly, taking a step out of the way of the Master's hand. "You've crossed the line. You're so far over the flipping line that a linesman would need a telescope to see you. A Hubble space telescope!"

"Oh, stop fussing. We'll have forgotten all about this by the morning. Weeble-boy will wake up as whole as ever; you'll forgive me as you always do, and everything will be back to normal. Ta-dah! No harm done." The Master lets his hand drop and hates the pathetic tone of his voice when he adds, "Let me in?"

"No harm done? Is that what you think? Is that what you really think? That everything can go back to normal after this?" The Doctor's own tone is getting increasingly high-pitched. "God, look at you. You're... You're covered in Jack's blood and your only problem with that is the mess?"

"That's not fair. You're allowed to be in my thoughts, but I'm not permitted to see yours? How are you doing that, by the way?"

The Doctor just stares at him. "What's fair got to do with any of this?"

With the drums quietened and the Doctor somehow keeping him out, this is all starting to feel like the Zero Room again. The Master really wishes he could control the way his body's trembling. "Look, I did what I had to do to keep you safe. The drums would've killed you. I had to... let loose. Please, Doctor. Stop blocking me."

"When I left you, you were in the Zero Room where the drums are neutralised. I wasn't in any danger. Next thing I know I'm woken by Jack screaming in my nightmares, only to find my nightmares are real, I've been drugged, and my head's full of atrocities coming from your mind. Don't you dare tell me you did this to Jack for me. Not again. Not this time. I heard you singing as
"Yes, well, whether or not I did this for you - and I did - I'm not going to pretend it wasn't fun. It was brilliant fun! Amazing! Best laugh I've had since you ended my lovely paradox."

"Fun." The Doctor flatly repeats the word.

"Oh, come on! Of course it was fun. Don't pretend you don't have it in you too. I did meet the Valeyard, remember?" The Master's starting to really panic. Almost without conscious decision, he starts to remove his gloves, pulling at them frantically. "And the best thing about it? Your precious captain deserved it! None of this would've happened if not for him."

"Oh, make up your mind, Master! Whose fault was it you did these things? Mine or Jack's? Not yours, of course. Never ever yours."

"Stop. Listen. Don't we both feel much better now? Drums all peaceful, headache all gone? Now if you'd just let me back in..."

"And what about Jack?"

The Master looks over at the sticky, gurgling mess that seems to be stubbornly clinging to life despite huge blood loss, and he sighs. Feeling in his pocket, he pulls out Jack's gun and casually shoots the almost-corpse through the heart. "There you go. Three times in one day; I'm on a roll. Anyway, give him a minute, and he'll be right as that heatwave-ending rain you were babbling about earlier."

The Doctor's opening and closing his mouth like a fish.

"It's not doing much for your sex appeal, that. Just so you know." The Master lets the gun drop to the floor and steps forward, raising his hands to the Doctor's face. "Let me in. Please, Doctor."

The Doctor doesn't back away, but neither does he let the Master through whatever barrier it is he's erected. "Is this what my forgiveness means to you? A get out of jail free card? You think you can do anything you like and it have no consequences? Because I'll forgive you?"

The Master honestly doesn't understand what's going on here. "You've forgiven me so much worse than this, Doctor. Why should this be different? Look, let me in. I've had enough of this. It won't happen again, I promise. I'll never lay a finger on the freak after this. I've learnt my lesson. Forgive me now and let me in!"

The Doctor rears back, out of his grip. "Oh no, Master. Oh no, no, no. You've got that very wrong indeed. You've not learnt a thing, and you probably never will. You can't. It's too late. I should have taken you in centuries ago while there was still a chance."

_Psychopaths can't love, ever._ Jack's words seem to sound again in the Garden Room, and the Master pulls his hands in to wrap around himself. "There's still a chance. There is. You can help me. I can be helped." He has to convince the Doctor of that somehow. "I can."

"Can you?" The Doctor's still staring at the Master as if he's never seen him before. He scratches the back of his head. "You're right about one thing. This is my fault. I've shown you far too much trust. Dunno how I'll ever make this up to Jack, but I know how to start." He walks over to Jack's corpse and using the Master's discarded scalpel, cuts it down. Getting blood all over his suit, he gently lifts the large body and carries it over to a bench in a gore-free area of the garden.

Numbly, the Master follows him over there, watches him kneel in front of Jack, straightening his
remaining limbs on the bench. The Master almost can't bear to watch the tenderness in the Doctor's
ministrations. "Let me back in. Please, I'm begging you, Doctor. Is that what you want? Okay, well
I'm begging. Look at me, I'm begging! Let me back in."

"I think not."

"Let me back in!" the Master pretty much screams.

The Doctor stands up and looks at him, his lips pursed together. "Come on," he says eventually.
"This way." He gestures with his head and walks towards the door. The Master follows, as what
else can he do?

When they get to the Console Room, the Doctor gestures towards the chair, and the Master
obediently sits down. He'd really rather like to have a shower and clean clothes, but that seems to
be off the cards for now.

The Doctor doesn't sit down. "It's time to dissolve the entrelacement."

"What?"

"You heard."

"No." Oh God, this isn't happening.

"You're refusing?"

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, Doctor, you're taking this too far!"

The Doctor shakes his head slowly. "I remember a time when torture for you, if it happened at all,
was just the means to a greater end. Admittedly, a meticulously plotted, often diabolically evil, and
always utterly power-hungry greater end. But my point is that torture wasn't the end in itself.
You've degenerated."

"I did it for you."

"Stop saying that!"

"But I did! You... you didn't see yourself in the woods earlier. You... It was like when I had my
laser screwdriver beam aimed at you. The drums..."

"Why not simply stay in the Zero Room?"

The Master screws up his face and wraps his arms tight around himself. "If you're in my mind, you
should know the answer to that," he tells the floor.

"I'm not in your mind," the Doctor says coldly. "If you won't agree to the dissolution of the link
then I've no choice but to build this makeshift wall higher and thicker. Can't dissolve the link by
myself, but I can make sure we're apart all the same."

The Master's long past the point of caring about the sobs in his voice as he pleads, "How's that
going to cure me? Save me? How'm I meant to know what you want me to be without your mind to
guide me? You know I can't... can't tell... Doctor, please."

"You have to be shown that your actions have consequence." The Doctor walks over to the coat
stand and feels in the pocket of the Master's jacket.
"God, what am I? Your rebellious teen? Just stop this. Can't you tell you've made your impact? Don't do this to me." *Don't leave me alone in my head.* Even now he can't quite say it out loud.

The Doctor takes the TARDIS key and the kiddie sonic from the Master's jacket, then throws the jacket over to him. "Okay, out."

"What?"

"Out of the TARDIS. Now."

"What?"

Sighing, the Doctor walks over and grabs the Master's arm, hauling him up. "You can't stay here anymore." He drags him over the TARDIS door.

"But... but the saurians!"

"I'm fixing your screwdriver to emit the same sonic pulse that mine uses to keep them away," the Doctor says, doing just that. "You can sleep in the looming hall."

"No."

The Doctor puts the sonic into the Master's unresisting hand and closes his fingers around it for him almost gently. "I'm sorry, Master. Really, really sorry. You warned me, and I didn't listen, and we're all paying the price for my... my hubris." He shakes his head, and the Master watches with dumb fascination as the Doctor's eyes fill with tears. "Try to be good, eh?"

The Doctor opens the TARDIS door and ever so gently pushes the Master outside into the half-light of first-dawn. The Master feels the door close behind his back and doesn't move. This can't be happening. It's a joke, a cruel joke as punishment, but soon the Doctor will open the door again and let him back in.

He's still trying to convince himself of that fifteen minutes later when the TARDIS de-materialises behind him, and he drops to his arse in the dew-soaked grass.
The Doctor's just putting the finishing touches to the headset when an abrupt gasp comes from the bed. Jack half sits up before falling back to the many towels covering the sheets. "Welcome back," the Doctor says, smiling down at Jack over his glasses and hoping he looks at least vaguely reassuring.

Jack turns his head on the pillow to look at the Doctor, who's sitting in a hard chair at the bedside. "How long was I gone?"

"A few hours. Was getting a tad concerned."

Still, the Doctor's been glad of the time to get his fractured thoughts back in some semblance of coherence. There's a monstrosity of a jerry-built barrier in his mind, the equivalent of piling up every piece of available furniture in a room higgledy piggledy against a vulnerable door in a total headless-chicken of a panic. He's tried to bolster his wall as best he can since, but his hearts aren't fully into the task.

Nah, they're not into it at all. They're screaming at him to take the wall down immediately and swing the door wide open, let the rampaging werewolf back inside where he belongs.

Can't do that though, can he? The Master has to learn; he has to be shown.

Jack sits up and stretches, the blanket the Doctor laid over him falling down into his lap. The Doctor's irrationally relieved at the sight of so much healthy, smooth flesh. He has to repress a desire to reach out and stroke it. "After Abaddon," Jack says, "I was gone for days. Only the faith of one of my team prevented me from waking up locked in a mortuary drawer."

"Abaddon?" the Doctor asks

"A huge demonic creature, he came through the Rift after my loveable team of idiots was manipulated into opening it. That won't happen again, before you start." Jack gives the Doctor a sharp look.

The Doctor just smiles. "I trust you with the Rift. You know the dangers."

Jack nods a little grimly. "So do they, now. I guess they needed some first-hand, hardcore guilt before they really took it in. As their boss, that's my fault, but it really won't happen again."

The Doctor tries to look... what? Accepting? Like he has confidence in Jack? Like he's proud of him? The Doctor's all those things, but he's not sure what Jack needs to see right now. It's been so hard to think since last night. Well, so hard to think about anything but the Master, and what he did, and what the Doctor's going to do about him.

What the Doctor's going to do without him...

He looks back down at the headset and finishes his work on it with the sonic screwdriver, asking, "So, this Abaddon was like, ooh, extra strength knock-out pills for indestructible men?"

"He stomped around the city, taller than the highest building. All Book of Revelations meets Ray Harryhausen." Jack snorts quietly, but then lowers his voice, looking serious. "Everyone touched by his shadow fell down dead. He was hungry for lifeforce, and I had to stop him quickly, so I gave him an all-you-can-eat buffet." He pauses and frowns. "Could I have hurt the Matrix?"
"Oh, I doubt it. Really, I don't think you need worry about that. Bound to be sturdy failsafes built in." The Doctor smiles fondly, not letting his concern for the people of Cardiff show. He's sure, at least, that what Jack doesn't need right now is any sign of disapproval from him. "You do have yourself some adventures, don't you?"

"The Rift's like Disneyland for the adrenaline starved. Am I naked?" Jack peeks under the blanket. "And reassuringly intact. How did I get here?" He looks around his TARDIS bedroom, frowning.

"I carried you."

"You're stronger than you look. Guess I already knew that. I, uh, I seem to be a lot cleaner than I should be."

"I washed you too, best as I could." The Doctor rubs at the back of his neck, frowning. In many places, it hadn't been easy finding Jack's skin to wash it. "Tried to put everything back where it belonged in case that would speed things up."

"Ah." Jack looks uneasy, his eyes focused on something not in this room.

"Thought you'd forgive the intimacy, under the circumstances."

With a little shake, Jack seems to pull himself together. He grins at the Doctor. "I'd forgive you any intimacy. Just wish I'd been awake to enjoy it."

The Doctor finds he can't manage even a small laugh. Putting together a blood-soaked jigsaw of his friend is not destined to become one of his favourite memories. "Jack, I'm so very sorry."

Jack shrugs. "Not your fault."

"Oh, but it is. It's entirely my fault."

Their eyes meet, and it's Jack who looks away. "I guess it depends how in control of his own actions you believe he is."

"What do you think?"

There's a long pause, and the Doctor's already regretting asking when Jack finally says, "I think I'm not ready to feel pity for him just yet, Doctor. Give me a day or so, okay?"

"No, of course not. Sorry." Fiddling unnecessarily with the headset, the Doctor looks down.

Jack moves his legs from the bed, and wrapping the blanket around himself with unexpected modesty, he gets up and heads to his wardrobe, asking, "Where is he?"

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

The Doctor keeps his attention on his hands as he says, "From my mind and from the TARDIS."

He's aware of Jack turning around to face him. "You kicked him out? Was that a good idea?"

The Doctor shakes his head slowly, noticing his hands have a slight tremor. "Don't ask me. No clue what to do with him, really. I don't... I just don't know. Had to do something."

"Wanna talk about it?"
"Not with you." He glances up and sees the hurt look in Jack's eyes too late. "No, now don't! Don't go thinking whatever it is you're now thinking, 'cause you're wrong. You're so wrong."

"Strangely enough, that's just what I was thinking." The bitterness in Jack's tone is unmistakeable.

"What? Oh, not 'wrong' in that way! You can stop that right now. Didn't you hear when I said that it was me who was wrong about that? The Matrix in you didn't fit with what I thought I'd done."

Jack manages a wry smile.

The Doctor shakes his head again. "After everything he's done to you, wouldn't it be adding a stinking great lorry load of insult to your already rather mountainous injury to expect you to listen to me whinging on about my... about him?"

"I'm here for you, Doctor," Jack says earnestly. "Always will be."

The Doctor lets his eyes briefly close. "Really not sure I deserve a friend as good as you, Jack."

"Fortunately that's not something you get to control. Anyway, ever think that maybe that's what this is all about - what you deserve? Or more accurately, what you think you deserve."

"I'm punishing myself with him?" The Doctor snorts. "He says the same thing. Calls himself my hair-shirt. It's not true... or at least, so far from the whole story that it might as well not be true." He scratches above his ear. "Things between the Master and me have always been far, far, far, far more complicated than that."

"That's a lot of 'far's." Jack smiles. He hitches up his blanket, holding its gathered edges over one hip. "I've been talking to his past incarnations."

The Doctor winces, wondering just how much of his murky past is now known by Jack. "Don't suppose there'd be any point in me asking you not to?"

"Well, a little late now anyway." Jack chuckles.

"How d'you find them?" the Doctor asks, probably a little too casually. "He was very different when we were younger. Still power-mad and devious and more than a little obsessed with me, but... well, he wouldn't have done what he did to you last night. Of course, I was different then too. The Time War..."

"I like your previous regenerations." Subject change? Well, Jack has that right if anyone does. "A whole bunch of them, of you, were keeping me company while I was on vacation from my body back there."

"Were they? That was, er, nice of me." The Doctor can only hope Jack won't be after a repeat performance any time soon.

"I thought so." Jack grins. "They kept me entertained. You seem to feel responsible for me, even wearing personalities who never knew me in the flesh. I think I like that."

"They sense we're friends. It can be odd that, when you meet someone you've not yet met, and you feel future echoes of your regard for them. Nice though."

Jack nods. "Last night's fun and games were my first deaths since my link to the Matrix was fully activated. Maybe it'll always be like that now; I won't so much die as relocate to the Matrix 'til my body can be healed. In which case, cool! I'm hanging out with Time Lord history." He's grinning as
he turns back to the wardrobe, and the Doctor shakes his head.

"It's okay to be angry, Jack."

He watches Jack's broad shoulders shrug. "I'm not. Maybe it just hasn't hit me yet." The blanket drops, and the Doctor's briefly treated to the sight of a fine pair of naked buttocks before boxers are pulled up over them. Jack turns around, trousers in his hands, and starts to step into them. "Doctor, it's not like this is the first time he's done that to me. After a while, it's just something to be endured. Half the reason torture works is the fear it arouses. I stopped fearing damage or death a long time ago. And pain? Well, it's over soon enough."

The Doctor stares at him, frowning. "Want to know what I think?" he asks after a minute or so of watching Jack dress in silence.

Jack looks back uneasily as he finishes buttoning up his shirt. "I have a feeling I should probably be answering no, but go on."

"I think you're trying to protect me."

Jack meets his gaze, saying slowly, "If I am, then don't you think you owe me enough to let me do it?"

"You did a touch too much of that on the Valiant."

That gets a sharp look from Jack. "I didn't think you realised."

"I'm not stupid, Jack. Truth is, I was grateful at the time. Needed to be able to concentrate on the Archangel network. Willed myself to accept your pretence because, otherwise, what he was doing to you because of me, well..."

"It wasn't pretence, Doctor. Being indestructible does change your attitude to things, believe me." Jack shakes his head. "For a while, after I realised I couldn't die, I got silly. Nothing seemed real anymore. It was like... like playing a video game. Dying was nothing more than an inconvenience."

"Just had to reload the save-game," the Doctor says with a small smile.

Jack nods, pulling his braces up over his shoulders. "I took any number of stupid risks, died more than once, but who cared? Then a soldier under my command lost a leg thanks to me not taking risks seriously enough. I might be indestructible, but no one else is. I started to realise that, gift or curse, I'd been given something that came with responsibility." He smiles. "Well, I was kind of right."

"You're a good man, Captain Jack Harkness," the Doctor tells him, voice soft.

Jack pushes his hand back through his hair, looking almost bashful. "Oh God, I've tried to be. Since meeting you and Rose... well, talk about crossroad moments." He grins a little weakly. "Now I'm the only person I consider expendable, though of course I'm not. I can't be 'expended'. What's a little pain in the face of that? I can't wrap the people I care about in cottonwool, but I can at least make sure I'm the one who enters a chamber full of sted radiation, or, you know, that I grin and bear torture instead of making a pity-fest out of it."

"No one should have to grin and bear torture, whether it does lasting damage or not." And didn't Jack himself the other day say something about having had enough of grinning and bearing to last an eternity?
Jack shrugs. "I've been on the other side of the toolbox, Doctor, back in my bad old days with the Time Agency. Maybe the Master's just my bad karma working itself through. I'm not saying I enjoy his attentions, but it really isn't as big a deal for me as it would be for pretty much anyone else."

The Doctor doesn't think Jack's lying, but he also doesn't think Jack's telling the whole truth. He's caught the flash of anger in those blue eyes more than once in response to the Master's taunting. He's nowhere near as blasé about it all as he'd like the Doctor to believe. Who would be? The Valiant was a Dante-esque hell for Jack, and no matter how resilient the man is, no one can survive that unscathed.

Jack pushes the protective towels to the end of the bed and sits back down on the edge, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. "Doctor, I'm not sure if this'll make you feel better or just that much worse, but I think I did more lasting damage to the Master last night than he did to me."

No, that certainly doesn't make him feel better. "What did you say to him?" It has to be words; what other weapons would Jack've had at his disposal?

Jack opens his mouth, but then pauses and shakes his head. "Sorry, Doctor, but no. Part of the reason he reacted so strongly was my threat to tell you. I... well, not that I owe him any consideration at all, but it would just feel mean to repeat those things now."

The Doctor takes his glasses off and rubs at his face. Is Jack too good to be true? Whether he is or he isn't, the Doctor probably owes him the courtesy of acceptance. "Try this on, would you?" he says, handing Jack the headset.

Jack raises an eyebrow, but does what he's told, frowning a little as he settles it in place. "What did you do to it? It feels different."

"I've combined its functions with your Torchwood earpiece and added a transtemporal component to the data feed."

"Transtemporal?" Jack's initially confused look quickly becomes a suspicious frown. "What's going on?"

The Doctor doesn't pretend not to understand Jack's suspicion. "We're in Cardiff, parked in your Hub, just a few hours after you left. Your team have arrived for work and are no doubt right this moment debating which highly dangerous alien artefact to aim at my poor TARDIS in the absence of your guidance."

"Oh God."

"Yeah, you should probably go out and stop them."

"They can wait!" Jack stands up, fists clenched but at his sides. "Let me see if I've got this straight. Your posterboy-for-psychopathy boyfriend tortures me to death - again - and I'm the one being sent home in disgrace? Me?"

"Yeah, thought you were angry," the Doctor mutters under his breath before saying more loudly, "This isn't punishment, Jack. It's protection."

"For who?"

"For you!"
"You sure about that?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

The hurt is obvious in Jack's expression. "What happened to 'Stay, Jack. Let's collapse a star together'?"

"If you stay, one way or another, he'll find a way to do that to you again." Doesn't the Doctor have enough guilt on his shoulders already?

"Maybe. Maybe not. Isn't that my problem? I accept the risks."

"I don't, and it's my problem to solve, not yours." The Doctor stands, putting his hand on Jack's upper arm and softening his voice as he tries his very best to explain. "I took on the responsibility of watching over the Master at the end of the year that never was, and I failed in that role when he hurt you. His actions make sense to him. He can understand that it's the sort of thing we object to, but not why it's wrong. I've made myself his conscience in the lack of his own, but when it mattered, I wasn't there to do my best Jiminy Cricket. I brought you to Gallifrey, and I failed to protect you. That's not going to happen again."

Jack doesn't move from the touch; if anything he moves into it slightly, but there's still anger in his tone when he speaks. "Just so I know, Doctor, how many centuries do I have to have lived before you'll stop treating me like a child?"

He squeezes Jack's shoulder. "It's not as bad as you think. You'll still be able to chat with us. Ooh, pretty much anytime you want to. You'll still be helping us, still be a vital part of the team."

"What, by answering transtemporal phone calls and connecting you to the right indices? Because that's just what I've always wanted, to be a glorified switchboard operator!"

The Doctor lets his hand drop from Jack. "Like to think you'd want to talk to us socially too rather than just, you know, putting us through."

"Hardly the same as being with you, seeing the dream become real."

The Doctor huffs, gripping at the hair on the back of his head with both hands and tugging it upwards. "It could be, more or less."

"What do you mean?" Jack's looking ever so slightly like a very cute little boy in a sulk, lips all a-pouting. The Doctor knows better than to mention this to him, however.

"I've built in a highly customisable mindscape for you. It's just showing a fairly nondescript park at the mo, ready for you to personalise. I could set it up to reflect, say, the lake area on New Gallifrey, updating daily to show our progress."

"How do I access it?" Jack asks grudgingly.

"Default password's 'sanctum'. Change it to whatever you like, of course. Your place now."

"I like the lakeside idea. " Jack's eyes roll up as his attention moves inside his mind. After a few moments, he actually smiles. "Oh, fantastic VR for such a small device, Doctor. Utterly real for all the senses. I'm impressed."

"It's your head doing the work." The Doctor smiles back even though he's pretty sure Jack can't see him right now. "I'll be making up headsets for Romana and myself, isomorphic, so you don't get
unwelcome visitors. We can pop by as often as you fancy seeing us, really. Romana'll want daily contact to keep the Matrix records up to date, and I'd bet my last Ukranian ducat that she'd prefer to interface in person. She's really rather taken with you." He pauses. "Jack...?"

"I can hear you, Doctor. You seem very far away though. I'm gonna have to choose my moments carefully to access this 'scape'. It's so real, so involving..."

"Well, I need you to listen to this next bit. Sorry. Plenty of time to play when I'm gone. Not that I'll really be gone. Well, I suppose I will be 'til I've made the other headsets. But in no time at all, you'll have 24/7 Doctor. Imagine how fed up you'll get with the sound of my babble then, Jacky boy."


The Doctor grins back. "Course it is; I'm a genius. Mind you, it helps that your modified brain uses AP cells. Compared to normal human brain cells, that's like the difference between, ooh, a multi-terabyte solid state hard drive and a five and a quarter inch floppy. Quite some upgrade Romana gave you. Your IQ's off the human scale now. Must be. You can think so much faster, and of course, have silly amounts of data at your mental fingertips. Oodles and oodles and oodles of it. I'm not the only genius in this room. Not anymore. Not by far."

"Well, that's... kind of cool actually." Jack beams. "So what was it you wanted to make sure I listened to?"

"Oh yeah. Okay. Right. I've built in a delay circuit, an automatic switchboard thingumy. You're not gonna want us hassling you with Matrix queries right when you're stuck in the middle of Rift-related chaos. The system will intercept any incoming calls and stack them up for you in order. Then, when you've free time, let the system know. You'll get our calls one by one."

"Won't your queries sometimes be urgent?"

"The delay'll be all on your side. Far as we're concerned, we'll get almost straight through to you. See, I've jiggered up this system whereby the headset in the future will constantly be sending messages back via the Matrix to the headset in the past, so it'll know exactly how far ahead to bounce incoming calls in order to get to you when you're available."

"Clever!"

"I thought so." The Doctor mimes polishing his fingernails on his jacket lapel and grins. "It's programmed to keep our timelines roughly synchronous. Chats'll happen in chronological order, not dart about all over the shop. Can be confusing that, even for a Time Lord."

"Well, that's my problem of long sleepless nights resolved." Jack nods. "Okay, I'll give you that my exile isn't as bad as I'd thought. You seem to have contrived me a way to have my Time Lord cake while eating my Torchwood muffins... and that really didn't come out the way it sounded in my head." He chuckles. "I'm still not exactly overjoyed about getting no choice in this, though God knows, I should be used to that by now."

"Jack, please. I can't risk him doing that to you again. D'you really think I care so little I can just, oh, I don't know, wave a hand and forget what I saw when I ran into the Garden Room? The Valiant was bad enough, but I wasn't in control there. Now I am."

"I guess there's no point in telling you not to blame yourself, is there?"
"None at all as you know better. Awww, I should've sorted out those drums long since." The Doctor crushes down another upswell of panic at the thought.

Jack puts his hands on the Doctor's upper arms and makes a point of catching the Doctor's eyes. "Don't be too upset if fixing them makes little to no difference, will you?"

The Doctor stares glumly at Jack. "At least I'll know then whether there's any point in persevering with him."

"And if there isn't?"

The Doctor shrugs, Jack's hands falling from him. "Can't set him free to roam the universe and wreak destruction wherever he sees fit; no prison can keep him if he doesn't want to be kept, and I... I don't want to just put him down like a bad dog." The thought of it seems to freeze something inside him.

"Could you do it if you had to?"

The Doctor stares into Jack's eyes. "You know the things I've done."

Jack pulls the Doctor into a hug. "Yeah, you'd do it. My poor Doctor." There's silence apart from their breathing. The Doctor rests his hands loosely on Jack's back and leans his head against Jack's, closing his eyes and enjoying the comfort for what it is. Jack moves, pressing their cheeks together, and the Doctor's a little shocked by how much need he picks up from the contact. Inadvertent touch-telepathy with non-Time Lords does sometimes happen, of course, but this level of accidental empathy is unusual.

Oh Rassilon, is this how the Doctor feels to the Master? So desperate, so... devout? Poor Jack. Poor all of them.

"You really do love him, don't you?" Jack asks gently after a while.

"I've known him a very long time." The Doctor separates from Jack and turns away. He knows Jack's making a face at him, for his non-answer, but if he doesn't look then he can pretend to be oblivious. How can he admit to loving the monster who turned his friend into butcher's offcuts? "Right, now. Anything you want to take with you?"

"Only you, Doctor."

That makes him look back round to meet with a cheeky grin. Completely charming, of course, When is Jack ever anything but? The Doctor reaches out and taps the headset hidden in Jack's hair. "You are taking me with you. If I time the initial connection right, you'll have me on tap from the moment you walk out of the TARDIS."

"Lucky me," Jack says, his tone laden with outrageous innuendo, and the Doctor laughs.

He lets his hand slip down to Jack's cheek as he wonders how to approach the next item on his short 'before Jack leaves the TARDIS' list. Would Jack appreciate a kiss? Course he would. Stupid question, really. "Trying to do my best by you, you know."

"I'm all right, Doc," Jack says. "Don't fret, okay?"

The Doctor manages a weak smile. "Forgive me, my friend?"
"Of course." Jack frowns slightly. "Something in particu-

He doesn't get to finish his question as the Doctor's kissing him. The Doctor does what he has to do, makes contact with the Matrix via his presidential imprimatur and quickly inserts the viral encoding straight into the multidimensional mesh, but as soon as that's done, and he can relax into what's really a rather warming embrace, it all ends rather more quickly than planned.

The Doctor finds himself pulling back in shock. "Jack, you're positively awash in artron energy!"

"I am?" Jack's looking a little lost. "Is that why you...?"

"No, but it's why I stopped. You taste like a Time Lord! I'd be worrying myself sick were you a normal human." The Doctor snorts and licks his lips. "I guess it can't harm you though. Was a bit of a surprise, that's all. Kissing you's like licking the TARDIS." He chuckles. "It wasn't before."

Jack snorts. "So, let's see. I'm an immortal genius who's oozing artron energy. All I need is another heart and maybe I'll pass as native on Gallifrey." He winks.

"Ahh, now, don't crave to be one of us." The Doctor tips his head to one side, appraising Jack and feeling pretty certain he understands the subtext of Jack's words. Well, it's not all that 'sub' really, is it? It's not like the Doctor failed to notice what the man has growing on his office desk when they had their little chat in there. "We're really not at all... admirable."

Especially not the Doctor. He's realising too late that the kiss had too much of Judas about it. He's done it to Jack again, hasn't he? It's not that he was up to anything all that wrong during the kiss; he just doesn't want to have to explain. Well, okay, so the degree of 'wrongness' would be hotly debated; he realises that, but just happens to think he's right all the same. But to do it via a kiss... yeah, that was a bit dodgy.

It's 'cause he's not thinking straight, and Jack's love feels so good right now, like a freshly aired pillow to sink into. He could just cuddle up in Jack's arms and fall asleep, safe and warm and free from the surreal horror his life seems to have become. Oh God, Jack's better off well away from the lot of them. Time Lords are bad news for the rest of existence.

The Doctor puts his hand over Jack's heart. "You have the potential to be something so much greater, so much more than us, Jack."

"More than a Time Lord? Aren't you meant to be the masters of the universe?"

"Oh, we'll certainly tell you that. Should know better than to believe the hype though. You've seen enough to know it's bollocks." The Doctor shakes his head. "Now Rassilon, he was remarkable all right, as close to a god in what he achieved as any sentience I've ever known. We're his children, yeah, the direct results of his genius, but none of us have half his greatness. He was unique, one of a kind. Just like you are, Jack."

Jack's smile is somewhat wry. "Am I still a founder, now that I'm in exile?"

The Doctor wonders if Jack took in anything he just said at all. Oh well, there's millennia enough ahead for Jack to realise the truth. "You're the most vital of us all."

Jack purses his lips, but then he smiles. "So why did you kiss me, Doctor?"

"Didn't you like it? Oh, I'm sorry. I was trying to be... to give you, oh, I don't know, a sort of apology and gift and expression of affection all at once. Like a bargain offer, buy one 'sorry' get a free snog. That sort of thing."
Jack chuckles, grinning. "I liked it just fine. Feel free to express random emotions that way anytime you want."

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One week later...

When Romana walks into the TARDIS without knocking, the Doctor is under the floor plates, snuggled close to the uncovered workings of the protyon linkage. He tries to get his sonic screwdriver out in time so he at least looks as if he's got a good reason to be down here and isn't simply using the TARDIS as a rather over-complicated and dangerous teddy bear, but Romana sees him struggling with his jacket pocket, so he gives up and just smiles up at her.

"Hello, hello, my good Lady President. How are you this fair, um..." He checks his time sense. "Morning?"

Romana crouches and looks down at him. "How am I? A little fed up with having to run this planet on my own, Doctor. If you really want to know."

He's not at all sure he did want to know in retrospect. "Master not helping then?" he asks weakly.

"Well, he was mooching around yesterday, briefly, looking thoroughly unkempt. He answered me in unhelpful, rude, and frequently nonsensical monosyllables, fiddled with a few looms, spoke with Truba and Hix, and then disappeared again. He's nowhere to be seen today, and that still makes his attendance a one hundred percent improvement over yours."

Oh-oh. He's in trouble. "Been a tad busy."

"Really?" Romana's perfectly sculpted eyebrows raise. "Doing what precisely?"

"Oh, stuff. Important stuff. You know, this and that."

"Some terribly vital skulking perhaps?"

The Doctor laughs, albeit rather hollowly, as it's that or duck and cover. "Guilty as charged, oh perceptive one. Sorry." He drags his fingers back through his hair and tries not to think about what the Master may be up to on his own.

Romana shakes her head. "I know things aren't easy currently, but I can't do this without you, Doctor. In particular, I'd rather not deloom a worthy stalwart of Time Lord architectural history on my own today; it wouldn't be at all respectful. Truba, Hix and Coraxicale are all working on the accommodation centre and can't be spared. And, I might add, Drexin's only one of many due to be deloomed over the next week, including your own brother."

The Doctor grimaces. "Right. So you'll be wanting me to... Right, okay. Er, I'll just finish off my vital skulking then. I'll be right with you."

Romana hands down a piece of paper. "The Master may be nowhere to be seen today, but I discovered this on my lab desk when I arrived this morning."

The Doctor looks at it, trying to ignore the clenching he feels in his chest at the sight of the characteristically pedantic script. In careful Earth English print, the Master has listed a number of his belongings still in the TARDIS: clothes, toiletries, some of his DVD collection. The Doctor gave Romana a large assortment of such things earlier in the week to hand over to the Master, but clearly his selection process was faulty.
The fact the Master's used a human script rather than their own must have some deeper meaning, but the Doctor doesn't have a clue what. It's probably an insult too complex for him to fathom.

"Ah," he says, stuffing the piece of paper in his pocket. "I'll be collecting this lot first then." He clammers out of his comfy little den, hoping against hope Romana won't notice the sweet wrappers and book he has stashed down there, and he replaces the floor plate. He must remember to deadlock the TARDIS when he doesn't want to be disturbed.

He gives her a weak smile. "See you in the looming hall in half a mo."

"Oh no, Doctor. You won't get rid of me that easily. I'm afraid I'm accompanying you now until we're standing in front of Drexin's loom. Otherwise, I know what will happen. You'll potter about picking up the Master's bits and pieces and getting more and more maudlin until I find you three hours later sitting on a bed and staring at a shoe."

"Nah." He draws out the single syllable. "That's not me. When have you ever known me do something like that?"

Romana just looks at him and then down through the floor mesh where, oh dear, one of the Master's black leather gloves just happens to be lying next to the Doctor's copy of *Intergalactic Perspectives on Psychopathy*. It tells a far too obvious story.

The Doctor briefly closes his eyes. Okay, an escort it is.

"Is my company really so bad?" Romana asks as they head down the spiral stairs.

"Course not, Romana! Always love to see you, you know that. I'm just, well, as you pointed out, distracted." He orients himself to the shared bedroom and heads off down the right corridor.

Romana keeps up with him, her practical daywear - a long, tailored jacket not unlike the justaucorps of seventeenth century French dandies, together with blouson, trousers and long boots - still managing to confer a level of stateliness to her stride. "Was this separation really such a good idea?" she asks. "Both of you seem to be suffering as a result."

The thought of the Master suffering makes something uncomfortable twist inside him. "I didn't have any better solutions. Still don't. I had to do something. Jack... Jack is..."

"Perhaps you should have left the Master for me to deal with? Really, inter-founder disputes should fall within my purview, Doctor."

"What would you have done?"

"Oh, I'm sure I would have found something fitting."

"But what?" The Doctor stops walking, taking hold of Romana's arm. "Serious question. Getting pretty desperate for answers here."

She studies him until he lets his hand drop. "Ever since we came here, you've been trying to convince me that this entrelacement of yours is not a mere matter of romance, but rather in order for you to keep a better eye on the Master. So blocking the link hardly seems a rational response when he proves he does indeed need such an eye kept."

That... makes sense. A horrid amount of sense, actually. The kind of sense that the Doctor knows he's been quite deliberately skirting around in his conscious thoughts, not wanting to actually admit it. "What should I have done then?" he asks, tugging at his hair with one hand.
"Perhaps some kind of implant using an empathy circuit? So whatever pain he inflicts in the future, he feels it himself. It may sound cruel, but he wouldn't even be aware of it if he behaved."

"You're right; I should've turned him over to you." The Doctor leans back against the corridor wall, tipping his head back. "I was far too angry to make sensible decisions. I... I woke up, still drugged, with all this wild stuff in my head, blood and screams and more blood." He closes his eyes, reliving it. "The Master's drum-driven rage, his underlying fear, the fun he was having making Jack scream - the sheer exuberant fun! He was so happy. And, oh, his conviction that what he was doing was right, that it was for my sake..." He opens his eyes and meets her gaze. "I just wanted to hurt him like he was hurting Jack, Romana. Make him learn. Force him to..."

"You wanted to block the horror that filled your head and to punish him for betraying you by hurting Jack. Doctor, you should never have entrelaced with him in the first place, not with your history. It was arrant recklessness, frankly. But now that you have, and he refuses to separate, blocking him is not the answer. It's making you both worse than useless."

The Doctor shoves his hands into his pockets, one of them finding the second of the Master's gloves that he's been hoarding. He squeezes it between his fingers as he tries to maintain control over his emotions.

It's not as if he didn't realise Romana would feel that way, even though she's never said it before. There was a reason that he hurried the entrelacement along after she first appeared in the Cloister Room, after all. Oh, he'd had all sorts of rationalisations for his actions; he could spin a pretty tale to himself and to others, but the truth was he wanted the Master bound to him for almost entirely selfish reasons. He made himself the Master's lifeline so the Master would be forced to care about him, at least in some way.

Yeah, and look what happens when the Master cares about him. He tortures good men to death in order to protect the Doctor from a little pain. Well, okay, a lot of pain. But it's not as if finding Jack like that didn't hurt just as much. More, really. Much, much more.

The Doctor pushes off from the wall and starts walking again, striding fast down the corridor. What has he done? What has he done to the Master by cutting him off from possibly the only thing keeping him at all sane? "So every decision I've made regarding the Master has been wrong? Is that it?"

Romana seems to keep up with him effortlessly. "As your President, I consider your decision making process to have been thoroughly flawed and reprehensible. Absolutely." She sighs and adds more softly, "But as your friend and as Jack's, I understand. I might even have decided the same in your position; I'm not sure."

He stops outside the bedroom door, resting his hand on it, unable to stop himself briefly imagining the Master on the other side, waiting for him with characteristic impatience to come to bed. "Don't know what to do, Romana. I've never felt so... lost. Even after the fall of Gallifrey, I didn't doubt myself to this degree." It feels like half his mind is missing. Funny, that.

"Well," she replies slowly, "it seems to me fixing those drums of his would be a splendid start. I've tried to be patient, Doctor, but I really don't understand why you haven't at least attempted that yet. If the High Council had known about them, they would have acted centuries ago. His tutors at the Academy should have picked up that something had gone so wrong with a previously promising student... but of course, the promise was still realised, wasn't it? I seem to remember reading he obtained excellent marks during his time there."

The Doctor snorts. "Better than mine, that's for sure."
"So why have you been putting it off? Or is it him who's been wriggling out of it? I'd find that easier to believe."

He shrugs and then opens the door. "Both of us, I think. Fear's my crappy excuse, and Jack paid for it. Can't allow anything like that to happen again." He pulls out the list from his pocket and scans it, saying, "Trouble is I can't trust my own judgement, Romana. You've seen that. My mind's too affected by... by all of it. By him." He looks around and meets Romana's gaze. "Tell me what to do."

"As a friend or as your president? Ah, I think the answer would be the same for both. Fix him, Doctor, and thereby fix yourself. Make that your priority after helping me with loomings. In fact, once we've loomed Drexin, I'll co-opt him, and you can make the Master your first priority. We can't achieve our objectives in New Gallifrey without you and him working together and at peak efficiency. I'm relying on you two to rediscover the big technical advances, you know."

The Doctor nods, throwing one of the Master's tailored jackets onto the bed. "I'll have to let my big ol' higgledy piggledy mental wall drop."

"Yes, well, I can't help but see that as being a thoroughly good thing." Romana crosses her arms as she watches the Doctor collect together various items. "Do you know what I saw when I went looking for the Master this morning? Carcasses of saurians strung up by ropes in the forest and hacked to pieces with a laser knife."

Oh Gods. The Doctor's voice has raised an octave or so when he asks, "Where... where did he get a laser knife from?"

"The labs, I suppose. I can't keep an eye on everything when there's only me trying to do all the work."

"Sorry." The Doctor picks up a jar of the Master's favourite hair styling gunk and turns it in his hands. "So sorry. What if it's already too late?" he asks, not really expecting an answer.

"Delaying action will only make that eventuality more likely, won't it? This isn't like you, Doctor, this fearfulness and avoidance."

"Oh, but it is, Romana. It's completely me." The Doctor unscrews the hair gunk jar and sniffs the contents. Aww, he misses waking up with this scent in his nostrils. It's only been a week. How can it hurt so much so quickly? "Haven't I always run? Haven't I always?"

"Not when it mattered."

In his mind, he sees Gallifrey burn again, hears the screams, hears his own scream as the bright starfield that's his inner awareness of the minds of other Time Lords becomes rapidly darker and darker. "If I was faced again with that choice you gave me, I'd run." Run with the Master to the end of the universe. Run away with him the way the Master had always wanted.

"No, you wouldn't, Doctor." Romana's confidence in him hurts too. "You do your best work when your back's to the wall."

He dips his finger into the waxy cream and moves it around the thick central pillar in the jar, no doubt a design to ensure the consumer doesn't get half as much product as he'd think from the size of the jar. He lifts his finger and combs the cream roughly through his own hair. "I'll try to find the Master after Drexin's up and about. He can't be that far away."

"Good." Romana nods. "It rained overnight, and it's lovely and fresh outside now. It will do you
good to get out there and see it for yourself."

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The Doctor doesn't manage to find the Master that day, or indeed either of the next two days, though he does look hard in between all the frantic delooming, orientating, instructing, and organising. He doesn't return to the TARDIS each night until he's too exhausted to keep walking any longer.

Romana comes to wake him every morning. She's worried about him, and he knows it, but doesn't know how to reassure her as he'd be worried about himself too if he could spare the mental energy. During his treks, he sees plenty of evidence of the Master's continued existence and increasing insanity, hacked into the trunks of trees or the bodies of saurians, but no actual Master.

The Doctor's existing in a state of chronic panic. If he doesn't find the Master soon, it may be too late. He's not even sure how he knows that, but it feels like truth.

The Master knows he's being hunted and is actively avoiding him; that's obvious. Of course, were the Doctor to take down the Great Wall of Oh-My-God-You-Didn't in his head, he'd be able to trace the Master directly, but the one time he tried that, he only got halfway through his deconstruction before the pain from the drums seemed to threaten his own sanity, perhaps his life.

Romana says she's seen the Master a few times, often huddled up with groups of the new resurrectees, but as soon as she's approached them, he's skedaddled. The other Time Lords have been less than helpful, claiming not even to remember what the Master was talking with them about. He must return occasionally to the lakeside area, to get clean in the habitation block they're building, or to eat. But whenever the Doctor's around, the Master's nowhere to be seen, rather like that cat in Thomas Stearns' poem.

The TARDIS scanner can't find him either, which is odd.

The Doctor's just returning from another hopeless trudge through the Gallifreyan wilderness when he hears a voice in his head. He actually feels a quick burst of joy between his hearts before he realises the voice is Jack's, and he's hearing it via the headset.

"So what happened to the 24/7 Doc I was promised, stranger?"

The Doctor presses his fingers to the flat triangle of the headset's processing unit above his ear. He's made these sets so small and comfortable he'd completely forgotten it was there. "Ah, I'm sorry, Jack. I'm being thoroughly useless currently. You should hear Romana on the subject."

"Believe me, I have, and at length. She, at least, still seems to want to talk to me, if only to complain about you and the Master."

Ah. "Oh Jack, it's not personal. I'm just not..." Not what? Good company? Coping? Quite sane?

"Found him yet?"

"He's always been very good at avoiding me when he doesn't want to be found."

The Doctor waits to be told that he's not looking hard enough, but all Jack says is, "Find yourself somewhere safe to sit instead and come join me in my mindscape."

"Ah, now, really this isn't the best time for-"
"Do as you're told for once, Time Lord."

The Doctor frowns. "Someone's getting bossy as he gets older."

"Yeah, yeah. I've got official backing for this one. You can't wiggle out of it, Doctor."

Thank you, Romana. So what is this? An intervention? Oh, he's in need of one, all right. He's just so tired.

Sighing, the Doctor opens the door to the TARDIS and heads inside. "On my way," he tells Jack. After taking off his coat, he sits down in, appropriately, the captain's chair and shuts his eyes, thinking his way through the headset link into the Lakeside mindscape.

Having walked into the TARDIS from the darkness of late night Gallifrey, it's a little confusing to find himself outside the looming hall in bright sunlight, and he looks around, getting his bearings and wondering which way he should head. There are two figures down by the water, so he walks towards them through the grass, wondering who Jack has with him.

Jack's figure is easily distinguished by his great coat, but who's the black-clad person beside him? The Doctor's seen a high-collared cloak like that before somewhere, and oh God, he knows that bearded face. What in Rassilon's name does Jack think he's doing?

As he gets closer still, the Doctor's worst fears are confirmed. Ignoring the other figure with its far too familiar smirk, the Doctor marches straight up to Jack and waves an angry finger at him. "This isn't remotely funny!"

"I thought you said he'd changed, Captain," says the amused voice of the Master of Christmas Past. "Really, apart from a slight improvement in the sartorial elegance department, I see little evidence for it."

Jack takes hold of the Doctor's pointing hand and gently lowers it to the side. "This isn't a joke, Doctor. We're here to help you."

"Help? The only thing that man ever helped was himself. As often as possible!"

"Now, is that fair?" the Master asks. "I tried my best to help you in the Death Zone, and you laughed in my face, all four of you. Oh, and I spoke on your behalf during that farce of a trial too, for all the thanks I got."

The Doctor turns to glare at the face that once belonged to Tremas of Traken. "D'you really want me to list all the times you hurt, threatened, betrayed or attempted to kill me or my friends whilst wearing that body?" He gestures skittishly towards the vision in black velvet.

The Master chuckles and holds out a welcoming hand. "Be my guest, Doctor. I suspect I'll thoroughly enjoy the recitation."

Jack rubs a hand over his face. "Uh, Doctor. I didn't arrange this so the two of you could squabble. Strangely enough, I thought you might be pleased to see him, considering how worried you are about his modern counterpart right now. He has some valuable insights to offer into the mind of his future regeneration."

The Doctor gives the Master a very doubtful look while he answers Jack. "This version gave new meaning to the word 'obsessed', but he wasn't... well..."

"Completely deranged?" the Master offers. "That's certainly how the captain describes my future
self. It's a little depressing, I must say. However did you allow things to get so bad, Doctor? Aren't you meant to be the man who makes people better?"

The Doctor's eyes narrow, remembering his Master saying those words, but it's probably coincidence. "Late or not, I'd still like to do that. Trouble is, you're making yourself far too scarce."

"So scarce your TARDIS can't find me with a thorough scan? As I understand it, there's no more than eight or nine Time Lords on Gallifrey currently, so I shouldn't take much finding."

"You're blocking the scanner somehow."

"Hmm. Tried scanning for something I'm carrying then? Manmade fabrics? How about gaps in the scanned terrain where nothing seems to exist, gaps that move about?" The Master laughs as the Doctor's face apparently gives him the answer. "You never even thought of looking for the absence of life in a land where life abounds, did you? You don't change, my dear Doctor."

"I thought... well..." Oh dear. The Doctor drags his fingers hard back through his hair and then tugs at it. "I'm an idiot. Stupid. So very stupid!"

"Hopeless." The Master shakes his head disparagingly. "How many more days of my mental disintegration were you going to risk with your stupidity? If I'm beyond saving now, I'm going to hold you solely responsible."

The Doctor gives him a very wry look. "You'd do that even if it happened on the other side of the universe in a totally different time-stream from my own. Always my fault, isn't it?"

The Master smiles. "I'm so glad you realise your place in all this." He walks closer, his black cloak rippling slightly. "We're lovers again in this brave new world of yours, are we? How very interesting. Clearly, I was never mad enough before... or was it you who needed less mental stability in order to return to our youth?"

The Doctor finds his reaction to this younger Master's proximity very confusing. He stands his ground, but cranes his head back. "If you wanted to be lovers when you wore this body, you had a funny old way of showing it."

"Do you think so? I would've thought all the attention I paid you told its own story quite eloquently. All those gifts I made you of my finest schemes. Do you imagine anyone else received such meticulous attention from me?"

Because, of course, nothing says 'I love you' like trying to kill him. The tragic thing is that the Doctor knows the Master's sincere. Every stupid disguise and labyrinthine trap was the equivalent of a plump bloodied mouse left proudly on the hearth carpet for a beloved owner. The Doctor sighs. "Maybe we should always have been lovers, Master. Maybe none of this would have happened if we'd been together all this time." Who knows, had they been working together maybe they could have won the Time War for the Time Lords.

"It wasn't me who made that impossible."

"I know."

The Master raises an eyebrow. "Is that an apology? After all this time?"

"Would it mean anything to you if it was?"

"Hmm." A feline smirk warms the Master's lips. "Try me."
The Doctor meets dark eyes he's not looked into for so very long. "I'm sorry, Master. I'm sorry for refusing to run with you, only to run away by myself less than a century later. I'm sorry for denying you and letting my family cajole me into marrying someone I then badly let down. It was cowardice, all of it, and I'm sorry."

"Heh." The Master - no, the memory of the Master - raises a gloved hand to caress the Doctor's cheek in a move he certainly never tried when living. "Do you know, that feels surprisingly good. I've been waiting to hear that for so very long."

The Doctor closes his eyes, in danger of losing himself even in so slight a touch, ridiculously grateful when it doesn't stop. "I'm scared of what's happening to you without me to watch over you, Master. You're not at all well, and I... I need you back."

"Hardly surprising if you've gone and got us entrelaced. From the sublime to the utter slapstick, that's my Doctor." A leather clad thumb smooths over the Doctor's lower lip. The Master's voice is low and enticing. "However did I manage to trick you into this one?"

"You didn't." The Doctor's aware his breathing is uneven. He opens his eyes and finds the Master scarily close. He feels dizzy. "It was the only way, or the least cruel way, or so I thought. Tell me, Master. Tell me how to get you back and keep both you and the universe safe."

"For the former, dismantle the wall between us. I'll come straight back to your side unless I miss my guess entirely, and I'm certain I don't."

"I tried. The drums..."

"Ah yes, the drums." The Master's hand drops, and he takes a small step back. Even that seems like a terrible chasm opening between them. "Do you know why they're so crippling now?"

The Doctor shakes his head. "Wasn't it a gradual increase? Don't you hear them?"

"Now? No. Whatever they are, they don't come into the Matrix with me." The Master's smile is sly. "I heard them when alive. Always did, ever since childhood. For a long time, I thought everyone heard them." He shrugs slightly, pursing his lips. "They were accompaniment for some of my wilder schemes, an appreciative audience if you like, egging me on. Easily enough resisted if I wanted to... until I contracted that cheetah infection."

"That made them worse?" The Doctor finds himself stepping forward, closing the gap, and putting a hand on the Master's arm, beneath his cloak. He moves his fingers over the velvet arm of the jacket, enjoying the pile.

The Master glances down at the Doctor's arm and smiles. "The drums and the cat hungers got on rather too well together. Not that I had a great deal of time to enjoy their particular duet before your charming Romana decided to gift wrap me for the Daleks. A shame, really. I would've enjoyed an opportunity to meet you again whilst under their combined influence." He smirks up at the Doctor. "Certain lusts, shall we say, were increased."

"I'll bet." The Doctor means the words to sound firm and cynical and winces when he hears the breathless need in his voice. He coughs and attempts a more solid tone. "After your execution, when you possessed the body of that poor American, you, er..."

"I'll bet."

"You'll have to talk to a later regeneration if you want that story. Sorry, Doctor, I only know hearsay about that time and rather wish I didn't even know that much."

The Doctor doesn't seem to be able to stop kneading the velvet sleeve. "You're being very..."
obliging."

With another of those characteristic chuckles, the Master says, "I've learnt it's easier to oblige than wait for the captain to force things. We Matrix memories have no civil rights, you see."

The Doctor physically jumps at the mention of Jack, who he can now see has dropped right back and well out of earshot, but the Doctor had completely forgotten he was present at all. He steps back from the Master. "I'm sure Jack isn't a cruel boss."

"No, just firm. He's quite charming. Amazingly loyal to you, of course. How do you manage that?"

"Your modern self doesn't like him much."

"My modern self sees him as a rival for your affections; something you'll have made a lot worse by walling me off from your mind for the captain's sake."

"Oh God."

"By the sound of it, I think you may have broken me. How embarrassing." The Master's expression is full of distaste.

The Doctor shakes his head. "You started your current regeneration seriously fruit-loopy, Master. You spent most of the previous one human. I've made things worse. Yeah, a lot worse. Know that. But I didn't... It wasn't me that broke you."

"Ah, but my dear Doctor, I thought you understood." The Master lifts his hand and holds it out to the Doctor. "It's always all about you."

Even as he's cringing at the words, the Doctor feels his body respond to the seductive voice, the inviting pose. "Certainly was for you, all right. Couldn't get enough of trying to trap me, could you?"

This time they both step forward. The Master smiles as he runs a hand up the Doctor's jacket. "The pull towards each other seems a lot more equitable with this current regeneration of yours. I like it, but why?"

The Doctor's fingers seem to be combing into the Master's swept back hair. "The entrelacement?"

"You didn't feel it before the bond?"

"Er..."

"You did, didn't you?" The Master presses into the Doctor's hand like a cat, the ever-present smirk continuing, unsurprisingly, to be ever-present.

"It's nothing new," the Doctor admits. "Just stronger. After the war I was alone, the last of the Time Lords. To find you again was..." The Doctor stops talking as the Master's gloved hand slips behind his neck.

"My poor Doctor. Come here."

He feels himself pulled towards the Master's mouth and then they're kissing. Well, sort of. This Master doesn't seem to have developed the deep-sea diving technique of snog yet; perhaps the Doctor has Lucy to thank for teaching him that one. This Master simply presses their lips together and pecks, surprisingly gently, as his hands move about the Doctor's body. The Doctor's hands
seem to be behaving in a similar manner quite separate from his conscious control.

"Master," he murmurs, finding the feel of the Master's moustache and beard strange but somehow right. He presses their bodies closer. Gods, he needs this, and he's not sure how much he cares that this isn't *his* Master. They're all his Masters, after all. Wasn't he just told that? All of them all about him.

The Master moves his head down to suck at the Doctor's neck, his beard scraping slightly. The Doctor moans, feeling a hardness being pressed against his own.

"How... How can a memory feel sexual arousal?" he asks. Well, it's closer to pleading really.

The Master chuckles against his neck. "We're pretty well rounded personae, Doctor, when we're allowed out to play. But do feel free to blame your captain. It's his mindscape lending us the touch of extra realism here."

"Oh, of course." What else could he expect from anything of Jack's? The Doctor hates to think what might be going on in this mindscape when he's not around. Talking of Jack, the Doctor really needs to remember he has an audience here. He starts to take a step back, but freezes on the spot when a hand is placed directly over his erection. "Master, oh... oh God..."

"So needy, Doctor. So very pretty. Do you have any idea how often I wanted to do this?" The Master cups and rubs, and the Doctor feels his knees become weak, his muscles trembling.

"Master, please. Come back to me. I can't think with you gone. Can't function..."

"You need only make me welcome." The heel of a hand is ground into the Doctor's cock in a way that feels so desperately familiar and then the full strength of the Master's other hand comes to bear on the Doctor's shoulder. The Doctor drops to his knees and finds himself mouthing at black velvet obediently.

At least until the black velvet in question is pulled sharply away from him.

Jack is glaring at the Master. "Nowhere on the list of instructions I gave you did it say 'take advantage of his vulnerable mental state and get a free blow job'."

Apparently unabashed, the Master just grins. "I always found deviating from the script to be one of life's more satisfying pleasures." He gestures at the Doctor. "Anyway, who could resist such abject need encased in such a pretty shell? I believe, Captain, you're just cross because he won't kneel for you."

Jack's hands make fists, and the Doctor struggles to his feet. "It's my fault," he says quickly, wondering if he should step between Jack and the Master. But it would be silly to act so protectively of what's really little more than some neuron power and stored data.

Neuron power and stored data that he was just kissing.

Jack just shakes his head, asking the Master, "Have you told him everything I said to tell him?"

"Not quite." The Master turns to the Doctor, making a meal out of looking him up and down lecherously before speaking. "If you can mend my poor broken head, then your next question is bound to be along the lines of how can you make me behave? Make no mistake, Doctor, the drums are not responsible for much of what I've done throughout my illustrious career."

The Doctor swallows. "How then?"
"Oh, the answer's easy. Give me what I've always wanted."

"Power?"

Smiling, the Master nods. "That's one of the two things and the easier to achieve. As I understand things correctly, and if insanity doesn't spoil things for me, being one of the three founders of New Gallifrey will serve quite adequately."

"Four," Jack states.

"Hmm?" the Master looks questioningly at Jack, even though the Doctor's certain he knows exactly what Jack means.

"There are four founders. Hurry up."

"What's the other thing?" the Doctor asks.

"Oh, you, of course." The Master steps towards the Doctor again. "And there must be no hedging or sharing. No half-measures. You'll need me to trust you completely if you want me to conform to something approaching your silly standards, and that's not going to happen unless I'm convinced of your constant attention and presence." He places his hands flat on the Doctor's chest, over his hearts. "Do you understand, Doctor? I need to have all of you. Grant me that, and you'll find you get an equitable exchange."

Jack takes hold of the Master's arm. "Okay, you've said your piece for the merits of co-dependency. It's time for you to head back to cold storage now."

"Not even a goodbye kiss?" the Master asks, looking at the Doctor, but it's Jack who answers.

"There's been more than enough inappropriate kissing already. Off you go." And with that the Master's gone. The Doctor closes his eyes and tries to force down the lump in his throat.

"Are you okay?" Jack's voice asks.

"No." Sighing, the Doctor opens his eyes. "I'm an idiot- in so many ways. Why that version of the Master, by the way? Not even a true regeneration."

"He's the most recent I have stored in the Matrix that's actually capable of something approaching a civil conversation. I might've known he'd take advantage of you."

He didn't. Not really. But the Doctor can't find the energy to argue. "Suppose I better head off then and calibrate the TARDIS scanner."

"Not quite yet. You and I need a little talk first, Doctor." Jack sounds firm.

The Doctor's spirits sink further. Have his Matrix crimes already been found out? He thought he'd have a little while undiscovered at least. "What about?"

"It's bad news, I'm afraid. The Master's been up to his old tricks."

"Huh? Old tricks?"

Jack raises an eyebrow. "As in plotting to take over the universe, and as opposed to hacking up innocent lizards to release the pressure?"

"Oh. Those old tricks." How on Gallifrey has he found the time, let alone the mental energy? Still,
it's almost encouraging if he has been. "What have you found out?"

"Well, as I told you, I spent my recent dead time with several of your older regenerations, and one of them in particular was very insistent that you were being... er, let's just say gullible. He was equally vehement that the Master was up to something, that the madness was just a ruse, and that he should never have been trusted in such a vital project as New Gallifrey."

"Only one of me said that?" He's surprised.

"Only one of you went on at quite such length, at least. We know the madness isn't a ruse, even if he uses it to hide behind at times. But just in case, I had a word with Romana, and she mentioned seeing the Master involved in secretive conversations with some of the new Time Lords. We started to check things through, and that's when we found it."

"Do I want to know?"

"We compared the genemaps I have stored to the genemaps in the looms. They should be identical, but they're not. The Master has inserted a chunk of genetic code into the DNA of every Time Lord so far loomed bar Romana. We're not sure what it does yet, but it can't be good."

"Nah, course not. Bound to be bad." The Doctor wishes he could bring himself to care. He should care; he knows that, but this is all time in which he could be finding the Master. "So, um, what do you want me to do about it?"

Jack chuckles a little darkly. "I'm not your boss, Doctor, and anyway, you have enough on your plate. Romana's on top of this one, but we thought you should know about it."

"I don't even understand how he could have found the time to do this, unless... Wait, wait... awww no. Of course! No wonder his brain chemistry was so haywire. I even said it to him, that he was working on something while I was kipping, and... and his denial seemed so real. You know what I think? I think he was keeping the truth even from himself somehow, blocking it from his conscious mind. The stupid, stupid idiot."

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Armed with a frantically built gadget that relays the recalibrated scanner signal from the TARDIS, it takes the Doctor less than fifteen minutes to find the Master. It's still fourteen and a lil' bit minutes too long. He spends every one of those eight hundred and fifty-two seconds alternatively reiterating what an idiot he is and what an idiot the Master is, all in a low and increasingly breathless mutter.

They're well suited to each other, at least.

He finds the Master lying on his side in a small clearing in the forest. He's surrounded by very small and obviously curious saurians, perhaps a recently hatched clutch of some species. They don't seem to mean the Master any harm, and they scatter as the Doctor draws closer, but the Master himself doesn't move.

Kneeling down behind the curled body, the Doctor can see that the Master's eyes are open and staring blindly through the trees. His chest moves gently as he breathes, but the only other signs of life about him are the fingers of one hand that are slowly tapping out that nightmare rhythm into the forest floor.

Is the Doctor too late? Oh God, let him not be too late. He lays a gentle hand on the Master's arm and when that gets no reaction, he squeezes. The Master doesn't seem to even know the Doctor's
"No, no, no. Master, no. Don't do this to me."

He lets his hands wander as they will over the unresponsive body as he tries somehow to think clearly. The Master's clean-shaven and in clean, dry clothes, so he can't have been in this catatonic state for too long. His eyes are red and swollen, his lips parted. His pupils respond to light, but his blink reflex seems buggered. He has a small cut on his neck and a great many scratches on his hands, which are gloveless. His pulse is far too fast.

"Where have you gone, Master? How far away? Oh, what've I done to you?"

Stroking his fingers over the Master's head and face, the Doctor finds iPod earphones and carefully removes them, tracing them back to the iPod itself on the Master's belt, which he stops playing. Looking at the screen, he sees the Master's two and a half hours through a three hour playlist. Well, that gives the Doctor a timescale at least.

"C'mon, c'mon. Think, you fool. Gotta be something. Something to do."

The words of the Master's past self come back to the Doctor almost like he's hearing them again afresh. 'You need only make me welcome.' Yeah, that's it. That must be it.

The Doctor lies down on his side behind the Master, spooning up to him. He slips his lower hand under the Master's head, so that the Master is lying upon it, and wraps his upper arm around the Master's body, holding him close. "Aww, my friend, I'm sorry, so sorry. Time to come home now. I promise this won't happen again. I swear it."

He presses his lips to the back of the Master's neck and then licks over his vertebrae, tasting salt and honey, before he closes his eyes. Methodically, the Doctor starts to strip the wall he's constructed between them. It takes just a few seconds for the pain to start throbbing in his head, but he ignores it, best he can.

Were it normal pain, physical or neural, he could simply block it, build a wall around his pain receptors much like the one he's currently deconstructing around the entrelacement. But the drum-pain is far from normal. Its true source is undetermined, let alone how or where the Doctor feels it. It's just there, increasing in intensity, the more he grants it access.

It gets harder and harder to think though it.

Through the same holes into the Master's mind that the pain escapes, he sends desperate mental calls. 'I'm here. I've come to get you. I'm sorry, so sorry. Come back to me. Come back to yourself, Master. You're safe. I'm here. I'm sorry. I love you. Come home. Koschei, come home. Please come home. I need you...'

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When he wakes up, he's lying on his back in the Zero Room. He doesn't have to really think to know that. The slight rose glow to everything in here makes it obvious. The fact his head feels like it's been the focus of a rugby scrum is also more than obvious. Working out how he got here, however, is going to require more in the way of brainpower, as will explaining this strange feeling that, despite his physical pain, everything's somehow all right now.

The Doctor turns his head to the side to find the Master sitting cross-legged beside him, looking... relatively healthy and not actively barking mad. The Doctor's eyes close instinctively as a towering wave of relief hits him, forcing him to hold his breath as it washes over. The Master's back where
he belongs; the wall is down. The Doctor reaches out tentatively through the entrelacement, not to listen to thoughts or share his own, just to reassure himself in the solidity of their bond. It's there. It's real. The Master's home.

"Are you awake or not, Doctor?" the Master asks, his voice amused, but his thoughts concerned and taut. "Make your mind up."

"You're... how... Are you okay?" the Doctor asks, opening his eyes again.

The Master's half-smile is wry. "Comparatively. Was it really necessary to almost kill yourself to get me back?"

"Apparently."

"Odd. But that's your fault. My head's full of you again, you and your bizarre sensibilities."

"Is that a complaint?" The Doctor sighs and tries to sit up, regretting it almost instantly. "Ow, ow, ow."

"Ah. Well, that explains why his muscles hurt quite so much. Turning his head a little sideways, the Doctor gives the Master an uneasy look. "Sorry. About everything. I'm so sorry."

"You really are, aren't you?" The Master shakes his head, snorting softly. He lets his hands rest on the Doctor's face and just stares, biting his lower lip. "Ever since you chucked me out, I've been imagining you sitting in the TARDIS, watching my epic decline and fall and laughing at me, thinking I deserved it. But instead you've been heading pell-mell towards your own breakdown. Ironic, that. Isn't it ironic?"

"You know what I do, I don't care how bad, never do that again."

"Whatever I do, I don't care how bad, never do that again." There's a tightness in the Master's voice that's much stronger in his thoughts.
"I won't." The Doctor gives an ironic smile. "Course I'm rather hoping you'll behave so the matter won't come up again."

The Master stares at him, nostrils flared and jaw clenched, and for a moment, the Doctor worries there's going to be shouting or violence or both. But then the Master stretches out his arms expressively and declares, "I am what I am! I'm my own special creation. And oh, something about no apologies, wasn't it?" He chuckles but then soberes, a lop-sided smile slanting his mouth. "I bang my own drum too, unfortunately."

"The drums are going. No procrastination this time, no avoidance. We're getting rid of them together."

"Yes." The Master bows his head in uncharacteristic submission. It's not an act either; it's in his thoughts, the acceptance. "Soon, very soon, they're either going to kill you, or reduce me to a mindless savage, and I don't care for either prospect. Soon as your head stops hurting, let's do it. Yeah? Finally get it sorted."

"We don't leave here 'til we've done it."

The Master pauses and then winces. His neck tendons seem to tighten. "Promise me you won't build that wall again? Promise me and mean it, Doctor."

Fear, obvious and straightforward, is coming through the link. The Doctor reaches out for the Master's nearest hand, and the Master moves it closer, takes hold of his. They grip each other so tightly it's as if one is trying to save the other from a terrible plummet. If so, the Doctor has no idea who's rescuer and who's rescued.

"I promise," he tells the Master. "Never again. It was a huge mistake. I was just so angry with you, so very, very angry. But I know now; it's not the answer."

The Master closes his eyes. "You better mean it."

"I do. Can't you tell? Can't you see it in my mind?"

"Yes. But I could see how much you needed me before, and it didn't stop you, did it? I completely underestimated your ridiculous urge for self-punishment." He shakes his head, as if a shiver is running through him. "And I'm meant to be the sick one?"

"Master, I swear by Rassilon, by the whole of space/time, I will not build a wall between us like that again. Now, why not just confess your sins so you can stop feeling so scared of what I'll do when I find out?"

The Master opens his mouth to speak, probably to deny, but then heaves a sigh, his expression disgusted. "You already know about it. I can see it in your thoughts. So much for all my precautions." He glares at the Doctor. "How did you find out? Was it the hair creme?"

"What? Was it the what?"

"Not the hair creme? Damn, I thought I'd covered every eventuality."

The Doctor decides it's probably better not to mention Jack in this context. "Romana found out about it all. I've been too preoccupied to uncover anything. I had to be told to recalibrate the TARDIS scanner to find the mobile gaps in the scanner coverage. Never even considered it by myself." He pauses and then adds, "Should I worry about the hair gunk then? I've been, er..."
The Master looks at him and narrows his eyes. Then he leans down and sniffs the Doctor's head. He chuckles. "You sap."

The Doctor only winces a little. "Missed you, that's all. Was there some nasty additive in the gunk?"

"No. Or if there was, I didn't put it there. Romantic imbecile."

"You've missed me too!"

"Doctor, I've been far too busy going completely off my trolley to miss anything apart from silence." The Master closes his eyes, and the Doctor receives strong impressions through the link. Suddenly he knows almost first-hand the terror of realising he's losing control of himself, barely able to think, knowing he's disintegrating into less than an animal and helpless to stop it.

"Oh God. I'm so very, very sorry."

"You already said." The Master's hand is threatening to crush some of the smaller bones in the Doctor's, but there's no sign of the Master's inner tension in his mildly amused expression. "I suppose you feel I should apologise too."

"Nah. At least, not to me. Jack certainly deserves one. More than one. Many, many more. But I think I'm the only person you could apologise to and actually mean it. No one else really registers to you, do they?"

The Master raises his free hand to tap of the bridge of the Doctor's nose. "You've been reading too many psychopathy textbooks. May I remind you they're almost all written by and about humans? By human standards, all Time Lords have a personality disorder, at least half of them a serious one."

"Point. Straws to clutch at, that's all. I, er... I spoke with one of your previous regenerations."

"Did you? Which one? Oh, that one." The Master chuckles, clearly having picked up the answer from the Doctor's head. "I might've guessed. Needing your Master fix, were you?"

"Well, it wasn't my idea to meet with him, but yeah, it kind of turned out that way. Seem to have developed a completely embarrassing peccadillo for leather gloves. Can't think how."

The Master waves his free hand. It's sadly naked. "I did something unfortunate with a laser knife to the ones I was wearing earlier." The Doctor supposes that half-explains the many scratches. "I could go looking for some for you. I think there's at least one pair still in the TARDIS."

The Doctor knows exactly where the gloves are. "Er, no. Stay here, Master. Where it's safe. Where there's no drums." He grips the Master's hand tightly, tugging him closer. "I need you here."

The Master meets the Doctor's eyes and smiles knowingly. "My pretty pervert. Although, I have to say it, Doctor, not terribly pretty right now. Have you seen yourself? You're not so much doing a lost weekend as a lost week and a half."

"Sorry."

"Oh, don't get all worried now. I still want to fuck you stupid. Stupider. Takes more than too much stubble and shadowed eyes to turn me off you."

"Master, I..."
"Oh, don't look at me like that. And stop those needy thoughts too! You're not well enough for what I want to do you. We'll both have to wait." The Master cranes his neck about, as if trying to straighten a crick.

"I'm not the only one with demanding thoughts."

"Listening in?" The Master grins. "Are they turning you on?" He separates his hand from the Doctor's, but only to slip his fingers through the gaps in the Doctor's shirt and touch flesh that way. "With the drums gone while we're in here, it seems everything else wants to play catch up."

"You're not leaving this room 'til we've got rid of them forever."

The Master looks down, undoing a couple of the Doctor's shirt buttons. "What if we can't?" He looks back up. "Seriously, Doctor. What if we can't?"

"Then we don't give up," the Doctor says fiercely. "We keep trying. And in the meantime, we're very, very careful about stopping them before they get bad. We know the things that help, and even if we have to spend half of every day doing those things, then that's what we do. That takes precedence over everything. No matter what we're doing, no matter who's relying on us, sorting the drums comes first. And we sleep in here, and you actually do sleep rather than scheme while I snore."

The Master slips his entire hand through the gap in the Doctor's shirt. The Doctor's eyes inadvertently close at the touch and his breathing deepens. The Master slowly runs his hand up and down the Doctor's chest, and it's just perfect.

"My mind," the Master starts slowly, "has always been the one thing I can rely on. I'd rather die than lose it. Promise me you won't let me live mindless, Doctor."

"It won't happen."

"Promise me!"

The Doctor opens his eyes. "I promise. But it won't get that far. I won't let it."

There's silence between them for a little while, the Master's hand gently stroking, and then the Master bends down and kisses the Doctor softly on the lips. "Sealed with a kiss," he says with a one-sided smile as he pulls back. "I suppose that must mean I still trust you." He shakes his head ruefully. "Doesn't exactly come naturally."

"Lie down with me?"

The Master nods and lies down on his side. He opens the rest of the Doctor's buttons and wraps his arm around the Doctor's waist, under his shirt. "You should sleep."

"You too."

"I'm not sleeping in here unless you're handcuffed to me."

"Ah." The Doctor nods and turns his head to face the Master. "I wondered if that was why you left the Zero Room that night. Well, I did when I actually started thinking; at the time, all I could see was what you'd done. Afterwards, I slowly started to understand why you'd done it, why it made sense to you." He shakes his head ruefully. "I won't leave you alone. Not again. No matter how much you seem to want me gone."
The Master closes his eyes, and after a while, the Doctor does too. He lets himself relax and slip closer to sleep, feeling safe with the Master snug to his side. Safe thanks to the Master's presence? If anything's proof of mental disintegration that statement is. Still true though.

He's pretty much asleep when he's jolted back to full wakefulness by what he quickly realises is a sob. The Master's crying? The Master never cries! His thoughts confirm it though. Oh, his poor Master.

The Doctor wraps his arms tightly around the shaking body and pulls it half on top of him. "I'm here. I'm here."

"Don't look at me. Don't listen." The Master presses his face into the Doctor's shoulder.

"I'm here. I'm not going to let you go."

Voice muffled, the Master pretty much rants into the Doctor's body. "This isn't my emotion. Don't you dare think it is! You better tell me you're not. Tell me you're not!" He jabs painfully at the Doctor's ribs with the heel of one hand. "You think I care about crap like this? It's yours, all yours. I'm full of all your sappy, stupid, useless caring. I hate it, hate you. Oh gods, is there anything left of me at all?"

"Of course there is." The Doctor hadn't actually been feeling anything much more than content, so the Master must be picking up the capacity for those emotions more than the emotions themselves. Yeah. Oh Rassilon, yeah. Must be terrifying for a man who's never known such feelings before to suddenly be full of them. Like a blind person seeing rainbows or fireworks with no warning. "You're you. You're still you. You really, really are."

"Oh yes?" The Master looks up, glares at the Doctor with reddened eyes. "Then who is it that I am, Doctor? Tell me! Outside this room, I'm just the rhythm section; the rest of the orchestra's gone bye-bye. I'm just a... savage. Yes, a savage, dancing to the percussion of the hunt, the chase, the kill." He bears his teeth. "Like the cheetah people, but worse. So much further gone. Where am I in that, Doctor? Where? Tell me!"

The Doctor has to stay calm somehow if he's to help the Master through this crisis. "You carried me back to the TARDIS from the forest. That wasn't the drums."

The Master doesn't even seem to hear him. "And in this room, this hellhole? I fill up with you. I'm just a mirror for all your stupidity, feeling all these alien, imbecilic emotions: guilt, responsibility, concern for people not me, shame, love... Oh Rassilon, the love. It's sickening! How can you bear it?" He grips the Doctor by the shoulders, snarling down at him. "The captain told me I couldn't love, and you'd leave me because of that, and if this is how love feels, he's right. How can you bear it, Doctor? This appalling need..."

Oh Jack, not kind. Understandable and utterly forgivable, but still not kind. "I won't leave you, Master."

The Master seems to ever so slightly shake his head, barely more than a tremor. "How can you keep hold of someone who doesn't exist? I'll just slip through your fingers and drift away. Maybe I should. Maybe it'll all be over then. Will it stop? Do you think it will stop if I just give in?"

"Of course you exist, and we are not giving in!" The Doctor pulls the Master tight to him, squeezing, remembering the Master refusing to regenerate and hating the memory.

"You're not listening!" The Master struggles, trying to pull away. "I'm empty. I fill up with
whatever's going. Alone in this room, I'm nothing more than a shell." Suddenly, his muscles relax; he collapses on the Doctor. "Was it always this way?" he asks, his voice fractured. "Wasn't I someone once?"

"You still are someone." The Doctor strokes the Master's hair. "I can see him even if you can't. Look through my eyes and see yourself. Master, you're the realest person I know. How could I love you so much, despite everything, if you didn't exist?"

The Master snorts. "If anyone could, you could. You've always been more interested in concepts and ideals than boring old reality."

"And you're not?" The Doctor snorts in turn. "You're just changing, Master. We both are. Entrelacement does that. There's a limited merge of personality. You know that's how it works."

"You're changing? How?"

"If you think about it, you'll know I am. There was a time, not so long ago, I'd be insisting on knowing every detail of this genetic mischief of yours so I could put it right myself."

"You don't care about it?"

Keeping one arm around the Master, the Doctor scratches above his ear, pondering the question. "Not sure I do much. Let Romana deal with it."

The Master lifts his head. "You could at least admire my cleverness."

The Doctor laughs. "How can you say you don't exist anymore when that's such a very 'Master' thing to say. You can tell me all the details tomorrow, and I'll compliment your genius then."

"Maybe throw in a couple of 'how could you?'s for old time's sake?"

Grinning, the Doctor lifts a hand to ruffle the Master's hair and only just catches himself in time. 'Cause that would go down like a dose of old-fashioned cascara and gentian bitters. He soberes, making sure he meets the Master's gaze. "This isn't a carte blanche, so don't go thinking it is. If you ever do something like torture Jack again then... well, no more separation. Never doing that again. But I'll think of some punishment you'll hate, believe me." He pauses and then adds more brightly, "Romana had a good idea along those lines actually."

"I'll bet." The Master's expression is wry. He wipes his nose on the back of his hand like a little boy and sits up, his back to the Doctor. "If you kill the drums, Doctor, you'll have to stay entrelaced with me forever, or... or put me down like a dog. You know that, don't you?"

The Doctor nods unseen. "Forever, I promise." He's not surprised to find he means it, even though there's a little Romana in his head telling him he's an idiot and he's letting her down, and a little Jack looking all hurt and terribly noble. It's time for the little people to get back into the box. He reaches up a hand to stroke the Master's back.

"Everything's going to be all right, Master. I swear it. Everything's going to be all right."
The Master's far from happy. "I still don't see why I have to come."

"Would've thought you'd prefer to come-with, rather than just lie there in the Zero Room while I had an adventure in your head without you." The Doctor seems annoyingly chirpy, unexpected considering how ill he was before their lengthy kip together. He's swirling his long coat back and forth around his legs, using his hands in his pockets.

The Master looks despondently around the rather barren landscape. They're on a dusty path in twilight, flat yellowing grasslands to either side of them, unrelenting and featureless bar a towering mountain range far distant behind them. "I don't like mindscapes."

"Well, technically, not a mindscape. It's a Visual Metaphor Psychic Realm." The Doctor plays with the four words of the buzz-phrase in his mouth. "Or dreamscape if you'd rather."

"Semantics? Oh, Doctor, let's not. Whatever, I don't like places like this." The Master especially doesn't like his own dreamscape, it seems. It's like looking into a mirror that shows not his face, but his soul. Far from pretty, or even interesting other than in an entirely nihilistic, futility-of-everything kind of way, and it's not like either thing's exactly news to him.

"Guilty conscience?" the Doctor asks.


"The Matrix. Driving poor old Goth to the death in a sort of dreamscape, trying to make him kill me in a silly game of Rambo in the jungle."

"I'd forgotten that one. Oh, what're you complaining about? You won, as usual. You always win. Instead of new regenerations, I got to spend decades immobilised in my own TARDIS. Decades, Doctor. Unmoving in an ancient, agonised body. And you wonder why I'm having the odd sanity issue?"

"I don't wonder. I understand. You know I do. Perhaps that's why you hate mindscapes and their like, all that time with just your own mind for company."

"Maybe," the Master admits grudgingly. "This is worse though. All the third rate symbolism we're going to get in here. Much worse than just being stuck with my own thoughts. I am, after all, a very interesting thinker." He just doesn't do metaphors, that's all. He has a very directed mind. To the point. The Doctor's the twisty one.

"It's because you can't control things here," the Doctor says, nodding.

The Master screws up his face in exaggerated disbelief. "Was that meant to be some great, on-high insight into my character? I did choose my name, you know."

"I was there."

"So you were." The Master puts his hands into his pockets and discovers to his surprise that he has what very much feels like his laser screwdriver. Maybe things won't be quite so bad here after all. He hides a smile, maintaining instead what he hopes is an attractive pout. "We're really just going to walk down this ridiculous path into the back-reaches of my mind? It'll take hours. Without the visual metaphor crap, we could get where we're going in seconds."
"Not done much inner work, have you?" the Doctor says, clearly amused, and the Master glares at him. "Takes the same external time whichever method you choose. Only our experience of time changes. And done via a dreamscape, working on a psyche can be so much more effective, go so much deeper. And anyway, it's, ooh, oodles more fun this way."

Fun. Right. The Doctor grins in that way that uses his whole sappy face, and the Master wants to feel properly annoyed by the sight, but yesterday is far too recent in his memory, and a relaxed, grinning, and most importantly, not on the verge of clog-popping Doctor is something to be savoured.

Shaking his head ruefully, the Master lifts his hands to rub at his face and is surprised to feel wetness. He takes his hands away and looks down at them. They're covered in blood. He's not sure whether it's from his hands or his face. Nothing hurts. "Oh, this is fun, all right. Just look at all the fun, Doctor. I'm oozing fun."

The Doctor looks at him and winces. "Just metaphor. That's all."

"You don't say."

Walking close, the Doctor takes the Master's hands in his and seems to concentrate. The blood fades away.

"Oh, blessed messiah," the Master says caustically, yanking his hands back. "What's next? Feeding of the entire Quintel system? Changing piss into champers? I might've known you could control things here when I can't."

"I work with the paradigm; you try to fight it."

"Which means what, precisely?"

"It makes sense as a metaphor that I could wash your hands clean of blood."

"What? Oh, that's just... Arghhh." The Master clamps his hands to the sides of his head. "Could that possibly be the most sanctimonious thing I've ever heard? Yes, I believe it could. Where's the sickbag? I'm appalled."

The Doctor shrugs. "It worked."

"Oh, this is hell. Sheer hell. Isn't this hell? You've bought me to the nine circles, you bastard."

"You were already here, Master." The Doctor taps his temple. "Your head, remember?"

"Hardly likely to forget. Can we do this to your psyche afterwards? Strip your soul naked to the bone and see how you like it?"

"You're the one with the urgent need for a drum-cure. Is that what's bothering you then? The fact I'm going to see so much of the real you?"

"No." It's not a complete lie.

"What then?"

"The fact that I'm going to see it. We've barely started yet, and I'm already losing all respect for myself. I mean, what is this? This half-light empty savannah? Gods, I told you I was just a shell. Do you see it now, Doctor? D'you see it?"
"This is just the outlands. The antechamber, if you like. As your attention is inside with me currently, of course it's empty."

"There's a stinking great lacuna in your logic there, Doctor. Watch you don't trip and fall." The Master scrapes his nails through his hair. Something's making his skull itch. "I suppose outside of the Zero Room this desert would be full of cheetahs or tribal drummers or something. It's just so... embarrassing. Predictable. I hate being predictable."

The Doctor sighs heavily. "If you want to leave, you can. Just thought I might be glad of your help later on."

"Aww." Reaching out, the Master takes the Doctor's hand, squeezing it hard enough to hurt. "Scared of what monsters lurk within me?" he asks in his best kiddie storytime voice. "So you bloody well should be! Most of them take your form, after all."

"Honestly?" the Doctor asks, looking alarmed.

"Cross my heart, hope to die. Stick a red hot knitting needle right through your nasty, crybaby eye."

"Why? What've I ever done that..."

The Master's glad the Doctor stops talking before he's forced to thump him one to shut him up. He yanks at the Doctor's hand. "Well, are we going to start this route march or not?"

Sighing again, the Doctor separates himself from the Master's hand and starts walking off down the twisting path. The Master follows. About a hundred yards further on, the Doctor starts to whistle.

The Master glares at him. "If that strangled noise turns out to be anything from The Wizard of Oz, you're a dead Time Lord."

The Doctor stops whistling.

There's really only so much identical featureless landscape even the most willing experimental subject can take. The Master keeps schtum for as long as he can, in keeping with the unwritten rules of the Mutual Sulk, but eventually he feels he has to say something. He opens his mouth to do just that when he notices the air above the path a short distance away start to shimmer like a heat haze.

A figure appears where the haze was. Judging by the coat and hair, it seems to be Captain Harkness. "What the hell's he doing in my head, Doctor?" the Master demands, more than a little outraged.

"Not sure." The Doctor frowns.

"He's not a symbol to me," the Master says, striding towards the figure. "He's nothing!"

The Doctor shoots him a disparaging look as he keeps up with the Master's pace. "You sure about that? Not sure how he could fail to symbolise something for you after the last couple of weeks."

"He's less than nothing," the Master repeats, meaning it in the purest way possible.

The Doctor shakes his head. "Either way, this is the real thing." He breaks into a trot, apparently determined to reach Jack before the Master does. "Hello there, my good friend. Nice to see you, if
unexpected. Care to explain how you got in here?"

"Where's here?" Jack asks, looking around himself with a confused expression. "I wasn't expecting a visual link. I know I've been playing with settings, but this should still be audio only."

"This is the Master's mind, his dreamscape. You shouldn't be here, Jack. You really shouldn't."

Jack looks around some more, seeing no doubt the whole lack of anything very much, and the Master's sure he sees a quickly hidden sneer form on Jack's face. "Ah. Yeah, sorry. I guess I fiddled a little too much with the settings." He focuses his gaze on the Doctor. "We have to talk."

"Is it urgent?" the Doctor asks. "Cause otherwise, I need you to leave here. It's not fair on him."

"Uh, yeah, it's urgent. Sorry." Wonder of all wonders, Jack actually nods at the Master. Is he apologising to him? "There's a problem, a big one. Romana asked me to make contact. Good thing you still have your receiver on."

"What's happened?"

"What do you think?" Jack nods towards the Master again, but this time it's definitely not an apology. "He happened."

The Master concentrates very hard, trying to force the dreamscape to obey his wishes and make Jack look like a donkey, a Jack-ass no less. Nothing happens. It's beyond aggravating.

"The Master's been with me for a good thirty-six hours now," the Doctor says calmly. "He's done nothing wrong."

"He did plenty before though, and it's come back to bite us all in the ass."

The Master swallows his irritation. "I don't want you in my head, Captain. I suggest you cut out the accusations and get to the point fast."

Jack turns to face him. "Your little genetic experiments are what happened. Romana was able to reverse your DNA remodelling on the Time Lords still in their looms, and with the help of two of them once woken up, she was able to synthesise a retro-formula that will fix the ones that are already loomed. Trouble is, they got wind of it."

"Oh no," the Doctor says. "Tell me they didn't."

"They did. You have a revolution on New Gallifrey before your population has even reached twenty, a rebel force that's stolen all the tech they could carry in their hands and run for the hills. Not before killing Nicina with a laser knife, however."

"Aww, poor Nicina." The Doctor winces, turning away briefly. "She regen okay?"

"We don't know. The rebels took her body with them."

"Bugger. Is Romana all right?"

"She's more than a little angry, Doctor."

"I imagine 'bloody furious' would cover it better," the Master says wryly. "There was a flaw in my original coding, by the way," he tells the Doctor. "One that wasn't obvious at first. I wasn't able to fix it as, no matter what I did, I couldn't get you to send the right pot of hair creme out of the TARDIS. Probably because you were too busy over-coating your own follicles with it like the sap
The Doctor rubs at the back of his head, his face screwed up. "Should probably ask you to explain that. Later maybe." He turns back to Jack. "Is she safe?"

"Yeah. Romana's in the Console Room with Braxiatel. They deadlocked the TARDIS so they're safe for now."

"Ah, she's with Brax. Good. That's good. Jack, tell them to stay put? Soon as we're done here, we'll come out and help reclaim the looming hall and so on."

Jack puts his hands on his hips. "You can't interrupt what you're doing?"

"No, really can't."

"Really can't or really don't want to?"

The Doctor looks a little cross. "Both, Jack. I have to fix the Master's drums, now more than ever. Romana and Brax are safe for the time being, and I don't think they'll hurt Nicina again as they'll need a hostage for negotiations. I need to do this now."

"Right." Jack lets his defiant stance drop. "Talk to me once you're done in here, okay? Keep me in the loop."

"Will do. You better go now. Oh, and fix those settings so you don't get a free trip into private territory again."

Jack gives the Doctor a wry half-smile and doesn't even look at the Master before disappearing from the dreamscape.

The Master stares down at the dust around his feet and kicks at it, contemplating what they've been told. "They were meant to be more... obedient, not rebellious, you know."

"More obedient to their Master's whim perhaps?"

"Well, yes." He looks up and smiles sweetly. "Of course. I do like to have reliable minions, after all. Who doesn't?"

The Master can tell that the Doctor's having to force himself not to smile back at him. The 'stern' is wobbly around the edges. "But there was a flaw?"

"I'd spotted it, calculated the fix needed and coded the patch. But guess who threw me out of the TARDIS before I'd a chance to apply it? Do you have any idea how tricky it is only being able to work on things while your entrelaced lover is deeply asleep? I had to keep it all blocked from my conscious memory during your waking hours."

The Doctor nods, looking unsurprised. "Zeta rhythm deprivation would drive even the sanest Time Lord to extreme acts, you realise."

The Master looks down again, biting his lower lip before saying, "I realised too late what I was doing to myself. I'm sorry."

"Are you?" The Doctor now does sound surprised, and so he should, really.

The Master gives him a one-sided smile. "Yes, a little." As much as he's capable of being. "It does happen occasionally, you know. Of course, it could just be your sappitude intruding into my
The Doctor smiles and reaches out, pulling him close and pressing a kiss onto his forehead. The Master pushes him away.

"Soppy time now? Just 'cause I said sorry? I think not." He wipes his cuff over his forehead. "If you want to kiss me, do it properly."

"'Properly' being, let me guess, rock hard and breathless?"

"With a lot of tongue and accompanying wriggling, groping and thrusting," the Master says, grinning.

The Doctor chuckles. "There are other kinds of kissing, you know. Ooh, all sorts of other kinds."

"And you'd know all about them, would you? Not interested."

"Your past regeneration kissed completely differently from this one."

"You kissed him? You kissed him in the Matrix?" Is it possible to be jealous of yourself?

"I kissed you. In Jack's mindscape."

"Show me," the Master says. "Show me how I kissed you there."

The Doctor steps close and holds the Master's face in his hands. He presses a soft kiss on the Master's lips, and then another, and another, and another.

"That's it? That's all I did?"

"Well, our hands were doing a lot of wandering at the same time."

Thank Rassilon for that! He was beginning to worry about himself. He starts to caress and explore the Doctor's body, gently but insistently, in keeping with the kiss. "Like this?"

The Doctor's voice sounds just a little bit tighter as he answers, "Er, yeah. Like that, pretty much." The Master can sense the arousal sparking in the Doctor's mind.

The Master chuckles, pulling back from the kiss. "Want to fuck in my head, Doctor? Want me to push you down on this dirt road here and take you hard in the dust of my mind?" He watches the Doctor's eyes close, his chest rise and fall with a deeper, more ragged movement. The Master presses their lower bodies tight together and grinds. "It's been over a day since you dropped that obscene barrier of yours," he says, voice low and provoking. "And we still haven't shagged. I want you."

"I want you too, Master, but-" the Doctor starts breathlessly. "Ohhh, don't do that!"

The Master doesn't even consider not doing that. Instead, he ups the ante, cupping the hand now resting over the Doctor's erection and squeezing. "No 'but's."

"Yeah, I mean, no. But yeah, a 'but'. There needs to be a 'but'."

"Nope."

"Yep."
"No!"

"Yes!"

"Oh, shut it, Doctor," the Master says and covers the annoying mouth with his own, kissing it properly this time. To start with, the Doctor kisses back enthusiastically, but then with a deep groan, he attempts to push the Master back.

The Master's just considering whether to let him, or to push his luck, when suddenly something slams into his side and sends him flying to the edge of the path. He looks up to see a goat with large spiralled horns looking down at him. "What the...?"

"Er, I think this would be that 'but' I mentioned," the Doctor says, waving his coat tails about in an attempt to shoo the animal away.

The Master takes out his laser screwdriver and shoots the beast dead. "That's generally how I deal with 'but's or 'butt's." He stands up, ignoring the Doctor's offer of a hand, and rubs at his hip. "You need to be a lot more careful what you say in here."

"Yeah, sorry. Really. But seriously, this isn't the right time for nooky."

Nooky? Who the hell says 'nooky'? The Master shakes his head and walks behind the Doctor, putting his hands on the Doctor's hips. "Yes, it is. It's always the right time, and no more ruminants, thank you. Didn't you say time was extended in here? That actually we're taking almost no time at all?"

"Time's extended, but our energy isn't. We can only keep going in here for so long, and sex will drain our reservoirs rapidly. You know it's true. You know neither of us is capable of a 'quickie'."

The Master says nothing, rubbing himself slowly against the Doctor's arse, not wanting to admit the Doctor's right. He loves the way the Doctor's buttocks feel; the only parts of the Doctor with much in the way of flesh to them. He presses into their firmness, feeling the response in the Doctor's mind.

"Master. Stop it. Please."

Huffing, the Master lets go and turns aside. He stares out at the great dismal emptiness that surrounds them and sighs. Is it any wonder he wants to fill up on the Doctor when this is all that fills him normally?

He feels a hand on his back. "Sorry. I promise once we're done here and have helped Romana that you'll get at least a day in which to do anything you want to me. Anything."

It's a good promise. Rassilon knows how long it'll take to be fulfilled though if his would-be minions are running riot. Stupid idiots, the lot of them. Just how often have his minions been his downfall over the years? No wonder he's always preferred to work alone.

The Master turns back to the path and considers the prospect of continuing up it. "We must've been walking at least, oh, a relative half-hour before the good captain paid us his nice little visit, Doctor, and we're still in your supposed outlands. In fact, I'd swear we hadn't moved at all."

"Hmm, I think I agree, though it wasn't quite as long as that." The Doctor sniffs the air. "Could be having a touch of the Red Queen's race here."

"All the running we can do just to keep in the same place? Well, that's it." The Master folds his
arms, refusing to walk another step. "Find us another way. Use your messianic, paradigm-
compatible voodoo powers and sort it out."

"Yes, Master," the Doctor says facetiously, which is not at all how the Master likes to hear his
name. The Doctor looks around, hmms and hahs to himself, and pats his cheeks with both hands.
Finally his gaze falls back on the Master. "Don't suppose I can persuade you to say something
along the lines of 'Oh, my ears and whiskers', can I?"

"What? No! Don't you dare!" The Master can't stop himself glancing down, only to find he seems
to have sprouted a waistcoat from somewhere, complete with fob watch. Through gritted teeth, he
growls, "If I have long white fluffy ears now, you're beyond dead. Way, way beyond it."

"You haven't," the Doctor says. "Just new clothes. Well, I say new clothes, but actually..."

Frowning, the Master pulls out the fobwatch. It's covered in Gallifreyan script. "Ah, I see." On
impulse, he clicks the watch open, just as the Doctor steps forward, holding a hand out.

"Er, I wouldn't... oh. Oh."

"Oh?" He looks up at the Doctor. "I believe you'll have to elucidate that 'oh' at least a little, Doctor,
if you want me to follow."

The Doctor gives him a tight smile. "Feeling all right, are you?"

"Well, I experienced a brief spell of dizziness just then as I opened... Oh. Indeed. Your point is
taken. I'm regressing, aren't I?"

"Just a little."

The Master touches his face with his empty hand, feeling the features of his previous regeneration.
"Well, I'm sure you must be happy. I distinctly remember you expressing a preference for this body
over my latest."

"Master, I did nothing of the sort. I said I liked your personality as a human, that's all. Which is
certainly not who you are right now."

"So sorry to disappoint you, my dear."

The Doctor sighs. "Oh, this journey's going to be a barrel of something, all right. After you?" He
gestures to the side of the Master, where a wide, perfectly circular, and apparently bottomless hole
seems to have appeared in the middle of the path. It certainly wasn't there before he opened the
watch.

"This would be that lacuna of yours, would it?" the Master says. "I do hope you're not expecting
me to jump into there."

"You wanted a shortcut." The Doctor stands at the edge of the hole and stares down into it. "Here
you have my very best voodoo magic rabbit hole. In you go."

"Oh, Doctors first, I believe." The Master gestures, a fluid and graceful movement.

The Doctor shakes his head, but apparently in exasperation rather than refusal as he bounces on his
toes a few times at the edge of the hole and says, "See you at the bottom then." He hops into it,
plummeting silently away from the Master in a quite bothersome way, coat flapping around him
like broken wings.
The Master stares dolefully down until the Doctor disappears from sight and then looks around himself. Is it his imagination or are these outlands growing darker now the Doctor's gone? The emptiness and encroaching shadow reminds him of Utopia, of the end of everything. Resisting the urge to pinch his nose, he steps into the hole with as much dignity as he can gather, and drops.

He keeps dropping, really for a quite ridiculous length of time. "I am not Alice," he mutters crossly to himself. Although, of course, Alice wouldn't be seeing 'Vote Saxon' posters fluttering in the air as she fell past, nor toclafane balls, nor grinning futurekind, hanging from the sides of the oubliette, clawed hands reaching out to tear at clothing. His fobwatch is ripped away and falls faster than he does. The laws of gravity are meaningless here.

A little further down, he passes a chameleon arch, dangling like a spider on a line of web, and then the ruin of a dalek's metal casing, embedded in the dirt wall and still smoking. It's just after this that the nature of the pit changes completely. The walls around him are no longer physical; he's in the Vortex, as far as he can tell, and no longer falling, but rather being pushed onwards, propelled through the time winds.

At least the metaphor has air to breathe; either that or he's breathing vacuum these days. "Well, isn't this splendid?" he asks himself sarcastically.

Maybe it would be a little closer to splendid were the Doctor with him, but it's verging on dull on his own. He's not sure how long he's been falling through this... this umbilical cord, but he's really rather had enough of it. As he thinks that, he finds himself exploding out from the Vortex, up into a room. He lands with a painful thump on the floor.

"Up you get," the Doctor says cheerfully, holding out his hand. The Master looks sourly up at him, wondering why his vision suddenly seems tinged with green, and the Doctor adds, "C'mon Master. Doubt you'll want to stay in this place very long."

The Master looks around. He seems to be in the Cloister Room in the Doctor's TARDIS, but this isn't how it looks nowadays. He's seen it this way before, two bodies ago. He lifts himself up on his arms and sees elaborate embroidered sleeves fall down upon long gloves of black cloth. "Aww no," he says with an American accent that makes him wince. "Not this useless corpse."

"'Fraid so. Well on its way to George Romero territory too. A bit niffy, if you don't mind me saying."

"Fraid so. Well on its way to George Romero territory too. A bit niffy, if you don't mind me saying."

The Master does mind, but he says nothing. He's staring at the dome closing over the remote Eye and realising how he got here. He shivers. "Am I gonna have to regress through all my incarnations to get where we're heading, Doctor?" His voice becomes increasingly husky as he speaks, so he coughs a few times before continuing. "If so, a fast-forward button sounds a better idea."

"Well, the rabbit hole was a bit of one, already. But yeah, think we will. The drums have been with you since childhood, so I imagine that's where the path'll lead us." The Doctor's still holding out his hand so the Master takes it and struggles to his feet in the cumbersome robes.

He pretends he doesn't see the Doctor surreptitiously wipe his hand after letting the Master's go. What? Is he oozing through his gloves or something? "What path?" he asks, looking around. "There's no path here."

"Oh, there is. Don't worry; I can see it. We're still going the right way; I won't let us stray."

The Master wonders what would happen if they did stray. Looking up, he sees something unexpected. "Hey, there's you! Crown of thorns and everything. I remember a lot more clothes the
first time you wore it though."

"I know. I'm trying not to look."

"Aww, you should. You've always looked hot in bondage. Especially bondage and nothing much else. No one does suffering as sexy as you do it, Doctor. I think I'm going up there to, uh, have a little talk."

The Doctor grips the Master's arm as he tries to move off. "No, you're not. The path leads out of this room. Come on."

The Master frowns. "Spoilsport."

"It's not really me. It's your very disturbing fantasy of me. You can indulge in it at some point when I'm not in your head to witness it."

"But you're always in my head now..." The frown becomes a scowl as he tries to cover up sudden fear with anger. "Unless you intend to break your many promises on the subject made last night."

"Nope. No more separations. I meant it." The Doctor places his other hand on the Master's chest. "It's us now, for better or worse."

"So, let me have some 'worse' now in that case." The Master winks, trying to ignore the feeling of his eyelid getting stuck shut for a second before opening again.

"Master, your body's falling apart. Just what is it you think you're going to do to that poor wretch up there?"

"It's not falling apart *that* much." Perturbed, the Master quells the impulse to look under his robes. He swallows and ends up coughing again. The Doctor puts a supporting hand under the Master's elbow, and once he's stopped coughing enough to talk, the Master surrenders. "Oh, okay. But you owe me some fun time after we finish here. With chains. Lots of them."

"Let's get this done; then you can have all the bondage fun you want. Come on." Keeping his hand on the Master's arm, the Doctor pulls him out of the Cloister Room into the corridor outside.

The Master's smiling happily to himself as the Doctor keeps him walking. "Lots of chains and no clothes, on you at least, apart from a nice collar. Unlike me, you suit a collar. Oh and a bit or a gag. A bit, I think, so I can see your teeth. And ooh, I mustn't forget a nice big black-"

They turn a corner straight into the path of a dalek. It is, probably not coincidentally, big and black.

"Fuck!" the Master yells and dives to one side just as a beam shoots out from the dalek's weapon appendage. Fortunately, the Doctor's still holding on so tightly to the Master's arm that he ducks and dives with him; the beam passes harmlessly over the top of them. The Master feels frantically around his robes for a pocket.

"Escape is not possible," the dalek intones. "You will be exterminated."

"Wait!" the Doctor yells, holding up a hand. "You don't want to exterminate us!"

"You are the Doctor, and that is the Master. You are the enemies of the Daleks. You will be exterminated. There is no escape."
"But you haven't heard what we have to say yet!" the Doctor says, getting to his knees and maneuvering himself in front of the Master. "We've got secrets. Ooh, all sorts of lovely, important strategic info type secrets. All about the Time Lords! We can help you destroy them."

The Master isn't sure what would happen to the Doctor were he to be exterminated by a figment of the Master's imagination, but he's damn sure he doesn't want to find out. Fortunately, he's discovered he has more normal clothes under the Prydonian robes, and they have pockets. His hand closes around his laser screwdriver.

"This is a ruse, a play for time," the dalek says, fidgeting on the spot the way they do when agitated. "The Doctor would not betray the Time Lords."

"Haven't you heard?" the Master asks, shuffling to the side of the Doctor. "We're renegades, both of us. Infamous renegades. We're exiled from Gallifrey, so what do we have to lose?"

"Do not move. You will remain still. You will reveal the secrets of the Time Lords, and then you will be exterminated."

"Hmm," the Master says, tipping his head to one side. "Is that a good offer? Let me think about it. Oh, you know what? No deal!" He fires at the dalek and is more than a little surprised to see it immediately shrink to doll-sized. He'd thought it was still his screwdriver in his pocket, but no, it too has regressed.

The dalek's not dead. This fact becomes obvious as a very small and tinny voice becomes rapidly hysterical on the subject of their imminent extermination. The Doctor quickly picks it up, making sure the weapon arm is pointing away from them. Tiny beams lance out around the corridor.

"It's almost cute," the Doctor says, sounding vaguely amused.

"Ah, fast forward button?" the Master asks. "Who knows how many more of those there are around."

The Doctor nods. He carefully breaks off the weapon arm and then puts the dalek down on the floor, where it buzzes around like an annoying radio-controlled car, banging into their feet. The Master tries to stamp on it, but quickly discovers that dalekanium, even thinned by shrinkage, isn't easily crushable.

The Doctor's lips are pursed. "I could probably get us to Sarn with the use of your TCE."

The Master's brain may be zombifying in this body, but he still has enough sense to work that one out. "No way will I let you shrink me, Doctor."

"Thought you'd say that. Hmm. We need props. They seem to act like levers, crowbars for trapdoors. Got anything else in your pockets?"

The Master shrugs off his robes with a sense of relief and has a feel around. "Only this." He pulls out the key to this version of the Doctor's TARDIS. "Hmm, it's a novel thought, Doctor, but why don't we, I don't know, use the TARDIS to travel back in time?"

The Doctor chuckles and runs his hands over his face. "Profoundly obvious. Let's try it. Sooner we move you back a body the better."

They sneak through the TARDIS corridors like thieves, which must be kind of weird for the Doctor. More disturbing still must be the intermittent Dalek battles they sometimes can't avoid. "Should I let myself be hit?" the Master asks at one point. "Maybe that would speed things up."
"No!"

"Why? What would happen in the real world?"

"I... I'm not sure." The Doctor has a slightly haunted look to him. "But let's not try it?"

Eventually they make it to the Console Room. The Doctor heads straight to the controls. "Hmm, where to?"

The Master doesn't answer immediately; he's staring at his hands which seem to have gone all squishy inside his gloves. "Back. Just back in time and fast." He spits out a tooth. "Oh, disgusting. Hurry up!"

As soon as the TARDIS enters the Vortex, the Master starts to feel better. He's unsurprised as the long cloth gloves on his hands change to leather. He holds up a hand and waves to the Doctor, grinning with a happily full set of teeth. "Look what I have here for you, my dear Doctor."

The Doctor looks up at him and immediately develops a glazed expression the Master knows well. "Can't stop," the Doctor says unhappily, staring at the Master's hand. "I chose the express route."

The Master's grin drops as he realises what's coming. "I'd better sit down." He makes it to the chair just in time. He can feel his flesh desiccating, knows that it's darkening, withering, oozing oily blackness like a mouldering corpse, and this isn't the worst. Oh no, there's much worse to come.

It had been all about the Daleks, of course. After the Doctor had ruined the Master's best attempts to set the Humans and Draconians at each other's throats, the Daleks had not been at all pleased. Forced to act swiftly to mend his reputation with them and prevent a summary extermination, the Master found himself sharing some special plans of his own, well before they were ready for use.

The plans involved his prototype of what eventually became black-hole converters, together with a quick cannibalisation of a Dalek warship, and the sun of the Draconian system. Despite the project's haste, it could have worked, were it not for the Doctor's inevitable interference.

The Darkheart device itself functioned almost exactly as projected. The Master had modelled it on his idea of how the Hand of Omega might have worked, vastly simplified of course. It was a mere question of the right catalyst at the right time provoking a dramatic increase in local gravitational forces. The Draconians' sun, despite its small mass, collapsed and turned supernova just as planned, just as the Daleks were expecting.

But of course the Master had had to stay and gloat. Well, not gloat exactly. He was a little shocked at his own actions in truth. Never before had he wrought quite such impressive destruction as that which was brought about by the explosion of stellar matter propelled out through the Draconian solar system. He sat in his TARDIS, watching planets burn, and wondered if now, finally, he deserved the epithet 'evil' that the Doctor was always throwing his way.

Still, wielding such power was heady, better than any drug.

Retribution came fast. The star's collapse did not end in that simple explosion as it should have done, but continued to rapidly progress, far faster than natural to the universe. Under the manufactured gravity of the compromised weapon, the remaining matter collapsed in on itself further and further, becoming impossibly dense, until a black hole was formed. The system was no longer burning, but instead being sucked rapidly into a singularity.

As was the Master's TARDIS.
Oh, Master," the Doctor, the *reason*, says sadly.

"Don't you dare condescend," the Master hisses. "You who did this to me. Nothing I've ever done to you compares to condemning me to a singularity."

"I didn't exactly put a black cloth on my head and decree sentence, you know. I was trying to stop you committing genocide. I failed, didn't have time to work out how the device worked, guessed, and ended up making things worse. But yet again it was you who fashioned the rod then turned on your own back. It always is. If you'd just once accepted my help when I offered it..."

"I'm accepting it now!" The Master can feel it coming, the event horizon: the stretching, the freezing, the endless moment of attenuation. "Don't force me to go through this again, Doctor."

"No choice. We have to go back through this if we're to get where we're going. But you won't be alone this time, Master. I'll be with you all the way." Despite the Master's obscene appearance, his stink of the tomb, the Doctor kneels and wraps his arms around him, holding him tightly. "I'm with you."

The TARDIS is narrowing around them to a black-walled tunnel. The Master closes his eyes, finding it harder to breathe. It's so cold, the coldness of nothing: no life, no matter, no time. "I survived the first time by willpower alone. Willpower forged in my inexhaustible hatred for you, Doctor."

"This time we'll survive through love."

"Love conquers all? How tawdry and utterly predictable of you, Doctor. I can't love, remember? I can't damn well love!" The Master screams and keeps on screaming as regeneration begins to be flayed from him.

"I can love enough for both of us," the Doctor yells through the roar of the eternal moment, through the Master's everlasting scream. "All you need to do is let me." The Doctor's hands tighten further around the Master, who can feel warmth spreading out from the places they touch.

"Self-righteous bastard," the Master cries, tears freezing on his cheeks. But the Doctor's as good as his word, and the heat of life and love spreads through the Master, filling him somehow, saving him from the horror of the single dimension.

It's as if they're back in the Valiant again, and the Doctor's radiant with borrowed faith, his arms wrapped tight around the weeping Master, filling him with unwanted love and forgiveness. Only this time, the Master wants it, needs it more than any physical demand of his tortured body. He clings to the Doctor, his lifeline.

And then it's over.

They're back in the TARDIS... no, in his old TARDIS with the black décor and the filing cabinets full of data he stole from the Capitol. He straightens up, taking deep breaths as he recovers, and the Doctor pulls back a little.

"It's been some time since either of us saw this room," the Master says softly, stroking his beard as he considers it.
The Doctor nods, still crouching, his hands on the Master's knees. "Think we've maybe reached a point where you can control things. Are you all right? That wasn't exactly a fun ride on the old roller-coaster."

"Quite all right, thanks to you, Doctor." The Master smiles self-effacingly. "At least it was quick this time... or my experience of it was."

"Express route," the Doctor says, smiling gently.

Nodding, the Master says, "Tell me, if you would. Did you ever wonder why I chose the Utopian humans to be my army? It wasn't simply a matter of convenience or just to torture you, although they served well in both roles."

"I understood. Eventually." The Doctor puts his hand on the Master's knee. "You couldn't stand the idea of what they were facing at the end of the universe."

"Or failing to face. How could I not respect a will to survive so strong that they even tried to deny the end of time itself? I, who escaped a black hole on willpower alone. Poor unfortunate things, they were. They deserved some kind of consolation prize for trying so hard."

"But it wasn't right, was it? What you did," the Doctor says softly.

The Master puts his hand to the Doctor's face and smiles fondly. "You believe you can get me to admit that in this body, don't you?"

"You were a little more open to argument when you wore it," the Doctor says, smiling. "A smidgen."

"I suspect I could be made to admit it in any form now, Doctor, while the drums are quietened and my head's full of you and your sensibilities. What good would it do either of us if I did? It wouldn't be true regret." He pats the Doctor's cheek. "Shouldn't we be moving onwards?"

"Course." The Doctor stands and looks at the console island. "You're the designated driver now, I think."

The Master gets up, but turns instead to the filing cabinets. "Shall we see? If I am, then the path should run this way..." He walks around the row of cabinets, delighted to find another row behind it and more beyond that one, stretching back into library-like stacks. "Yes, Doctor! It's working. You should stay close now."

"Clever, Master," the Doctor says, catching up and putting a hand on the Master's back. "This should lead us to Gallifrey itself, shouldn't it?"

"And from there to the Untempered Schism, which is, I believe, where we both think the drums began. But let's not count our metaphors until they're shaped."

They traverse the maze of cabinets, following the Master's instinct as it's he who now seems to possess knowledge of the path. At some point they start holding hands, which causes the Master to chuckle softly when he realises it, but he just squeezes the Doctor's fingers and doesn't let go.

Eventually, they emerge into a dingy Gallifreyan archival chamber, full of dust and stifling tradition. "I wonder what this represents," the Master says, after ensuring there are no Time Lord shaped metaphors here other than themselves. "The stagnation and self-referential inversion we once ran from?"
The Doctor strokes a finger across a desktop, tasting the dust he gathers. "Or just old memories, seldom referenced."

The Master nods, acknowledging the point. He takes his TCE from his pocket; it's one of his earlier models now. "This way, Doctor. Please try not to feel distressed if I have to eliminate any citizens we might meet. I feel under no obligation to indulge such figments with conversation."

"Just remember you're destroying little bits of yourself every time you wield that weapon of yours."

"I believe I can live with the loss." The Master smiles companionably at the Doctor before opening the door.

To his mild surprise, it leads straight out into the Panopticon, which is thankfully empty of robed figures. Tall-ceilinged, tiered, and yet surprisingly small considering its import, walking inside it feels like visiting an antiquity, something of history long since passed... which, the Master supposes, is exactly what it is now to them both.

"At least there's no Daleks," the Doctor says, his mind taut with strong emotion.

The Master looks around at him. "I imagine the last time you were here wasn't unlike my own final visit." He can almost hear the screams of weapons charging the air, the dull thumps as bodies fell from above.

"We might only have missed each other by minutes. Seconds even."

"Working together, we could have stopped them, you know."

The Doctor snorts very softly. "Not by the end, but earlier, yeah. Maybe. Can't imagine either of us agreeing to an entrelacement at that point though, and without it, we could never have trusted each other enough. Not by that point in our mutual history. The days when any flimsy excuse would get us working together on a project again were long since gone."

"Too much spilt blood."

"An ocean between us." The Doctor places his hand on the Master's shoulder. "Thank you for running, at the end, for surviving."

The Master chuckles quietly. "Despite everything I've done to you and those you care about since?"

"Yeah. Despite that, thanks."

"You're quite welcome, Doctor. I'd like to say you can always rely on me to survive, but I'm uncertain about that currently."

Hmm, the Doctor's looking suspiciously damp around the eyes, no doubt getting sentimental about his role as the agent of genocide again. The Master may be currently expressing himself via an older edition, but he still has no patience with that sort of thing.

He pats the Doctor heartily on the back. "Come on. Let's get out of the Capitol. Too many ghosts here."

They make their way through the deserted corridors and byways of the Citadel, wondering aloud at the absence of Time Lords, neither sure what that means for the Master's mind. An air-locked tunnel takes them outside to a transit dock, equally uninhabited, so they decide to steal an aircar. The Master makes for the driver's seat, but the Doctor shakes his head.
"Nah. Better let me pilot this. Think about where we're going, and where you're most likely heading as a result."

"I've been able to fly one of these things virtually since looming," the Master points out, but he lets the Doctor take the wheel and moves around to the other side.

They cross the north west peninsula of Wild Endeavour, making straight for the Academy where it nestles into the slopes of the Hadria range. It doesn't take long to get there; the journey presumably having little significance in the metaphor. Neither of them speaks as they travel, and as the Master gets younger and younger. By the time they land in the forecourt outside the Applied Astroneurology building of Prydon College, he's back in the simple robes of the initiate and less than 100 years old.

"Oh dear," he says, looking down at his smooth-skinned hands. "I never thought I'd feel like this again."

"Full of the rush and fervour of youth?" the Doctor asks.

"Quite," he answers, sitting very still. "It's not all that pleasant."

"You always seemed to handle it well at the time. Better than me, anyway."

"I'm out of practice, I suppose. Come on then, Theta." He gets out of the aircar and stands staring at the edifice of their college buildings. "There are people in there," he says as the Doctor appears beside him. "Students and teachers. I can sense them."

"We don't need to see them. It's along the valley for us."

Koschei nods, but doesn't move. It takes the Doctor slipping his hand into Koschei's to get him to start walking. They head out of the campus and into the meadows of the surrounding valley. Tall grass surrounds them, and Koschei can't help but look about him, wondering if, somewhere in these grasses, two boys are playing hooky, discovering the joys of each other's bodies in the mottled shadows.

"Do you remember?" he asks, almost reverently. "Do you remember us?"

The Doctor's arm slips around Koschei's shoulders. "Never forgotten. Not ever. Not even when I dearly wanted to separate you from anything that might make my will weaken, make me too trusting or show too much mercy. I never, ever forgot."

"We had such plans. Nothing went to plan at all in the end."

The Doctor doesn't answer, but his hand squeezes Koschei's shoulder.

Koschei knows they're getting close when the grass starts to die back, bleaching of colour and life. What of it manages to survive is stunted and unhealthy; just being in the general environs of the Untempered Schism seems antithetical to life. He stops walking without intending to, not wanting to follow the track around the small drumlin ahead.

"Koschei?" the Doctor says gently.

"I don't want to go any further." He's a child now, his voice high, his robes catching around his feet.

The Doctor's eyes seem to well with sympathy. "Maybe you won't have to. Sit down here for now
and I'll go reconnoitre." He ruffles Koschei's rough cut hair. "Don't worry."

"I'm still me inside this infant's body," Koschei points out, ducking away from the ruffling hand, but the truth is he's fighting an urge to throw himself on the Doctor and cling. He swallows hard.

The Doctor smiles sadly. "Won't be long." He turns and heads onwards on his own.

Alone on the trail, Koschei drops to his knees in the dying grass. He rests his hands in his lap and hangs his head the way they were expected to as children when in the presence of those greater than themselves.

He watches insects crawl around in the dirt. The heat of the only sun risen beats on the back of his neck.

Eventually, he hears the Doctor returning, muttering to himself. He stops before Koschei, but Koschei doesn't look up, staring instead at the shimmering red material around the Doctor's feet. "I'm sorry," the Doctor says, "but I think you need to come see this."

"Why?" he hears his little boy voice ask.

"Because I need a second opinion. Hard to believe I'm seeing what I'm seeing to be honest."

Koschei slowly looks up, his gaze travelling steadily up the Doctor's body. "No, why are you wearing those robes?"

The Doctor looks down at himself in surprise. How he could have been unaware of the huge ceremonial collar blinkering his vision, Koschei isn't sure. The Doctor pulls at the draped material looking ever so slightly cross. "I suppose I'm the shoe-in for your initiation mentors. Thanks for that."

"They suit you," Koschei says, grinning cheekily, knowing that the Doctor never has felt comfortable with the pomp and circumstance of Time Lord tradition. "Hat looks really stupid though."

"Hope you never spoke to your real mentors like that."

"Do you want me to call you 'sir'?"

"No, I want you to come with me. Please." The Doctor holds out his long-fingered, adult hand, and Koschei takes it, standing up.

They walk down the curving trail. Around them, day darkens rapidly into night, and Koschei's grip on the Doctor's hand tightens.

He tries his best not to hang back. He keeps his back straight, head upright, much as he did the first time, the weight of tradition and expectation forming a brace for his spine and shoulders. It doesn't matter what he will see here. It doesn't matter how it will make him feel inside. All that's relevant is his visible reaction. He has to stand firm, show maturity and acceptance, no matter what else happens.

He has to be accepted into the Academy or else he'll never leave this hidebound planet, never be free amongst the stars. And Koschei dreams of stars.

Every night he flies amongst them, extant throughout time and space, a vast cosmic spirit of the universe, alive with joy and wonder and unrestrained by the petty concerns of Time Lords. His race
has forgotten who they are; their name has become a joke. That's what his father used to say, and he was right. What do Time Lords know of the glory of the heavens now? They who rarely venture beyond their covered domes, let alone out into the cosmos. They know nothing.

Only Koschei can see, Koschei and his best friend, Theta. Together they play in the starfields of their minds, rehearsing the day when the stars will be their playthings for real. And today is the start of that, the very base of the incline that will grow to the foothills that lead into the mountains, the tallest peaks of which touch the sky. He must not turn away.

As they circle the bend around the drumlin, the silver hoop of the Schism wheel becomes visible ahead, lit by the flames of braziers. Several Academy worthies wait for them there, in full Prydonian splendour; their flame-sharpened silhouettes seem huge and otherworldly against the backdrop of the darkest red sky.

His mentor tightens his grip upon Koschei's hand. Perhaps he's accustomed to novices showing fear at this first glimpse, but Koschei shows no fear. Head high, he walks with a pace fast enough to seem eager while not breaking the solemnity of the moment with unseemly haste.

As they get closer, he can see the ceaseless swirl of the Vortex inside the ring of validium and gold. He can hear its pulsating roar, not only with his ears, but with the imprimatur in every cell of his body. Rassilon's symbol marks the place where he's to stand. He knows this; he's been told.

The Vortex spirals away continuously, calling to him to follow, promising freedom beyond even his imagination of the word. He feels a hand on his back, gently pushing, and he walks forward, his eyes never leaving the darkly opalescent swirls.

'Come to me,' they whisper, words forming in the throb of the breach, like patterns found in random dots. 'Leave this world of the rock-bound and flesh-bound. Swim inside me, in my uncountable depths. Dance in my currents and sing with the choir extertemporal. I will swaddle you, my child, my beautiful child, in the silk of comet trails. I will fulfil all your dreams, my man, my hero. For I am the Dancer, the creator/destroyer, and I am all things. Come to me now and be mine for all time and all things in between.'

'Yes,' he cries out inside his mind. 'Yes, I'm coming!’ But he doesn't move. He can't move. What's wrong with his body; why won't it obey his commands? 'Let me come,' he begs. 'Why won't you let me?'

The Vortex corkscrews away, always away, always leaving him behind. 'All that's stopping you is your own fear, my blessed son, my chosen one. Let go of your fear. Let go of your flesh and be mine. Hear the beat of the hearts of the universe. Let your feet move in time, out of time and to me.'

So he tries. He tries so hard, his hearts beating strong and fast, synchronous with the pulse of the Vortex. He tries to strip himself of fear, to will his ties to his body to fray and break, but the harder he tries, the more solid the ground feels beneath his feet, the more distant the call of the Dancer, now mourning his failure and loss. No. He can't lose this chance. No!

He dives into his mind, searching out the things holding him here, to this world, to this oh so limited flesh, and he savages them, ripping them out by the root, tearing them into fragments. Love, family, hope and compassion are just the tools of enslavers, keeping him within the pen. All must go. He shreds every bond he's ever made to anyone else, all but one, and the Vortex feeds on the fragments, carrying them away as if they'd never been.

But still Koschei is anchored to the spot because that one tie remains, an umbilical cord fixing him in life, in fleshy mortality. Somehow, he can't bring himself to attack it. 'Let me go,' he cries out in
his mind, reaching out down the cord. 'Let me go!' 

'Koschei?' comes back to him faintly. 'What's wrong? What's happening?'

'Let me go! You have to let me go! She's leaving without me. The window... the window's closing. Let me go with her, Theta. Please. Let me go.'

'Never!' the single word is much stronger and full of the authority of age. That's not his friend, but it is. Oh, it is.

Koschei feels himself being pulled backwards, away from the Schism. He's turned around so he can no longer see it with his eyes, but that doesn't matter. She's in his head now where she will never leave. She's not giving up on him, the Dancer, the singer, the siren of the wheel. She'll fill his mind with the rhythm of spacetime until he finally finds a way to let go of all this useless flesh and feeling and go with her, dancing the cosmic dance by her side.

Something shakes his body. "Koschei? Master! Come back to me right now!"

He feels his head tip back and jolt about as his body's shaken, but he can't see anything but the Vortex, spiralling away from him, always away, ceaseless and indisputable.

No, there is something else to be witnessed. Something once small and quiescent that's now growing fast, like wildfire spreading from a careless match. It swells and expands, crackling and hissing, covering all it touches until it towers over him. You are MINE. the fire claims, rife and fierce and alive. Alive like the heart of a sun, like the roar of the storm, like the imprimatur lurking in all their cells, informing them of just how much more they are than the sum of their genes.

And it, this fire, is inside Koschei, co-existing with the Dancer, balancing her, holding her back, keeping Koschei bound to life.

It's the one thing he can't let go... never could let go of, no matter how much they flailed at each other like cats tied at the tail. "Doctor," he whispers, his throat raw. "Doctor."

"Master. Master, look at me. Be with me."

He forces his neck muscles to work and straightens his head, trying to focus. He's half-lying on the ground, his shoulders lifted by the fierce grip of the Doctor. He thinks he's back in his current regeneration again. Feels like it, anyway. "Weak..." he manages to say. "She took so much..."

"Yeah. That's why you feel so empty when left alone. Can see it now. This thing's in your head, sucking away everything you are, all the time, taking everything you feel and desire and are except the urge to conquer and destroy. It doesn't seem to want them."

"Not everything. You stay. You're here, no matter what. You won't let the Dancer take me."

"Dancer?"

"Her, the Vortex, the drums. She calls to me. She never stops calling me, Doctor, but you won't let me go." Shouldn't he feel something when he says that? Regret or relief or something? He feels nothing at all.

He finds himself crushed against the Doctor's chest. "Never. Mine's the prior claim." The Doctor's out of his Prydonian robes now; the Master feels the roughness of the suit jacket against his cheek. "Never letting you go."
"Yeah, you said. Gods, I feel weird. Do you feel weird?"

"Yeah, but not as much as you, I imagine. We should leave here, get away from its... from her influence."

The Master nods against the Doctor's chest, but then he hesitates. "Let me look with modern eyes. I'm not a child anymore."

"I'm not sure I should let you. Nearly lost you there before I realised the danger."

"The one thing she's never taken from me is you. Only you have the power to do that."

He struggles to his feet and turns around, facing the wheel of the Schism. The other Time Lords are gone now, as have the braziers. It's day, and the swirling Vortex inside the metal ring seems somehow a little faded in the sunlight. It's still far too real and multidimensional to be a simple memory, however. He stares, feeling blank.

"It's really it, isn't it? The real Untempered Schism. In my head. Is that even possible?"

"Shouldn't be," the Doctor says beside him. "Apparently is."

"I've given her so much, tribute after tribute, without ever realising I was doing it."

"Because you love the burning-ground, I've made a burning-ground of my heart. That you, dark one, hunter of the burning-ground, may dance your eternal dance."

The Master screws up his face. "What?"


The Master decides he doesn't need to even try to understand any of that. "How can I have the Untempered Schism in my head, Doctor? Tell me. Please tell me."

"I would if I had the answer, Master. I don't. We've got to find it though, that answer. Have to get this out of you."

"That's Rassilon's ubiquitous symbol in front of the Schism. Do you think he built it?"

"The wheel? Yeah, seems likely, doesn't it? Even without his mark, it would have the feel of all his great deeds. Ooh, I remember one teacher telling me a theory the Schism was some kind of counterweight to the Eye. Nah, not a counterweight, a release valve. Like a spillway in a reservoir allowing water to escape when there's too much of it about."

"Makes sense, but how's it connected? Are there channels beneath the ground?"

The Doctor shrugs. "There's not exactly blueprints to study. It's one of the many wonders of antiquity that our stagnating elders successfully converted from science to futile mysticism."

"But it's not out there on New Gallifrey, is it?"

"Dunno. Well, it can't be if Rassilon built it."

"Can we dismantle it, Doctor? This one in my head. Can we? What d'you think?"

The Doctor turns and takes hold of the Master's shoulders, looking at him carefully. "Isn't it the
wheel that keeps the Vortex tethered? Keeps it safe?"

The Master lifts an eyebrow. "Tethered maybe, but it was hardly safe for me, was it? Look at it, Doctor. Does it ever stop moving away? I'm not tied to the Vortex; it's tied to me by Rassilon's damn wheel."

"So we dismantle the wheel, if we can, to exorcise the Vortex from your head? Will it go though? What's to stop it whipping around in here causing untold damage?"

"You? It'd suit you anyway, the role of exorcist. Ooh yes, I can see it, Doctor. Can't you see it? All you need is the dog collar. You've got the sanctified ever-so-holy thing down pat already." The Master smiles provocatively at the Doctor, feeling a little more like himself now. "I promise not to let my head spin around or to do dodgy things with crucifixes."

The Doctor seems uncertain. "You really think I have the power to remove that?" he says, waving a hand vaguely in the direction of the Schism but not taking his gaze from the Master, who nods seriously.

"If all this metaphor bollocks has taught me anything today, it's that. Isn't it that? You're the reason I'm still alive, Doctor. You've always been the reason, for better or worse, that I survive."

The Doctor's uncertain smile now seems to be trying hard not to become a grin. He tugs the Master to him and presses a kiss on his mouth. "For better or worse?"

"It wasn't a proposal, you sap." The Master laughs and then adds magnanimously, "Oh, go on. Feel smug. I'll allow it this once."

The kiss lasts longer this time. So much longer, the Master's starting to wonder if they'll end up shagging in the shadow of the Untempered Schism. There would be a metaphor for them both to savour, all right.

But eventually the Doctor pulls back, stroking the Master's face lightly with his fingers before turning aside. "Right. Better at least try this before we run out of steam. You gonna be okay going close again?"

"I think so. She... it's been a lot quieter since I, er, grew up again. You've quelled her somehow. Ooh, I'd hate to do this outside the Zero Room though."

"Yeah."

Hesitantly, they approach the wheel. The Master makes a point of keeping his gaze on the metal rather than the Vortex it frames. "If you're the exorcist, I'm the engineer." He puts his hand into his pocket and feels the reassuring shape of his laser screwdriver. "Excellent."

The main structure is, as he suspected, solid validium, which explains a lot. It may even start to explain what it's doing in his head. He strokes his fingers over it, wondering if the sentient metal likes its task or would prefer another. "Seductive stuff, this," he comments aloud.

"Dangerous," the Doctor replies. He's standing in front of the Schism, staring into it and frowning. "Stole some once, from Gallifrey's stockpile."

"Did you? What a naughty boy you really are, Doctor. We've so much more in common than you ever used to want to admit."

The wheel's crenelated, the embrasures filled with hollow wedges of gold. Presumably the metal's
conductive nature, or perhaps its excellent ductility, is important to the function of the biomechanics lurking within. He runs his laser tool over the edges, where gold meets validium, and he's surprised by how easily they separate.

Carefully sliding the golden cover out from the wheel, the Master says, "I wonder if any of the old fogies back home ever tried this?"

"Nah, would've been sacrilege. Ignorance was bliss, far as they were concerned. Great attitude for teachers, that."

Looking over at the Doctor, the Master is startled to see a pair of those cardboard 3D glasses from Earth balanced on his nose. "Um... expecting some big saurian to poke its head out at you and snap its teeth?"

"Checking for void stuff."

"In my head?"

"Didn't say I found any." The Doctor grins at him and replaces the glasses with his more normal ones. "Just playing safe. Trying to work out how to play Father whatsisname for you. Tell me about your Dancer?"

The subject makes him uneasy enough to step back from the wheel. "She's not mine. If anything, I'm hers."

"Nah, you can't be that. You're mine. Prior claim, like I told you. She's got no custody rights."

"What am I? A child from a broken home?" He thinks for a second and then adds, "Don't answer that."

"Tell me about her. D'you reckon she's real or just a way your mind chose to conceptualise what happened to you?"

The Master thinks hard about that one, shutting his eyes. "I think... real. Maybe. Hard to be sure as I'd forgotten about her until today and yet now my head seems full of her song, as if I've always heard it. Well, I suppose I did, but my conscious mind heard only drums." Is he really remembering or just imagining remembering? That sort of question is exactly why he hates mindscapes. Dreamscapes. Whatever. "She feels real in the same way Kronos did, so an anthropomorphised power, maybe. Remember Kronos?"

"I remember you begging to be saved from her," the Doctor says wryly.

"Oh, you would remember that bit." The Master shakes his head. "I suppose my utter genius, up until you buggered everything up, completely passed you by?"

"I remember you flirting with the queen too."

"I did a lot more than flirt, Doctor. Ooh, so very much more."

"I'm sure."

The Master chuckles. "That was my real crime in your eyes during that particular adventure of ours, wasn't it? Go on. Admit it."

The Doctor doesn't seem to want to look at him. "To get back to the actual subject at hand, the
Still smirking a little, the Master gives the Doctor what he wants. "The creator/destroyer, she calls herself. If I had to give her a descriptive name, it would be 'change'. Evolution, growth, mutability: all that sort of thing. The opposite of structure and stability."

"Neither side of the scales is much fun on its own. Need both to make a proper universe. So is she a chronovore like Kronos?"

The Master shrugs. "Maybe. How would I know? Doesn't she talk to you at all, Doctor, when you look into the Vortex?"

"Nope. Though seeing as I can only hear the drums through you, I suppose if I looked into the Vortex through your eyes then maybe. Bit risky though."

"Too risky. She might take us both."

"Don't think she wants me, Master. So if she's change, how best to fight her?"

"With constancy and structure, of course."

"Suddenly your control obsession makes so much sense."

"Oh, shut up. We're so absolutely, definitely going into the murky depths of your head just as soon as we have time." The Master's expression is sour. He looks back at the wheel; if metals can truly be thought of as mutable, then gold and validium fit the overly expensive bill. "You need the opposite of the wheel really, a weapon or defence based on inflexible properties, hard inviolate rules. Crystals are good for their rigid molecular structure; the less ductility the better. Something powerfully durable, unchanging, and... oh fuck."

"Hmm?" The Doctor looks over at him.

The Master gives him a slanted smile, not at all unaware of the really rather ridiculous levels of irony coming his way. "We need something unchanging, Doctor. Something unaffected by flux or entropy."

The Doctor straightens, his mouth falling open as he waves a frantic finger at the Master and makes consonant-free noises.

Sighing heavily, the Master squeezes the handle of his laser screwdriver, looking for comfort in its solidity. He's starting to believe in karma, and he doesn't like it one bitter-and-twisted little bit. "I'll just be getting on with the dismantling while you prepare me my lovely, artery-clogging, diabetic-shock-inducing humble pie, shall I?"

"Oh Master, I'm so sorry," the Doctor manages, but he's clearly delighted by the brick wall into which they've just slammed head first. "I'll do my best to negotiate a ceasefire for the duration, but you'll have to make a superlative effort too, you know."

"Just get on the phone to Mr Impossible. Let me worry about my behaviour, eh?"

With another sigh, he returns to the wheel, examining the revealed biomesh with the sensors in his screwdriver. He shuts his ears to the Doctor and concentrates all his formidable powers of focus onto the work at hand.

At a less tense time, he'd rather enjoy this. He's always felt an affinity for Rassilon and his
achievements. Having had his hands on more than one of the great Time Lord's infamous gadgets over the years, the Master's developed a sense of how Rassilon preferred to work. His approach, which to lesser minds might've seemed about as logical as a muslin umbrella, was in fact highly methodical and progressive.

It doesn't take the Master long to realise that the intricate multidimensional web of cellular gold fibre, over which validium-based nanites swarm like microscopic ants, has a single primary purpose, one which he's already intuited in fact. That is, to act as flexible tethers for the spacetime vortex.

This means he doesn't have to dismantle the wheel, just destroy the tethering meshworks under each gold casing. Oh, that's going to hurt, vandalising such superior tech. Outside his head, he'd attempt to maintain the internal integrity of the mesh while excising it from the wheel, to allow for later cannibalisation, but he supposes there'd be no point in that here.

He's still not sure exactly what the wheel is in his mind. The Vortex is real, but Rassilon's wheel has to be made of, well, just the stuff of thought, surely. Thought well-formed enough to tether something impossible inside his mind. Oh, really, he's not going to be able to make sense of this any time soon.

He twists at his laser screwdriver, setting it high enough to melt gold, and extends the head, pointing it at the exposed network. Then he hesitates. He's not at all sure of the melting point of validium, and he really doesn't want an army of angry nanites on his hands... or on any other part of him for that matter.

What would the Doctor do? Work with the paradigm, that's what. Right, swarms of tiny semi-living devices on an intricate web. He doesn't need a laser; he needs insecticide.

As soon as he thinks it, he feels the laser tool change in his hands, widen and gain weight. He looks down to see a can of Raid in his grip, and he laughs, calling out, "Getting the hang of the metaphor now. Aren't you proud?" He looks over at the Doctor. "Ah," he says, his good spirits deflating. "Hello, Captain. So good of you to come to the party. Did you bring a bottle?"

Jack looks sour and doesn't answer, turning back to the Doctor, who frowns at the Master.

Oh, consider what he could have said! Exasperated, the Master turns back to the wheel and starts spraying Raid liberally over the biomesh. There's an inappropriate 'thunk' noise, like a tumbler falling in a giant lock, as the golden mesh coagulates together into a lump of dull metal alloy. The hiss of the Vortex grows suddenly louder, and the Master takes an inadvertent step back.

"Don't do any more yet," the Doctor says, striding over. "Not 'til we're ready." He frowns at the Vortex. The Master's still carefully standing to one side of the wheel so he can't see it.

Jack walks over and stands by the Doctor. "Looks familiar. If not for the whole suffocation issue, I could've enjoyed my trip on the outside of the TARDIS. Well, suffocation and the fear of falling off. Didn't fancy floating around in there for all eternity."

"Rather lucky you waited to die 'til we got to Malcassairo then," the Doctor comments.

"I can, ah, hold it off sometimes, when I need to, like with the sted radiation."

"Yeah. That was odd to watch, all right." The Doctor turns his head to smile at Jack, and the Master carefully turns his frown upside-down just in case anyone bothers to look in his direction.

"Do you have an idea of what you want me to do here?" Jack asks.
"You're here as the representative of law and order, Captain," the Master replies, even though Jack clearly wasn't asking him. "When I untie all these guy ropes, the Vortex will break free. It may or may not be embodied by a... by something called the Dancer. Whether it is or not, you need to force control on the Vortex and persuade it to leave my head."

"Doctor?" Jack says, not looking at the Master.

"What he said," the Doctor tells him. "Remember, this is a zone where metaphor shapes reality. You can use it, if you understand it. You're a fact, Jack, irrevocable and absolute, and in here that's even more powerful than out there in the physical world."

"Oh, just think of the wonderful opportunity for revenge this offers, Captain," the Master hears himself saying. So much for good intentions.

But Jack just looks at him and actually smiles. "I think I'll content myself with the warming sensation of being so much better than you. That and a good-sized scoop of smug."

"You've earned it," the Master says peaceably. Now that was better. The Doctor must be pleased with that sentence at least.

Jack shrugs, looking a little surprised at the Master's reply. He turns back to the Doctor. "I'll do my best. For you."

"Appreciated, Jack. I'll do whatever I can to help."

Assuming he can now continue, the Master returns to the side of the wheel and removes the next gold cover. A quick spray of Raid later and the Vortex is that little bit louder again. Did he imagine that hiss of 'no' amongst the pulsing white noise?

He continues on, each biomesh he melts ending in a clunk, and the Vortex roar becoming louder and more drum-like in its rhythm. The Doctor and Jack remain in front of the Vortex, staring into it. The Doctor's eyes are focused deep within the spirals, his expression disturbed. Jack just looks resolute and defiant, hands on his hips. It's his default mode during dangerous situations, the Master suspects.

He finishes the side he's on and walks wide around the other two to get to the other side where he starts work again. "Like it or not, Captain, we don't seem to be able to escape each other's presence in our lives. Random chance or deeper reason, which do you think?" He means it just as casual conversation, a diversion from what he's doing as it's getting tougher as he goes on, but it's an interesting subject anyway.

"The same reason I can appear in your headspace, I guess," Jack says. "We're linked via the Doctor."

For a horrified fraction of a moment, the Master believes Jack means he's entrelaced with the Doctor too. Then common sense wakes up and points out that Jack's no doubt referring to the earpiece the Doctor's taken to wearing in the real world that connects him to Jack's headset across time and space. Paranoia then joins the discussion, insinuating that such a high spec technological link isn't that different from an entrelacement.

Fortunately for all, common sense counters paranoia with a trump card. All that matters right now is not winding up the obliging immortal who's meant to be saving the Master from something that may be cosmic oneness with the universe, but more likely involves featuring large on the menu for a chronovore tonight.
The Master nods silently at Jack, not trusting anything that might come out of his mouth currently. He's leaning on the wheel, and looking at his hand now, he's alarmed to see it tapping out a rhythm. *The rhythm.* "Doctor..."

"I see it." The Doctor comes closer and stands behind the Master, wrapping his arms around him. The compulsion to tap fades, and the Master sighs softly. The Doctor rests his chin on the Master's shoulder and asks, "Don't suppose I can persuade you to let me do this, can I?"

It's tempting to let him, really tempting, but, "I think the metaphor wants me to, don't you?"

"Yeah. You're right, much better if you do it yourself. Don't hesitate to ask for help though. I think accepting help's all right."

"Just stay where you are and I'll be fine."

He removes the next cover and lifts his can of Raid. It's not so heavy now, and he hopes he'll have enough to complete the job. He squirts at the biomesh and almost drops the can when he hears the words *"Come to me!'* like surfers on the top of the wave of noise from the Vortex. *'Come to me now, before it's too late!'*

He shudders and closes his eyes. "Did you hear that? The voice in the roar?" he asks a little plaintively. "Or is it just there for me?"

"No voice here," Jack answers.

"I, er... maybe," the Doctor says, close to the Master's ear. "There's... something. What's it saying to you?"

The Master closes his eyes, leaning forward and resting his forehead on the cool validium. "It wants me. It wants me to stop. It wants me to... jump."

The Doctor's arms tighten.

"Do you want to?" Jack asks.

"Yes," the Master answers without thinking, only to find himself being hauled away fast from the wheel, his heels dragging in the dead grass. "No, Doctor, no! Not without you." He attempts to struggle round in the fierce hold enclosing him. "Don't worry. You mustn't worry. Not without you, yes? Not without you?"

The Doctor's breathing heavily and doesn't answer. His grip's threatening the Master's ribs.

"Doctor?" Jack asks, casting them both a nervous look.

Slowly the grip relaxes enough for the Master to turn and face the Doctor, who's looking decidedly upset. What did he hear in the Master's voice that frightened him so? The Master runs a finger over the Doctor's left temple, feeling his way into the Doctor's panic and trying to calm it. "Silly. Haven't you learnt anything from our adventures today?"

"Uh, Doctor?" Jack tries again.

"Never ever do that again," the Doctor tells the Master, his voice raw and fierce.

"Do what? I only meant I felt a temptation to jump, not that I was about to do it."

"That's not true. I could feel it in you. The pull. You were going to do it."
"I was not!" Was he? No, he damn well wasn't.

"Doctor!" Jack's starting to sound cross.

"Master, I felt it in you. It was the same as when you refused to regenerate. Exactly the blimin' same. You wanted an end."

"No."

"Yes."

"No! Why would I want an end when I've finally got you where I want you, Doctor? When despite a temporary setback currently, our plans for New Gallifrey are really happening? Drums aside, this is the best time I've had for centuries. Seriously! Why would I want to end it? Tell me."

"Because you're afraid of what'll happen if you ever lose what you've now got, and you feel sure that you will. You already have once, briefly. How much safer, how much easier, just to give up now? Make sure I'm the bereaved one, and you're free of everything. No more pain, no more striving."

"Oh, bollocks, Doctor. Sheer, unadulterated bollocks. I'm the survivor, remember? I always survive. Who else has escaped a black hole?"

"Master, I felt it."

"Indigestion!"

"Master..."

"Oh for..." There's a loud roar of complaint to the side of them. "If one of you two Time Lords doesn't pay attention to me, right now, we'll all be free of everything!"

Finally, they both look over at Jack, who's staring in obvious alarm at the Schism. The Vortex is bulging out of the wheel, herniating into the Master's dreamscape.

"Don't like the look of that," the Doctor says. Who would? What's worrying the Master most is the way the bulge seems to be reaching towards him.

"Get further back, you two," Jack orders in full 'officer' mode.

The Master finds himself being dragged back again, but this time he digs in his heels. "No. What am I? The screaming heroine with a twisted ankle? I refuse to be a passive observer in my own rescue."

"I'm not letting you near that," the Doctor tells him. "It wants you."

"It can't take me unless I let it."

"And you know that how?"

"I just know. I've lived with this all my life. Let me go."

The arms around him become clamp-like again. "No way."

"Come with me then?" The Master scrapes his nails over his head, trying to separate his thoughts from the Doctor's fervency and panic. "Let me finish what I started, Doctor. We can't get rid of it
while it's still tied to me. Let me."

With obvious reluctance, the Doctor relaxes his hold just enough for them both to shuffle forward. They must look ridiculous, and normally, the Master would be irritated as hell by that. He's not sure why he isn't.

As they get close to the wheel, the bulge strains towards him like a reaching hand. Jack immediately steps forward, placing himself between the Vortex and the Master. The bulge seems to shy back, away from Jack, like one magnet repelled by another. Jack chuckles and steps further forward, herding the Vortex back into the wheel. He stands there, making a barricade of himself, legs and arms spread, hands on the wheel.

"Impressive," the Master comments, mildly amused by how calm he seems to sound despite the confusing mess of feelings in his head, many of which are not his. "Well done, Captain."

"I live to serve," Jack says sardonically.

Deciding on a slightly altered routine, the Master decides to remove all the remaining gold covers before spraying again. This means he'll be able to Raid the last few biomeshes all at once, which may be the only way he can do this at all, considering how much louder the throb of the Vortex becomes with each broken fetter, and therefore, how much harder it becomes to concentrate.

'Child of mine, come. Let go of all this pain and futility. Come join the dance of constellations, of matter and void, of time and flux and all things.'

The Doctor hisses. "I can hear it."

"So I'm not completely bonkers then?" the Master says dryly. "That's encouraging. She paints a pretty picture, doesn't she?"

"Yeah, best take on suicide I've heard for a while. It's still death though, still the end."

Would it be? Or simply the beginning of a new existence? The Master's not sure how long his consciousness could survive the unravelling of his body. He's done it before, but only very briefly. But he also survived an event horizon through strength of will alone, so who knows?

Hell, look at Rassilon. The man's living consciousness seemed separate from his undying body when they visited his supposed 'tomb'. Having been knocked on the head at the time, slipping in and out of consciousness, the Master's memories of the encounter are sketchy, but he remembers that. And didn't he read that Omega made himself a god in a negative universe purely by willpower and a refusal to die?

"I like you in a body," the Doctor says very quietly. "I like you with me. Please stay, Master."

"I'm going nowhere without you." The Master removes the last cover. "Are you ever going to believe that?"

"I'd like to. Help me?"

"Just hold me tight as I do this. It blocks out most of the... persuasion."

As the Master raises his can of Raid, he feels the Doctor's muscles tense, ready for action. He sees Jack brace himself too, and then, after giving the can a good shake, he starts to spray, moving up and down over the revealed biomeshes.
Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk. Tumblers fall into place; then everything seems to happen at once.

The roar of the Vortex is so loud it becomes physical, knocking the Master and Doctor backwards to the ground...

Jack's grip on the wheel suddenly breaks, and he flies backwards through the air with a wordless yell, flying far before landing in a broken heap on the grass...

The Vortex spills out of the wheel like a viscous liquid and starts spreading through the dreamscape...

'Come with me!' the Dancer screams. 'It's now or never! Don't deny your destiny, my child. Don't deny me. I who chose you. I who waited for you. Come now or never dream again!'

"Leave him alone!" the Doctor yells into the cacophony. "He's mine. You'll never have him!"

The Master feels like he's a child again, standing on Rassilon's seal and yearning to be free of everything mundane, fleshy, predictable and painful, yet unable to move.

"No! Jack, get up!" The Doctor desperately scrambles to his feet and starts dragging the Master backwards again. It's slow progress as the Master doesn't seem to be able to do much more than reach his hand out, staring at the fluctuating shapes the Vortex stuff makes. Sometimes he sees wings, sometimes something both noble and bestial, like a roaring lion. "Jack!" the Doctor yells again.

'Come with me!' the Vortex conglomeration roars, surging towards the Master.

"Why?" the Master hears himself ask. "Why should I?"

'Because you're mine and have always been mine. You have worn my mark, my promise, since your infancy. Now is the time to take your destined path. Dance with me.' It towers over him, but, he notices, doesn't touch him.

He tries and fails to escape the Doctor's grip long enough to stand up. "And if I refuse?"

'You cannot refuse.'

"Ooh, you know, I think I can? I'm not a child anymore, and I know what you are. Things like you eat things like me. Doctor, for the love of Rassilon, Omega and all the rest of those old bastards, will you stop dragging at me!"

"No," the Doctor says, fire in his voice. "You're mine, and you're staying mine." His volume increases as he yells, "Jack! Please, for my sake, please wake up!"

A proud eagle-like head appears in the chaotic shape and says to the Master, 'You are confused.'

"Oh, I am, am I?" The Master finally manages to stand though the Doctor's still pulling him backwards. "That's strange as I'm feeling clearer every second. I name you 'chronovore'. I know your kind."

A laugh like a crescendo of tubular bells resounds though his mind. 'You do not have the first concept of what your kind trivialises with that name. As if all we are is what we consume as fuel. I offer the chance to be my consort, little Time Lord. Power and freedom beyond your wildest dreams as even your dreams are stunted by the fetters of your putrefying flesh. Be unbound by time or space. Be free. Dance with me.'
The Master screws up his face. "Why? If you're so bloody brilliant, why the hell do you want limited, putrefying little me to butter your bread?"

The chronovore swoops forward, sprouting bulges, prongs and feather-like appendages, and then reabsorbing them just as quickly. It stops just in front of the Master's face and forms one of its own to say, 'Because of your capacity, your potential, your innate talent. Free of flesh, you could be a god, little Koschei, a god amongst gods. Such is your genius. Dance with me.'

Oh, this beast knows him too well, knows exactly what to say to appeal most, and there has to be something to the spin, even if only the barest sliver of truth. If all it wanted was a quick snack, the Master would be long gone by now. He smiles broadly at it. "Do you know, I've always been a good dancer? I've got a natural sense of rhythm. Almost as if I have my own drum section in my head, isn't it?" He laughs loudly and then sticks his face forward so he's nose to nose with the creature. "You're not convincing me, you know."

It roars, spreading up, out, and around him as if it intends to consume him anyway.

Suddenly, the Master feels himself propelled backwards, landing on his arse yet again, and he looks up to see the Doctor, defiant and yet clearly terrified, disappearing under a gloopy mess of Vortex.

"No!" the Master yells, horrified. He scrabbles to his feet and runs headlong at the Dancer. "Let him go!" He slams into the vortex-stuff and feels it burning his skin as he rips and tears at it, trying to find the solid flesh of the Doctor within its oozing mutability. "Give him back, you transcendent vermin!"

'He's yet living,' the Dancer says, trying to move as much of itself as it can away from the Master's attack. 'I'll release him once you accept your destiny."

"Blackmail?" the Master asks disbelievingly, not pausing in his attack. "What you offer me is so superdooperly wonderful you have to resort to blackmail to get me to agree? Let him go and then I'll think about it."

In the corner of his eye, he's aware of movement from further away from the Schism wheel. He carefully doesn't look that way and concentrates on shredding vortex with his increasingly bloody hands.

The amorphous creature oozes back towards the wheel, retreating it seems. 'I go now. I must dance. Either you dance at my side, or I'll take this precious Doctor of yours and consume his history, from the moment he was loomed to his last glimpse of you before I stole him away.'

"Oh, Dancer, you silly, silly thing. You really don't know much about the psychology of us mere fleshy types, do you? You've just lost all credibility." The Master heaves in the deepest breath he can manage and throws himself forward, diving into the syrupy heart of the creature and feeling an exultant thrill as his arms close around a solid form within it.

Of course, now the chronovore has them both...

He can see nothing but vortex, hear nothing but the pounding of the drums. He feels the clothes dissolving from his body, his skin soon to follow, but he can also feel the Doctor, solid and real, and having located his face, the Master presses a kiss tight onto the Doctor's mouth in order to share the air he took in.

'You fool,' the Doctor says mentally, his thoughts desperate and hopeless. 'What are you doing?'
'Shut up and be saved,' the Master sends back tartly.

'Saved? You've just doomed yourself with me!'

'Hmm, nope. Silly old Dancer here, who can't stay in this dreamscape much longer, can't take me with her unless I agree to go, and I don't. You hear that, you bastard of flux and chaos? I won't go with you. My decision's to stay flesh.' He tightens his hold on the Doctor.

A clarion peel, metallic and coming from all directions at once, threatens to overwhelm him. 'Then you shall die with your Doctor!' the chronovore cries. 'Oh yes, my clever and ungrateful child, I can't make you join the dance; you have to be willing, but I can merely consume you whenever I wish.'

Oops. The Master may, just may, have failed to take into account one small but very important factor in his calculations.

He can feel the vortex-stuff moving around him, knows they're being carried through the wheel to the Vortex proper. He crushes the Doctor to him, telling him, 'At least we die together. No one gets to be the one left to mourn. Not a bad non-zero sum for you, is it? Could be worse?'

'Could be a lot worse,' the Doctor replies faintly. His grip on the Master is very weak now.

Then suddenly there's a scream from the Dancer and a lightning bolt in the darkness. Lightning that doesn't fade. The Master can see his dreamscape outside through a tear in the blackness, and he surges towards it, dragging the Doctor with him.

There's another lightning flash and another. The Dancer screams and screams. The Master uses all the strength he has left to propel himself and the Doctor free of the creature's body.

They collapse to the dead grass, and the Master looks up. Jack is battling the chronovore with a huge crystalline sword, looking for all the world like some mythic hero and laughing. The Dancer's losing; that's obvious enough, the stuff of its body hanging in shreds and unable to reform as it's backed into Rassilon's wheel.

The ending comes so quickly now that it's almost an anticlimax. The Dancer screeches horribly and disappears inside the wheel, and then the wheel itself disappears as if it had never been there.

The grass they lie on is suddenly long and lustrous red.

Jack stalks over, his sword resting flat on his shoulder. "You two all right there?"

The Doctor stirs beneath the Master, managing, "We're good, just a little frayed around the edges."

The Master helps the Doctor sit up, happy to note that they are both dressed and unscalded now that the Schism has gone. "You were pretty magnificent there, Captain," he says. "I was impressed. Oh, and nice weapon!"

"I've been told that before." Jack chuckles then hefts his sword. "Diamond and steel, the two most orderly substances I could think of. Your flexible friend didn't seem to like it much. Sorry I was late into the fray; it took me a little while to find my way back here after unexpectedly dying. Not so simple as just finding my body it seems."

"You did brilliantly, Jack," the Doctor says. "Saved us both and got rid of the drums for good. You were amazing."
The Master wouldn't mind a little of that praise too. It's not that Jack doesn't deserve plenty, but surely he deserves a little too. After all, it's not exactly in his nature to play hero. Of course, they're only having this adventure in the first place in order to save him. He decides to be properly thankful and not worry about anything else. Beaming magnanimously at Jack, he says, "I think you can allow yourself more than just a scoop of smug now, Captain. I doubt anyone will complain if you eat the whole pot."

Jack snorts and actually looks a little embarrassed and 'aw shucks'y, which is, the Master's rather alarmed to note, quite a cute look for the man.

"Right," the Master says, drawing himself to his feet before helping the Doctor up. "Time we got conscious again, I think. Don't you?" He turns to Jack. "I know you did it for the Doctor. I don't know what effect getting rid of the drums will have on me beyond the obvious end to cathartic bouts of torture. We all agree that's a good one though, don't we? Let's hear it for the torture-free! Anyway, don't think I'm not grateful for what you did here today. What my gratitude means I've no clue; it rarely amounted to much before. But now we'll see. Thank you."

Jack nods seriously. "I appreciate you saying it." He shares out a smile between the Master and the Doctor. The Doctor gets the larger portion, but that's fair enough. "I better get back to my team. When I left them, Owen was about to dissect a luminous green pod that fell through the Rift last night. What's the betting it's an eggcase for a destructive parasitical alien and not a gigantic sugarsnap peapod?"

"I wouldn't give good odds," the Doctor says smiling. He's leaning heavily on the Master, but seems otherwise well. "Let me know if you need help with it."

Jack nods, salutes, and then disappears from the dreamscape.

"We should get to Brax and Romana now." the Doctor says wearily.

"You need a rest first," the Master says firmly. He could do with one himself, in truth.

"We'd better check on them first at least." The Doctor turns to face the Master and strokes his face, smiling. "We did it. No more drums."

The Master presses into the stroking fingers. "Who'd have thought I've been carrying around a link to a chronovore all my life? She's been riding me like a lamprey on a shark."

"You should start to fill up now, with all that stuff she's been feeding on all this time. It's going to be strange for you for a few months. All sorts of feelings and reactions you're not used to."

"You'll look after me, I'm sure." The Master grins, biting his lower lip.

"Wouldn't have it any other way."
"So." Braxiatel, a tall sallow man in this regeneration, looks down his Roman nose at the Master. "Are we to believe that all your misdeeds of the past were due to, or at least strongly influenced by, the actions of this chronovore?"

"Yes," says the Doctor, firmly.

"No," says the Master equally as firmly. "I've thought a lot about this as, do you know, it's really rather important to me? Isn't that surprising?" He offers a slanted smile. "The Dancer chose me because she saw something in me that all you boring stick-in-the-mud types lack. Something unique. Oh, but if it makes you happier to believe that I was only ever her puppet, by all means, go ahead. Make the most of it while you still can." He gestures with his hand, giving largesse to the needy.

"Thank you, Mr Saxon," the Doctor says dryly.

The three of them and Romana are enjoying a break from loom maintenance in the adjoining lab, drinking 21st century Earth single-estate Java. The coffee beans have been provided by Jack, along with quite a few other items of essential groceries, such as the much-needed lube, and wasn't that big of him? Laudable. Positively laudable.

It's the first chance the New Gallifreyans have had for a relaxed chat since the Doctor and Master emerged exhausted from the Zero Room two days ago. The Doctor's sitting on the edge of his desk, the Master's standing beside him, their legs touching.

The Master chuckles and looks down with false modesty. "Oh, perhaps there are a few things I wouldn't have done quite the same way without her encouragement, especially recently. But I would never have felt obliged to obey any rules but my own." He looks up and grins around the room, holding his arms out. "After all, mine are the only ones that make any sense!"

"Ah, it's amateur dramatics hour again. How I've missed it since the last bulletin." Braxiatel has a way with words. Or rather he has his way with words, generally roughly and from behind.

Romana nods at the Master from her chair opposite, apparently taking him seriously despite the supposed dramatics. "I agree. You could never have been anything but a rebel or a leader in your own right. A little like the Doctor in that respect." She stops and seems to consider her words. "Although the Doctor has always done everything in his power to avoid a leadership role. Until now."

The Doctor makes a noise in his throat. "The Dancer wasn't interested in me other than in a 'Time Lord and fries with extra cheese' sense. I might be a little, well, anti-establishment at times, but I lack the Master's courage."

The Master turns to look at the Doctor, raising an eyebrow. "Courage?"

"To rebel. I think about it too much first, hesitate and get all avoidy."

The Master snorts. "Once maybe. Now you make your own rules and don't think twice about it. Your self-concept may need a little updating there."

"Well, like it or not," Braxiatel says, "you two are both establishment right now. So the question remains, can we trust you?"
"Aww, Brax," The Doctor looks with distaste at him. "Let's not go through this one again."

"Thete, it has to be discussed."

"Not with me present, it doesn't." The Doctor scowls.

"I'd trust the Doctor with my life," Romana says smoothly.

"Yes," Braxiatel says in a worldweary tone, "as would I. But would you trust him with New Gallifrey?"

"I am," she points out, her voice like candyfloss wrapped around an iron bar.

Braxiatel holds his hands up in mock-defeat. "Just doing my job as your advisor, Lady President. I doubt very much you'd trust the Master with either New Gallifrey or your life, or, let's face it, a bent grotak and a pair of pliers. An entrelacement means we have to treat the pair as a single entity when discussing policy."

The Doctor lifts his hands to his face and hides behind them. The Master chuckles and pats his knee encouragingly. "Ignore the old has-been, Doctor. He's just all cross and bothered because that big stick up his arse is particularly troublesome today. It's the weather, you know. Makes the nobbly bits so much more nobbly."

The Doctor turns behind the shield of his hands to give the Master an exasperated look, but the Master grins and mimes 'ouch', and the Doctor doesn't seem to be able to help himself grinning back.

"Anyway," the Master says, "don't we have better things to discuss?"

"Such as what to do about that rebel force you instigated that's currently threatening all our progress?" Braxiatel asks.

"Our progress?" The Master laughs, shaking his head at the presumption of the three-day old resurrectee. "Good old-fashioned explosive should sort the problem nicely if we use enough. The TARDIS will provide pinpoint accuracy, of course." Well, if you allow a lot of leeway in the definition of 'pinpoint'. "Then we simply loom them again without my... helpful genetic extras." He smiles then realises the others are all staring at him as if he farted loudly in public. "What?"

"I wonder if the chronovore may have been unfairly slandered," Braxiatel says dryly.

"Oh, nonsense!" The Master shakes his head disparagingly. "They've only been alive a few days; they're barely real. Go into the Matrix and ask the stored copies what they think? I guarantee they'll want the messed up versions culled and new, unadulterated bodies loomed. Wouldn't you?" He stares pointedly at Braxiatel.

"Yes, and I only have Romana to thank that I'm not in that very situation." Braxiatel stares pointedly right back.

"And Captain Jack," Romana adds. "Especially Jack, in fact." She turns to the Doctor. "Has there been any movement on the slopes?"

"Nah," the Doctor says. "The TARDIS is monitoring continually and will let me know as soon as any of them emerge. But all's quiet on the southern front right now."

In fact, there's been no sign of the twelve rebels since the initial skirmishes. The Master suspects
they're busy planning something, or rather attempting to plan it, but as he personally made sure the leadership genes were thoroughly impaired in each of them, they're probably still arguing about who gets to sit in the choice spot left of the cave door.

"Master," Romana says sharply. "Tell me again exactly how your formula will have changed them."

"I've already told you, Lady P., I can't be exact. There's a flaw in the code that will have introduced a random element."

"I understand, but tell me how they would have been without that."

The Master shrugs. "I exaggerated traits such as unscrupulousness, venality, unorthodoxy and so on. Useful traits. Traits I could use. Most of all, I wove in a genetic response to, well, me." He smiles. "I'm their natural pack leader. Their genome recognises mine and responds with suitable servility. Judging by the ones I spoke with prior to... certain regrettable events, that bit of the code works really well." Scarily well, in fact. He could almost have thought they were human, the way they'd fawned around him.

Romana shakes her head. "Why, Master? It's not as if you didn't already have a leadership role here in New Gallifrey."

"Oh, and that would have lasted how long, exactly? Just as long as it took the Doctor and me to restore Gallifrey to her former technological glory, I imagine. We would never have agreed on policy once it came down to us versus the rest of the universe, and I don't do subordinate." He looks down. "Anyway, perhaps I had something to prove?"

"Do I want to know?" the Doctor asks, putting a hand on the Master's shoulder.

'**It really doesn't matter anymore,**' the Master sends mentally, shaking his head slightly as answer enough for the rest of the room. 'I wanted to show you that you could never control me, no matter what you did, however much you thought you'd tamed me.'

'**And that doesn't matter anymore?**'

_I think we're beyond that now. Aren't we beyond it?_

'**I've certainly no desire to tame you, Master. Where would be the fun in that?**'

The Master looks down again, hiding a smile from the observers. 'We understand each other perfectly. Fancy a nice stroll in the woods? The TARDIS'll warn us of any incoming trouble, and I could do with the break from the forces of oppression gathered against us.'

'**Yeah, let's.**' The Doctor slips off the desk, taking his coffee mug over to the sink. 'New Gallifrey's starting to feel a little like old Gallifrey, isn't it?'

"Where are you two off to?" Romana asks as the Master walks over to join the Doctor. "We haven't decided anything yet."

"Oh, I'm sure you and Brax can do that so much more efficiently without us renegadey types spoiling things for you," the Doctor says. "Let us know tomorrow what you decide. Oh, you can contact me via Jack's network if you need us urgently, but otherwise we're taking the afternoon off." He puts his arm around the Master in what seems to be a very definite signal of... something. In lieu of a 'Do Not Disturb' sign perhaps.
The Master smirks. He winks at Braxiatel because he knows it'll infuriate him, and he gives the Lady Prez a more respectful little bow. Then the two of them leave the lab and head for the trees.

The Doctor huffs out what sounds like a sigh of relief as they walk through the bright sunlight towards the forest edge. "Romana's right about one thing. I've got no desire to lead. It all boils down to paperwork and endless committees. No ta very much."

"Autocratic dictatorship is much more fun, isn't it?" The Master grins. "If there's paperwork, then it's all dealt with by some nameless minion or other, which leaves one free to throw around random contradictory orders and watch the sycophants dance. Never stops being amusing, that."

"That is a deliberate attempt to get a reaction out of me, isn't it?"

"I meant every word of it!" The Master slips his hand into the Doctor's as they enter the tree line. "Do you want me to try to get a reaction out of you?"

"Depends on the type of reaction."

"Which type would you prefer?"

The Doctor looks at the Master over the top of the glasses he's not wearing. Yes, one of those looks. "I'm sure you can work it out, assuming there's a reason we're under the cover of trees rather than sitting out by the lake in the sunlight."

The Master chuckles. "Impatient, Doctor?"

"A little. We've only shagged six times since we rid you of your drums. Apparently that's not enough. How are you feeling, by the way?"

"Good. Better than good." The Master turns, putting his hands on the Doctor's hips and walking him slowly backwards towards a tree trunk, grinning. "Stars, when you shine," he half-sings. "You know how I feel. Scent of the crime, you know how I feel. Your freedom is mine, and I know how I feel."

The Doctor laughs as his back hits the tree. "Well, I like it better than some of your song choices."

The Master sticks his tongue out briefly and then presses close to the Doctor. "It's a new day." He gives the Doctor a quick peck on the lips. "It's a new dawn." And a slightly longer kiss. "It's a new life for me." And now a thorough tongue-wrestling with accompanying thrusting and groping, which he doesn't draw back from, reverting to telepathy. 'And guess what? I'm feeling good! Aren't you feeling good, Doctor?'

'Increasingly so.' The Doctor's hands are under the Master's jacket, pulling his shirt from his waistband. 'Master...'

'Hmm?' Gods, he tastes good. The Master grips the Doctor's head with both hands to keep it still while he fucks the Doctor's mouth with his tongue. 'You want something from your Master, do you?'

'Could say that,' The Doctor's mind sparkles with amusement, but also surging arousal. 'Yeah.'

'Can't get enough of me, can you?'

'Stop teasing.' The Doctor's hands clasp at the Master's arse, and he grinds their crotches together.
Stop? He's barely started yet. The Master pulls back from the kiss. "Admit it."

"Huh?"

"Admit you can't get enough of your Master."

The Doctor gives him an exasperated look, so the Master takes a step back, almost laughing at the look of alarm that immediately appears on the Doctor's face in its place. The Doctor shakes his head and then says, "Oh, you... I can't get enough of you, all right? Come back here." He reaches out to the Master, who takes another step back.

"That didn't sound very convincing."

The Doctor crimps his lips, sucking at his cheeks before saying, "Is this in order to convince me you're still a bastard, drums or no drums?"

"A bastard? Me? Don't you understand that I'm standing here ready to give you anything you want? Anything at all?" The Master smiles slyly, licking his lower lip. "All I ask in return is that you let me know how much you want it, how much you want me. Is that so terrible a price?"

Closing his eyes, the Doctor tips his head back against the tree and takes a deep breath before facing the Master again. "I can't get enough of you," he says, sounding almost upset he's so intense. "I can never get enough of you. We could fuck for the next millennium, and I still wouldn't have had enough of you. Master, I'm yours in every way possible."

Oh, that was good. That was better than good. The Master hadn't been expecting that last line, and suddenly he's so hard and needy he can barely stand unaided. Which, a slightly less involved part of his brain points out, was probably exactly the Doctor's intention in saying it.

The Master surges forward, trapping the Doctor against the tree, and does his best to consume the Doctor's mouth. 'Doctor. My Doctor...' He pushes his hand between their bodies to rub at the Doctor's rapidly swelling erection.

The Doctor thrusts against his hand, moaning into his mouth. 'Master. God. Please...'

Breaking his mouth away from the Doctor's, the Master buries his face in the crook of the Doctor's neck. "Do you trust me?" he asks a little breathlessly, still cupping and rubbing. "Do you?"

"Course," the Doctor answers immediately, and the Master wonders if he really heard the question at all.

He pulls back to force the Doctor to meet his eyes. "Do you trust me, Doctor?"

"Yes." The Doctor laughs, his face flushed and eyes bright. "Okay, maybe not entirely with New Gallifrey, but with myself, my life, all of that. Yes, I do."

The Master nods seriously. "All right." And he reaches through the entrelacement and takes control of all the Doctor's voluntary nerve and muscle functions except his eyes and eyelids.

Nothing shows on the surface; how could it? Not with the Master denying every neural instruction from the Doctor's brain to move a limb or speak. But the Master feels a ripple of fear go through the Doctor's mind and the first stirrings of an attempt to resist his control.

"Stop that," he tells the Doctor firmly. "You said you trusted me. You can take back control anytime you want to; my mind's no more powerful than yours, but I'm asking you not to."
There's a pause, the Doctor's gaze never leaving his, then all attempt to fight stops. 'All right. I trust you.'

The Master smiles, "Good Doctor. My good Doctor." He feels in his jacket pocket and pulls out a single leather glove. "Such a good Doctor deserves a reward, don't you think?" he asks as he slowly pulls it on, his smile becoming a grin as he notes the Doctor's increased breathing rate. "Oh, my beautiful pervert."

'I If I'm a pervert, it's entirely your fault.'

"Good! We wouldn't want anyone else shaping your sexuality, would we?"

He moves forward and kisses the Doctor's unmoving lips gently, cupping his face with the gloved hand. With his other hand he undoes first the Doctor's jacket and then his shirt. Swapping hands, he runs the leather-clad one over the Doctor's chest while moving his mouth to gnaw at the Doctor's neck.

'Master, this is very hard.'

"Is it? Well, don't worry. I'll be down there soon enough to sort it out for you."

'I meant staying still. Staying still is hard. Oh God.'

The Master's tweaking a nipple, twisting and pulling just enough to hurt. "Doctor, you can't move. Therefore, it's easy to stay still. Hard, easy. Hard, easy. See? Different words?"

'Oh, shut up.'

The Master pulls back a little way. "Now is that nice?"

'This is torture!'

The Master's glad he has the Doctor's emotions to tell him otherwise, as if not, that word would have got him worried. It could be he's got a little over-sensitive about it, thanks to recent associations. It's to do with being out of control, with being ridden by a parasite until there's nothing left of him, with being punished, rejected, turned out and left to degenerate alone.

'I'm sorry. Oh God, Master, I'm so sorry. I didn't think. Please, let me move. I'm sorry!' The Master can feel the Doctor straining hard at his control.

"Shh," he says, soothing the Doctor with his hands and lips. "Shhh. It's all right. Unexpected emotional reaction - didn't you tell me to expect them? All gone now. Don't worry." He presses kisses all over the Doctor's immobile face. "Come on, let me give you this. I really want to. I'm all right, I promise."

'I want to touch you. Please.'

The Master smiles slightly as he uses his mental control to lift the Doctor's hand, making it stroke his face and neck, admittedly rather clumsily as he's never tried moving another person's body this way before. Well, Kamelion, he supposes, if the android counted as a person, but it was designed to be used that way. "This sort of touch?"

'It's a start."

The Master turns his face and moves the Doctor's hand so that two of the long fingers are moving
in and out of the Master's mouth. He licks and sucks at them, keeping his head still and making the
Doctor's hand do all the work, and he relishes every reaction he feels in the Doctor's mind, every
wordless plea for more, every stymied urge to move.

Making the Doctor's own mouth open, the Master slides a gloved finger in, just a short way, just
enough for the Doctor to taste the leather on his tongue.

Because the Master wants more too, he can only keep this up so long, just long enough to ensure
the Doctor's forgotten to panic or fret, forgotten to do anything much beyond react, and desire, and
strain to move, and beg. Then the Master moves the Doctor's arm back to his side, shuts the
Doctor's mouth, and drops to his knees.

With his ungloved hand, he quickly unfastens the Doctor's trousers and pulls them and the
accompanying underwear down to the Doctor's thighs. He wraps his gloved hand around the long
and slender cock revealed. Looking up the Doctor's body, he sees the pale belly and chest curtained
to either side by the dark of the open shirt and suit. He sees the ragged breathing so odd in an
otherwise motionless body. The Doctor's head faces front, and although he's allowed to move his
eyes, he won't easily be able to see the Master.

"You should use my eyes to see this," he tells the Doctor. "Go on, look at what I'm looking at."

He slowly strokes his fist up and down the Doctor's cock, knowing the Doctor's now watching,
listening to him moaning in their minds and yet so silent out here in the forest. There's birdsong,
the odd cracking twig or rustle of undergrowth, the Doctor's staggered breathing, and the slight
noise the Master's hand is making, moving on the Doctor's flesh. That's it.

He decides not to break the quiet. 'Isn't it good? Ooh, Doctor, so good. Don't you look hot like this,
surrounded by me?'

'Yeah. Oh yes, Master.'

He opens his mouth and licks at the head of the Doctor's cock, tasting the honey-salt tang and
moaning just a little. Opening wider, he takes the head in, sucking lightly, moving his head slowly
backward and forwards and each time going a tiny bit further down the shaft.

The Doctor's mind is swirling with sensation he seems to find both frustrating and wonderful. He's
cursing the Master even as he's loving it, loving him. The Master has no doubt that were he not in
control of the Doctor's legs, they would have given out minutes ago.

He chuckles around his mouthful. 'You know, I bet you'd love to thrust right now.'

'However did you work that one out?' The Doctor's mental voice is somehow breathless. 'Am I
allowed to do anything - oh Rassilon, Master! - to do anything here?'

'Oh yes. Of course. You can feel.'

'That's it? You're going to kill me if you keep this up. Going to... to force me to regenerate from
pleasure.'

'What a way to go. Fuck, it would be amazing to be inside you when you regenerated, feel you
changing around me. Wouldn't that be something?' He lets his teeth scrape down the Doctor's
length, blocking the Doctor's every physical reaction to the pain bar the pain itself and further
arousal.

'Tell... Tell me you're not serious.'
He decides not to dignify that with an answer; either the Doctor trusts him or he doesn't. He moves his hand and then takes the Doctor into his throat. Repeatedly. Deeper and deeper.

'Master! Bugger, I, oh, Master... ahhh. Bloody hell, tell me you're not stopping me coming too!'

'Of course I am. Apart from anything else, when you come these days, I come too. And I am not making a mess of my best trousers again. Gods, I love having my mouth full of you. Amazing sensation. Want to feel it? I might allow that.' He stills, his lips brushing the Doctor's pubes, and he swallows around the Doctor's cock.

'Argh. Godgodgod.' The Doctor's brain sends incessant demands to move, react, getaway, take more, but the Master blocks them all. He's a one-man denial of service attack. The Doctor growls in their minds. 'Get yourself out!

'Ask nicely.'

'Please do me the favour of getting... of getting out your cock and stroking it fast and hard. Or, Master, I'm going to forget just why I'm not letting you feel everything you're doing to me only twice as intense.'

'That sounds remarkably like a threat, Doctor.'

'Ooh, there's no 'like' about it. It simply is.'

The Master chuckles, pulling back from the Doctor. "Okay then. That's fair, isn't it? Yes, I think so." He gets himself out, and after a moment's indecision, uses his gloved hand to hold his cock. He slides his mouth down the Doctor's length again. 'I'm not sure about the 'twice as intense', but I do think it's time to feel what each other feels, don't you?'

The Doctor doesn't seem to need any more encouragement as instantly the Master can feel a mouth around his cock. His own mouth. Now there's a thing. He starts to wank himself roughly while continuing to give the best head he knows how. The Doctor pretty much screams across the entrelacement, and the Master's whimpering, can't stop himself.

It doesn't take at all long after that. With mouth and hand, he works them both to a frantic series of explosions that cause flash after flash of neural lightning throughout their minds. Helpless to maintain it anymore, he releases his control over the Doctor. The Doctor jerks and comes deep within the Master's throat, his mind just a long string of the Master's name, chanted over and over, the perfect accompaniment to the Master's own climax.

They collapse together at the base of the tree.

After really quite a long time, the Master says, "I suppose you think that all just goes to prove that my control fixation has nothing to do with any passing chronovores."

"I never thought otherwise." The Doctor laughs, leaning against the tree and lifting his arse in order to pull his trousers up. "We were friends long before the Untempered Schism, remember? We only ever played your games, even then." He nudges the Master. "But I think what we just did wasn't so much about control as all that. Or at least, there was something just a smidgen more important to you."

"Really? What was that then?" But the Master can already hear the answer in the Doctor's mind, and he looks down.

"Me trusting you." The Doctor puts his hand to the Master's chin, making him look back up. "I do,
"you know."

"The others would tell you you were mad."

"Stuff 'em. They don't even know you, Master. Not who you were, not who you are."

"I like it that way."

"I know. And I'm-" The Doctor stops talking abruptly and frowns, before standing up in a hurry and offering a hand to the Master. "TARDIS alarm. We better get back."

They hurry out of the woods, the Doctor talking to Romana over the Jack-link as the Master's come to think of it. They join the other two outside the TARDIS and head inside.

"Looks like all of them," the Doctor says, playing with the scanner controls and putting the display on for the others. "Which means we're outnumbered three to one."

"Oh, thank you for doing the complex maths for us," Braxiatel says, then adding, "They're waving a truce flag."

"I wouldn't put much stock in that," the Master comments. "Fanatically loyal to me? Probably. Aside from that, however, they'll be as trustworthy as a kitling left unattended with a spit-roasted bird."

"They have Nicina with them," Romana says. "I don't think it's unreasonable to assume they want to negotiate. One of us should stay in here, however, just in case. It can't be me."

"Thete should stay," Braxiatel says.

"No, you should," the Doctor replies. "I go where the Master goes. I'll instruct you in the force shield use."

"I'm fairly certain I'm the only one of us not in any danger," the Master points out. "Maybe I should go alone."

"No!" the other three chorus, each for their own reasons, he assumes. He shrugs. He tried.

"Braxiatel will stay inside," Romana says firmly. "Tell him about your forcefield, Doctor."

"Lady President, I really must-"

"No arguments, Brax," Romana says firmly. "If things go wrong I need a clear and un-entrelaced head to survive."

Sighing heavily and earning another pointed frown from Romana, Braxiatel joins the Doctor at the console island for his lesson in how to employ the tribophysical waveform macro-kinetic extrapolator-enhanced force wall.

While that's going on, the Master looks back at the screen, moving the controls for a close up look at faces. Nicina - at least, the Master assumes the willowy woman being held as an obvious captive is Nicina - looks angry and sullen, but other than the scratches and small bruises they all seem to bear, she seems unharmed. New in her regeneration and without a TARDIS to help with the transition, she'll be weak and probably very confused.

One of the two rebels holding her, Truba, is carrying an ugly contraption that looks very much like it's meant to be a weapon. He's pointing it at Nicina's throat. It seems to have been cannibalised
together from at least two laser knives and various other gadgets the rebels stole from the labs. The Master hopes it's not even half as deadly as it is ugly. Truba himself used to be a microbiologist by speciality, but the Master vaguely remembers something about him winning prizes for marksmanship. Reassuring? Hardly.

"Doctor? Master?" Romana says. "Are you ready?"

The Master nods. "I'd be more ready with a weapon of some sort."

The Doctor comes forward to stand with him and Romana. "Best I can manage is my sonic, but with the forcefield up, we shouldn't need one."

The three of them leave the TARDIS together and walk a few yards forward where they stop, within earshot of the approaching rabble, but not too close, Romana in the centre.

"Who speaks for you?" Romana calls out, her voice clear and resolute.

This simple question provokes an instant huddle and heated discussion amongst the rebels, and the Master bites his lip to stop himself laughing out loud. Pathetic, just as he designed them to be.

Finally one of them steps forward. It's Drexin. "I will speak, for now. We're here for an exchange of hostages, Lady President." The renowned architect and structural engineer is unshaven and smudged with dirt, and like all the rest of the rebels, he's very obviously nervous.

"Exchange?" Romana asks in obvious confusion. "But we don't have any hos-"

"The Master," interrupts Drexin. "Release the Master to us and Nicina goes free."

What? Oh, what a bunch of idiots. "I'm not a hostage or a prisoner," he says, stepping forward a couple of paces. He's aware of the Doctor close behind him. "Why on Gallifrey would you think I was?"

"Captivity can involve many things," says a tall woman. Coreth's her name, the Master thinks. "Not just chains and locks."

"We're really sorry, Master," Truba says, his voice catching. "This won't be easy to hear, but you've been brainwashed by the Doctor, made to act against your own best interests. Don't worry. We're here to free you."

Brainwashed? They have to be referring to the entrelacement, but that's hardly the same thing as brainwashing. The Master fixes his gaze firmly on Truba and waits for the man to start to fidget before he says coldly, "Put that ridiculous weapon down. It's got no style at all. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Truba visibly wavers, his fingers clutching convulsively on the gun, but he says, "I'm sorry, Master. I'm really sorry, but I can't do that. Not yet, not until we've freed you."

"I'm already free, you fat-brained imbecile! Stop pointing that damn thing at me. Am I not your Master?"

"Yes, Master, yes," Truba cries, sounding more than a little desperate. His forehead is wet with sweat. The weapon's twin emitters move wildly about, and the Master can only hope the contraption's trigger is not of the hair variety. "Of course you are. We're your loyal servants, every one of us."
"You'll thank us in the end, Master," Dexin says, more firmly, putting a strengthening hand on Truba's shoulder. "Once the drug is out of your system, and you're yourself again. You'll see how far we're prepared to go to serve you, and you'll be pleased."

Oh, fanatics. So useful in the right place, but this wasn't it. The Master meets Drexin's eyes and impels his will onto the man. "Release Nicina. Now."

After very little hesitation, Drexin turns to Truba and the other rebel holding Nicina and nods. They immediately remove their hands from Nicina, and she stumbles forward until she hits the forcefield. It drops, proving Braxiatel's paying attention if not showing an immense amount of battle sense. The Master quickly grabs Nicina's arm and pushes her behind him, towards the other two.

'Well done, Master,' he hears in his head from the Doctor, and he smiles to himself. Not for long, however, as that shivering wreck of a microbiologist, Truba, strengthens his grip on the ugly weapon, brings it up to take aim, and fires, all in under a second.

The Master's only just realising that the twin beam didn't hit him, missing his shoulder only narrowly, when Truba fires again, running forward. "Get that forcefield back up!" the Master yells. He whirls around in time to see the Doctor crumple to the grass, appalling pain lancing through the entrelacement.

"No!" the Master half-screams, running the few steps needed and dropping to the grass beside the Doctor. "No!"

The Doctor's unconscious, gasping for air that he no longer has the lung pressure to take in and trembling violently, almost convulsing. Terrible wounds part his flesh, the edges seared closed and bloodless by the lasers. No healing trance is going to save him from this one. 'Don't you leave me,' the Master cries mentally. 'Don't you dare bloody leave me now. Didn't you promise? You promised, Doctor!'

It's okay. It's okay. The Master can feel the Doctor's body preparing to regenerate. It's going to be all right.

His mind snow-blind with fury, the Master turns to glare at Truba, who's beside them now, the weapon still pointing at the Doctor. "Truba," the Master says, dragging up a voice from long ago. "You will obey me. You will not consider disobedience. You will turn that appalling contraption on yourself and use it. Now."

Truba actually has the cheek to look relieved as he obeys. He drops, his skull now a broken cup. The other rebels gather around his body. What the hell's happened to the forcefield?

The Doctor gives one last shudder beneath the Master and then convulses, spine rigid, head tipped back, artron energy fountaining from him. The Master bends over him, laying his forehead on the Doctor's ruined chest and closing his eyes.

The Master's vaguely aware of Romana and, it seems, that idiot Braxiatel rowing volubly with the rebels close by, but all his attention is on the regenerating Doctor. He has no choice about that. It's pretty much the strangest sensation that's ever assailed him, being entrelaced while the Doctor undergoes the transformation. It's as much as the Master can do to stay conscious as the link in their minds explodes with pure psychic overload.

"We're sorry, Master," someone is saying somewhere. "But you'll never get free if we don't do this. The pain will soon be over."
Suddenly, the Master is ripped from the Doctor and held back from him by multiple pairs of arms. He screams and struggles, but can do nothing as Drexin lifts the rebel's single weapon from the grass and fires again at the Doctor, and again and again and again before Drexin's knocked to the ground by a charging Braxiatel.

The regeneration process stops dead, leaving the Doctor's body a scorched mess on the grass, no discernible shape to it at all. The entrelacement howls and buckles like a collapsing bridge and finally dissipates completely.

The Master screams mindlessly until blackness descends over him like a vulture hoping for carrion.
Turn and Turn Again

Dead again.

Oh God, Jack hopes his team manages to finish off that pod monster without any other casualties. At least let them hold out until his body sees fit to take him back inside, but that might be a while considering the damage he was sustaining before it all went black.

He huffs, sticking his hands in his pockets, and looks around him. He's in the city square, just below Rassilon's Column. It's a sunny day; it always is here in the Matrix. White doves peck around the paving, and golden carp swim in the pond around the base of the column. Somewhere in the distance, church bells are ringing.

Several Time Lords, living and dead, have insisted that the Matrix world looks like this to Jack only because that's how his mind chooses to see it. If so, why he'd choose to visualise his internal indexing as an idealised English university city of the mid-twentieth century, he's not sure. It looks nothing at all like his brief memories of old Gallifrey.

It does work, somehow, all these Merchant-Ivory spires, punts on rivers, and clean-cobbled winding streets. There is something Time Lordish about it all. Jack always finds himself dressed appropriately here too: gathered cream-coloured pants, a well pressed shirt with sleeves folded, not rolled or scrunched, to reveal his forearms. A cream cable-knit is hung across his shoulders, the sleeves loosely tied. It's all a bit Sebastian Flyte, but Jack has no problem with that, providing he doesn't find himself holding a teddy bear one day.

In truth, he likes it here. There's something comfortable about the place, which is somewhere between a library and a graveyard in its purpose. It's an afterlife in a way, and it's more than most species seem to get. He'd like to think he'll come here when he finally dies and stays dead, as a gift for lifelong service to Gallifrey, but since the only way he can die is to be separated from the Matrix, that seems unlikely.

Still, maybe he'll learn how to take extended vacations here, just relaxing for a century or two while his body lies undying in a safehold somewhere. He can foresee a time when he'll need to be able to do that. His link to the Matrix might make him more emotionally resilient than most, but it still builds up, all the losses, the mourning that seems to start as soon as he gets to like someone, knowing that he'll live unchanging as they age and die.

Hardly surprising he likes Time Lords so much, is it? Well, most Time Lords. Though he'll outlast even them in the end, he guesses. Not for ages yet though. Even the Doctor's got three more incarnations to go, and providing he's careful, that should get him through another millennium at the very least.

Not that the Doctor's ever exactly careful.

Talking of the Doctor, since Jack's likely to be here a little while, he might as well go visiting again. The last time he died, it was remarkable hanging out with all the Doctor's past incarnations. To admit the truth to himself at least, he's been looking forward to dying again so he could repeat the experience. Which, he'll admit, is probably not the most healthy of attitudes, especially since he can haul out said prior incarnations into his mindscape whenever he ever wants without having to die first. That seems disrespectful when he has nothing to ask them though, and there was something about having all the older models around him at once that...
Well, it was a bit of a wet dream come true really.

A directed thought is enough to take him straight to the Doctor's street. He could've walked here, but didn't want to waste time. This is, after all, his domain; he might as well make the most of what he can do. He's the god here, the one with all the power. Sometimes it's just staggering how much trust Romana has put in him.

He won't let her down.

The Doctor's house, separate from the rest at the end of the street, looks like the architect was Dr. Seuss. It's tall and kind of crooked, like each floor was built separately and then stacked only loosely on top of one another. It's painted a familiar blue and is generally a little drab and shoddy. The door is panelled and flimsy-looking, and today, for some reason, it has an envelope taped to it.

An envelope marked 'Captain Jack Harkness'.

In a domain he controls, albeit largely subconsciously, Jack finds this unexpected addition a little worrying. He pulls the envelope from the door and then steps back in shock as something significantly more than a 'little worrying' happens.

The Doctor's house starts to crumble. It doesn't collapse as would a weight of heavy masonry, crashing to the ground, but simply disintegrates like it's made of nothing but ash, and a wind is blowing it away. In no time at all it has gone, leaving a darkened space on the street side where it once stood.

"That can't be good," Jack mutters to himself, coughing slightly in the dust. He shuts his eyes and thinks himself towards the Doctor. If any of the incarnations remain in the Matrix, Jack only needs to concentrate to go straight to them. He's the index, after all. When he opens his eyes, he hasn't moved. The Doctor's gone from the Matrix. Completely.

Oh God. Why didn't he leave the envelope on the door? He should have been properly suspicious of something that obviously didn't belong in his Matrix.

A virus? Has some enemy of the Doctor inserted a virus into the Matrix without Jack knowing? How would they do that? The Master? No, surely not. Jack would suspect the Master of just about anything else that could go wrong here, but a direct destruction of the Doctor's memories, no. Once maybe, but not now.

He looks down at the envelope in his hands and turns it over a few times. Will opening it just make things worse? No, this is most likely the punchline that every hacker can't help but insert into their code, the gloating and I-was-hereing.

Jack takes a deep breath and opens the envelope. Inside are two folded sheets of paper, which he unfolds and reads.

Jack, my best of mates,

Yeah, English. Right. I'm so scattered right now I started writing this in Gallifreyan and had to start again on a new sheet. Mind you, you can probably read that these days. Just in case, though, I'll stick with English. Important you understand.

I'm really sorry about this, Jack. Really, really sorry. I should've told you first, not just done it, but you might've talked me out of it. Couldn't risk that. It's okay to be angry with me. I would be spitting.
It's just that seeing you last night, seeing what he did to you, then washing your mutilated body and waiting for you to return from the dead, it's woken me up. We've been so cozy together, me and him, these last few weeks. I'd almost let myself forget what he is, what he's done, what he's still, quite evidently, capable of doing, given even a teeny-weeny fraction of a chance.

It was my complacency that tortured you last night, entirely my fault. He can't help himself, and I was meant to be keeping him under control, protecting the universe from his malignity. Couldn't even protect my friend when it mattered. I'm so, so sorry.

I haven't given up on him. Not yet, not quite. Though I'm angry enough right now that I almost feel I should, and maybe you think I should. Yeah, you probably do, and I can't blame you for that. Not like he's all I've got anymore in the way of Time Lords, is it? But not yet, Jack. I'm sorry. Despite everything he's done, I'm not quite there yet. We've so much history, him and me.

But I'm awake again, fully aware of the reality of him, and that's what this is about. I've removed myself from the Matrix as a failsafe, one I really, really hope will never be needed. It's like one of those mutually assured destruction situations humanity's so fond of. Scary way to live, but I've got to know that if everything goes wrong, he can still be stopped.

Cos the thing is, Jack, it's all about me. No, it really is. You don't need to know the wheres and whens and whys of it all. You've seen it for yourself. I'm his audience, his fuel, the whip on his back, and his holy sodding grail. Everything he does is about making an impact on me in one way or another. I'm the mirror in front of which he tries on different atrocities for size.

I'm not sure what he'd do without me around, but what with the entrelacement now as well as what was there before, I think he'd just stop. Or wind down slowly and then stop. Without me to witness it all, what would be the point? At the very least the loss of me will send him into a tail-spin, lost and confused for long enough for others to take care of him for good.

With everything I am, I pray it won't come to that. I love him, Jack. There's a man, a remarkable Time Lord, under the sadism and madness. I love that man. I'm sorry; I know that hurts. I just need to be honest here so that you'll understand, one day, maybe. I think I need you to understand.

Bet you're thinking I'm a galactic-sized egotist right now, aren't you? Nah, I'm just being a realist for once in my existence. If it becomes necessary to destroy myself to stop him, I've got to know I'll stay dead.

Now I have to ask you the hugest of favours. Don't tell Romana I've done this. There'd be no point as nothing she could say would make the slightest difference to me. There'd just be a hell of a row for nothing. So don't tell her for the sake of peace, yes? I know I'm effectively asking you to choose between loyalties, and that's unfair of me, just like most of this is me being unfair to you. I seem to excel at that, don't I? I'm still asking. Please, Jack.

Your friend, always,

the Doctor
Jack has to read the letter three times before it starts to make sense to him. It's then he realises how and when the Doctor did this thing. It was the kiss, that sweetly unexpected and so welcome kiss the Doctor pressed on him the morning after the Master's attack. The Doctor had claimed it to be something between affection and a get well soon card. It wasn't either thing, it seems, but just a ruse, a way to distract Jack so that the Doctor could get up to self-destructive mischief in the Matrix. Literally self-destructive. Oh God.

The Matrix provides Jack with a kind of photographic memory, in that it records everything he witnesses, even if he's not consciously aware of witnessing it. Rewinding to the time of the kiss, Jack can now adjust his point of view and watch the Doctor move through Jack's indices, locating and infecting his own biodata with a self-isolating virus.

The bastard. The utter bastard. He has to have known how much this would hurt Jack when it was discovered. However much it might suit the Doctor to appear oblivious to how much he's loved by his companions, Jack knows that he's always fully aware of it really. Hell, he even admits that more of less in this damn letter.

To mess with the Matrix, Jack's Matrix, via a kiss is cruel insult.

Asking him not to tell Romana is almost worse. Romana's the closest Jack has to a boss, and... he's going to have to tell her. He can't betray her trust, however much the Doctor's good regard means to him. The President has to be able to rely on the integrity of the Matrix and the Matrix keeper, which is effectively what Jack's become.

The Doctor will either forgive him or not; frankly, he'll have no right to hold a grudge under the circumstances.

It's a load of bull, too, the idea that this will stop the Master. Well, okay, maybe, just maybe it isn't, but the Doctor's not being honest with himself if he thinks that's the only reason he's done this. There's a death wish in the Doctor that lurks under every crazy scheme, every manic adventure. Jack can see it in his eyes. The Doctor's tired of hurting all the time, tired of being so lonely. The Master's allowed him to feel hope for something better, but were the Master to escape and start damaging the universe again...

Yeah, the Doctor loves the idea of oblivion the way that a human loves the idea of darkness and clean sheets after a long, hard day.

Well, two can play at this game. As soon as Jack's alive again and the pod beast taken care of, Jack will contact the Doctor via his headset link and lure him to Cardiff under false pretences. All it'll take is a kiss, one more treacherous kiss. Jack can see exactly how the Doctor did it. It should be easy enough to reverse the process and upload the Doctor back to where he belongs. That way, Jack won't even have to tell Romana about this mess.

The Doctor needs to know that the Matrix is Jack's domain, and no one but Jack gets to mess with it. Not even him.

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"Jack! Jack, c'mon, you bastard, wake up. You've got to wake up and move now or we'll all be making like the sodding dodo."

Jack heaves in air and opens his eyes. "Dodo?" he asks Owen, who's leaning over him. Jack frowns as his eyes focus on what seems to be a long scar, old enough to be silver-white, bisecting Owen's face diagonally. "Where the hell did you get that?"
"Aww no," says a familiar female voice from his other side. "Tell me he's not gone and reset himself again."

"Bloody hope not," Owen mutters, his scar pulling his lips into a kind of snarl as he talks. "We've not got time for fucking about." He waves a strange-looking instrument over Jack's forehead.

"Jack?" the female voice says, and he turns his head to see a young woman looking worriedly at him. She has short bleached hair with dark roots, and her face, her wonderful face, with its big eyes and wide mouth is intensely familiar.

"Rose? Rose Tyler? What the...?" He sits up in a hurry, pushing Owen's arm away. They're in some sort of open-plan office type room that he's pretty sure he's never seen before. This isn't where he died, and it's certainly not the hub. He stares at Rose. "How...?"

"He has," Rose says flatly to Owen. "He blimin' well has. Of all the times..."

Owen swears under his breath and forcibly turns Jack's face to look at him. "Jack, you tosser, listen and listen hard. Your memories have reset themselves. They do that sometimes when you cop it. The past you remember isn't real. Maybe it was once, no-one's sure, but it's not now. We've got a back-up of your proper memories back at base, but 'til we can get you to it, you're gonna have to trust us. There's a sniffer unit out there hunting you, and we've gotta get out of Cardiff right now."

Jack just stares at him, trying to make the words make sense. "Huh?"

"Oh, I could just slap you," Rose says, proving her point by smacking Jack's arm hard enough to sting. "This is typical of you. Oh yeah, dive straight in front of the sec-bot's lasers, why not? You don't even think about what'll happen if you forget yourself while off in la-la-land. You gonna get up or what?" She smacks him again.

That, at least, he can take in. He gets to his feet, rubbing absently at his arm. His clothes are not the ones he died in. In fact the only thing he recognises is his wrist console. Oh, and he's wearing a headset that may well be his normal one. Like the other two, he's dressed entirely in black combat gear strung with gadgetry. The office they're in is large and grey, full of cubicles separated by low dividers. It has two doors out and a lot of windows, all of which are covered by closed Venetian blinds.

"Just us three here?" he asks, checking about himself for weaponry. He has plenty, it seems, some of it definitely not of 21st century Earth origin. "Wherever here is."

"Ianto's doing sentry outside," Owen says brusquely, also standing. "Let's get going before the sniffers pinpoint your location."

Jack pulls himself together to a degree. Nothing's making much sense, but he hears the urgency in their tones and can respond to it. "Quickly then, where are we, and what are we doing here?"

Owen sighs pointedly. "You always do this. You never want to take our sodding word for anything."

Rose puts her hand on Jack's arm. "We're in Cardiff. We had to come here to try out a new device with the Rift. Didn't work. We thought it was a trap from the start, but we had to try all the same, just in case. Now we've gotta get away in a tearing hurry, so just do as you're told for once!"

Jack puts a hand over hers and squeezes, feeling unable to look away from her for longer than a second or so at a time. It's just so good to see her again, however bizarre the circumstances. "What's a 'sniffer unit'?" he asks, finally processing some of Owen's long speech from earlier.
"Grab and bag team with high spec Time Lord sensor tech," Owen says. "Perception filters don't work on them, and they're here for you. You top Gallifrey's Most Wanted list by a light year, Jack. Either they've had a tip-off that we're here, or this is a trap, like Rose says. Get your arse in gear, for fuck's sake."

"I'm ready," Jack protests, deciding not to attempt to make sense of Owen's latest speech just yet. "Point me in a direction."

Rose heads towards the nearest door. "I'll go get-"

The door bursts opens, and all three of them reach for guns, only to relax as Ianto hurries in. Ianto, it demands to be said, looks damn hot in black ops gear. "You're up then, sir," he says, his usual sardonic tone spicing up the plain words despite his obvious haste. "Best be on our way then. There's a small convoy of vehicles just pulled up outside. Air cars on the roof too."

"Fuck," Owen spits, grabbing Jack's wrist. "Get over here, you two."

Rose and Ianto scurry over to Jack's side, both putting a hand over Jack's wrist console. It's not hard to work out they're expecting a trip via his vortex manipulator, but where to? Jack looks hopelessly at Rose, who shakes her head disparagingly at him and then pokes at his wrist console with a finger. He can't help but notice two of her other fingers are missing on that hand.

The far door to the room is just slamming open as they're yanked out of that particular time-space locale and regurgitated into somewhere dark and cold.

"Lights," Ianto's voice calls out, and there's the dull thud and hum as fluorescent tube lighting turns on. They're in a small cube-shaped room with no windows or furnishing and just one door. The walls are ringed with a lattice of complex circuitry.

"Where are we?" Jack asks.

"Oh dear, sir," Ianto says sympathetically. "Have you gone and reset yourself again? I knew I should've brought the portable device with us, despite the bulk of it. Let's get you upstairs and restore from back-up, eh?"

"Sure." Jack's happy enough to be looked after by Ianto, who seems a welcome island of normality in the ocean of wrongness in which he finds himself floundering. "You could still tell me where we are though."

"Shielded reception room under Resistance HQ," Rose tells him brusquely, rubbing at her head and frowning. She probably has a transmat migraine coming on. Owen seems to be on it, though, as he's pushing up her sleeve ready to apply some weird looking gadget to her arm. "You're our boss, Jack," she says. "You need to get with-it in a hurry in case they trace the VM beam here despite all our defences. There's nothing the Overlord wants more than the Matrix in his hands."

Jack wonders if he's getting a transmat migraine himself. He rubs at his temple. "What year is it?"

The personnel say early 21st century; some of the technology says at least a century after that if not several millennia.

"2008, sir," Ianto says, putting a gentle hand on Jack's shoulder. "The answers to all your questions lie in the data room upstairs. Don't worry, you won't lose your current memories. They're unwipeable, hard-wired thanks to the Matrix. Come along now."

Jack lets himself be led to the door, wondering when his link to the Matrix became common knowledge. Maybe it always was here, wherever and whatever this 'here' is.
Before leaving the room, he turns back to the other two. "It's really good to see you again, Rose." He wonders what she's doing here, working with him in whatever this organisation is. Another answer that's awaiting him upstairs, he guesses. She looks tired and somehow hardened; where are the bright eyes and huge grin of the Rose Tyler he once knew? But she's still Rose, not just someone wearing her face.

Rose looks up and half-laughs. "Aren't you going to tell me you prefer my hair long? You usually do."

Jack grins because that's exactly what he was just thinking. It's not that there's anything wrong with the crop she's opted for; it's certainly more sensible for combat situations. It's just that, well, her long hair had felt like roughspun taffeta in his hands. "You're still drop dead gorgeous," he says, winking.

Rose laughs properly this time. "You always say that too." Jack's heart twists at the brief sight of her full grin after so long. His own grin starts to fall away as he wonders where the Doctor is in all of this.

"I'm nothing if not consistent, apparently!" he says, chuckling to cover up uneasy feelings. He turns and follows Ianto out of the door, and it swings shut behind them.

They enter a dingy looking space at the bottom of a spiral stairwell that seems to go up forever. There's the hollow noise of industrial air-conditioning echoing through the space. Another door leads off from the room, but Ianto starts up the stairs. "It's a bit of a climb, I'm afraid," he says. "Still, keeps our leg muscles strong."

So it's not all high tech here in this... whatever it is. An alternative dimension, Jack supposes, since it's far too complex to be a joke, clearly isn't a dream, and he somehow knows it isn't a mindscape. He's knows the feel of them well since having his own. Something must have happened in the past, something that shouldn't have. Something that's messed up history. And no one remembers what the present should be but him, thanks presumably to him being a universal constant.

"Oh, but the Time Lords should remember. Their biology allows them to process multiple parallel realities as easily as a human does long division."

Frowning, Jack pauses at the bottom of the stairs and shuts his eyes, accessing his headset and trying to make contact with the Doctor. No luck, just empty static. Romana? Nope, no sign of a connection and no information as to why not. Maybe this dimension's version of the headset doesn't work that way.

The Matrix has been strangely silent since Jack woke up too, not offering the helpful hints and summaries he's come to rely on. Touching at the indices within his mind, everything seems intact. Maybe it's just as bewildered as he is by all this wrongness. He mentally pokes at it, asking for an explanation.

'History,' a crotchety male voice says, 'has evidently been altered, whilst the Matrix, existing in pocket dimensions outside of N-space, has remained consistent with the prior reality. Therefore truth as the Matrix knows it is no longer congruent with external reality, and Matrix data must be considered unreliable. The Matrix will therefore be unavailable to querents until further notice. Good day, sir."

When Jack pokes at the Matrix again he gets the mental equivalent of a '404 File Not Found' message. He sighs heavily. So much for being the god of his own domain.
He opens his eyes to find Ianto looking down at him, obviously concerned. Jack manages a reassuring smile. "I don't suppose you happen to know where the Doctor is in this version of the universe?"

"Dead, sir. Just a myth to us from before the dawn of Time almost. I understand things were very different in the past you remember, but we only know this one."

Dead? The Doctor can't be dead, but a horrible feeling boils up inside Jack as his mind refills with the image of the crooked house disintegrating into dust. The Doctor has saved so many worlds, so many times. If the Doctor died back in prehistoric Gallifrey, could that explain... But no, that doesn't make sense. Even if the Doctor had died then, that wouldn't remove the things he'd already achieved from the reality. Something else must have happened.

"Sir?" Ianto puts his hand on Jack's shoulder. "You'll feel a lot less confused after the reinstall."

Jack nods, and they head upstairs. He's willing to bet the Doctor's still out there somewhere, in hiding maybe. When he knows for sure that he's stuck in this new reality, then he'll make time to mourn if it proves necessary, which he doubts. For now, he's still half-expecting to wake up back in his hub, all of this proving to be some kind of peculiar death-dream.

He sighs again softly and cheers himself up by watching Ianto's ass in the snug black pants as the man climbs the stairs ahead of Jack.

"Oh and yes, sir, we are," Ianto says a few steps later.

"We are what?" Jack asks.

Ianto grins back over his shoulder. "Still 'shagging in this dimension'. You usually ask that about now."

Jack laughs and resists the urge to pull Ianto back into an embrace. Memories first. "I'm very glad to hear it. Do I normally mention how damn hot you look in the black ops gear?"

"No, not every time, but then I'm not always wearing it."

"Even better!" Jack says, feeling more settled for the banter. "Maybe once I have the right set of memories you'll model that 'not wearing it' for me."

"You shouldn't talk like that while we're on duty," Ianto tells him, humour rich in his tone. "You know it's against regulations."

"Hey, you're the one who mentioned shagging. I'm just picking up the topic and running with it like a champ. Anyway, without the appropriate memories, how can I be expected to know the regulations? Oh no, I'm clearly the innocent party here, led astray by your provocative words and the way you're deliberately flaunting your perfect ass as you walk."

Ianto snorts. "Of course, sir. I'll try to remember to schedule myself a reprimand when I next access your diary." They've reached the top of the stairwell and are facing what looks like an airlock. Ianto stands in front of a keypad and swipes a card through a slot to one side of it.

"What is this place, Ianto?" Jack asks a little beseechingly. "I know I'll get my memories soon, but..."

"It's the current location of the mobile Earth resistance headquarters, sir. We're in Bombay. You're the resistance leader for this whole galactic quadrant and have been, on and off, for over a century.
I'm your adjutant, by the way, something that always makes you smile just like that when I tell you. I never can get a good explanation out of you as to why."

Jack tries to stop smirking, but it's easier to react to the last thing Ianto said than take in that stuff about him being Princess Leia. Adjutants have or had a certain and not entirely undeserved reputation in the Armed Forces of 20th century Britain. "Maybe I just like having you directly under me, taking care of... things."

Ianto rolls his eyes and then steps closer, subtle wickedness lurking in the corners of his slight smile. "In my experience, sir, you're just as fond of having me directly over you."

"Anything that gets you close enough to do this." Jack can't seem to help himself; he slips his hand behind Ianto's neck to draw him in for a kiss. This may be an alternative dimension Ianto, but he tastes just the same, that wonderful combination of maleness, spearmint and a hint of coffee. He feels just the same too, tight against Jack's body, muscles hard and face shaved so smooth it's as if he just left the bathroom.

Kissing Ianto, holding Ianto, losing himself in Ianto has been one of Jack's favourite ways to forget his worries for a while now. If Jack's a fixed thing as far as time, space, and apparently even dimension is concerned, then Ianto, in turn, has become Jack's personal fixed spot, a source of stability and sense whatever madness screams around them.

"I needed that," Jack says as he pulls reluctantly back after a minute or so.

"Always happy to oblige my commanding officer," Ianto replies, winking. He licks his lips and then turns back to the keypad, swiping his card again. He types in something and stands still as a retina scan scrolls down his eyes.

"So you're my own personal adjutant?" Jack says, in no way trying to hide the appreciative gaze he's running up and down Ianto like a full body scan. "I like the sound of that."

Ianto nods. "We move around a lot, you and I, off world and on. Can't make it too easy for the bastards to track you down. I try to keep the transitions smooth for you. Please stand just here for your retinal scan, sir."

Jack obediently stands in front of the scanner and tries not to blink. "Who's after me? Who is it, for that matter, we're resisting against?"

"The Time Lords."

He waits for the scan to finish before turning to give Ianto a disbelieving look. "The Time Lords? The bad guys are Time Lords?"

"You always have problems with this bit even when you get your memories back. The stored Time Lord personalities in the Matrix are, I believe, quite different from the aggressively dominant species we know." Ianto offers Jack a small smile before turning around to complete whatever process he initiated on the security pad.

There's a hiss as the airlock door unseals and moves back into the wall. Ianto and Jack enter the small space and let the door close behind them. The door at the far end doesn't open. Ianto turns to face Jack, feeling inside Jack's jacket and pulling out what looks like an ID card on a clip. Ianto pins it to the flap on Jack's breast pocket as various scanners and other devices move around them.

"The key thing you need to understand," Ianto says, "is that our common timeline, *this* timeline, came into being as a direct result of the Overlord's... that is, the Master's actions back at the start of
the Gallifreyan civilisation. You worked that out yourself, sir. You'll be able to remember how you came to that conclusion soon."

The Master. Jack might've guessed. He shakes his head slowly. This is a dimension in which the Doctor's dead, and the Master's galactic overlord? It's unthinkable. He still can't believe the Doctor's dead. It's just not possible.

The far door opens, and it immediately becomes obvious that something's very wrong. Wrong even in the midst all this wrongness that already bewilders him. Dull thuds and the sound of blasters and screams can be heard coming from the corridors beyond. Not too close, but definitely in the same building.

Jack looks at his wrist console, making it scan the area above and around them. "Multiple pockets of combat, laser fire, submolecular scramblers, some kind of lethal transwarp effect cutting off two areas entirely, many dead and dying, armed men and hover-bots on their way down to us," he reads out.

Ianto immediately hits a button on the airlock wall, and the door closes again. Not before Jack hears a scream worryingly close by, however.

"Open the door back up," he orders. "People out there need help."

"Sorry, sir. Priority number one in the event of an attack is getting you away from the danger zone. Were you to be captured, we might as well all give up the fight."

"Ianto, I said-"

Ianto walks to the other door and hits something that starts the scanners working all over again. "We can't risk the Matrix getting into the hands of the Overlord."

Jack leans against the airlock wall and tips his head back. "I thought I was your superior officer."

"Yes, sir. Of course you are. I'm in the process of obeying your standing orders by getting you to the shielded transmat room without delay. It's our only hope for jumping out of here undetected."

If the Matrix is so attractive to these evil Time Lords, then why is it being worse than useless as far as helping Jack is concerned? The door to the stairwell opens, and Ianto gestures for Jack to walk back though it, which he does, albeit reluctantly. "I don't like running out on a fight, especially if those are my people up there."

"The best thing you can do for any of us is remain free, Jack. Down you go now. We have to hurry."

They head down, taking the stairs two at a time and keeping loose hold of the inner banister to help them swerve around corners. They meet with Rose and Owen halfway down the long stairwell. "Trouble?" Owen calls up as soon as he sees them.

"Major offensive intrusion. Upstairs is a lost cause," Ianto reports without pausing. "Back down to the transmat room, both of you."

"Oh God, Mum!" Rose sprints up the stairs between them and tries to push past Jack and Ianto.

Jack catches her, holding her arms. "It's too late, Rose. It's hell up there. She either got out or she didn't, but there's nothing we can do to help her now. I'm sorry." He tries very hard to forget the scream he heard before the airlock door closed. He still hates running from what's going on up
there, but he's immortal, and unless things are even more different here than he realises, Rose isn't.

"Let go!" Rose kicks him hard in the shins and tries to yank her arms out of his grasp. "Get your hands offa me, Jack!"

He crushes her to him, wrapping his arms tightly around her, letting his muscles absorb her struggles. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I can't let you go up there."

"She's my mother!" Rose wriggles and then Jack feels something hard and probably metallic jabbing into his flank. "Let me go," she says, her voice hard. "Now. Or else."

Jack doesn't even loosen his grip, trusting that this Rose is close enough to the one he once knew for that to be just an empty if desperate threat. He presses his nose into her hair, breathing in her scent. "Jackie's a rebel, just like you. She knew the risks when she joined us, the same as you did."

He hopes to God that's all true; he's winging it here. "All you'll achieve by going up there now is a pointless death. I'm not prepared to let you sacrifice yourself like that."

"I can't just not try!"

"You can, and that's an order. Now get back downstairs!" He tries to put as much force into the words as possible as he releases her and directs her back down to Owen with a hand between her shoulders. Let her hate him if she she has to; at least she'll still be alive.

Lips firmly clamped together, Rose obeys without another word, her whole posture screaming anger and defiance. The four of them hurry down the remaining stairs and into the transmat room. Ianto shuts and seals the door.

"Coordinates?" Jack asks, lifting his wrist console.

"Use your randomiser routine," Owen says. "Or do I take it you never got the chance for the memory reboot?"

Randomiser routine? Jack pokes at his console, finds a menu entry that fits the description, but then notices something else. "Oh shit. Do we have a Plan B?"

"This is Plan B," Owen growls. "Also C, D and E. Oh fuck it, don't tell me, port-blocks?"

Jack nods. "Some kind of globe shield around this whole structure preventing any kind of dematerialisation."

"We're buggered." Owen walks stiffly to the side of the room and bangs his head against the circuitry a few times. "Bastards always win, no matter what we do. How are we meant to fight an enemy who sees the future, for fuck's sake?"

"We've not lost yet," Rose says, her arms folded and tone strong. "It's sewer time. We just need to get out of the range of this port-block, and we'll still be in with a chance."


"Sewer it is then," Ianto says. "This way, gentlemen and lady." He leads them rapidly through the other door that leads off from the bottom of the stairwell, into a large darkened room full of exposed plumbing and large ungainly devices that appear to be old fashioned generators or furnaces. At the back, there's a manhole cover barely visible in the low lighting. Ianto lifts it up using a crow bar left nearby, probably for that exact purpose.
Jack checks his wrist console as he watches Owen then Rose climb down. "They're through the airlock upstairs," he says quietly before stepping into the manhole himself. Ianto climbs in after him and pulls the manhole cover back over the top, cutting off their light source. If there's illumination down here, it's been switched off.

Before Jack reaches the bottom, Rose and Owen have their flashlights out and working. Hard beams of light move over the brick-walled sewer. It's warmer down here than it should be, though being in Bombay may account for that. The smell is the same as any sewer he's ever known though. Drips and distant splashes are the only sounds not made by the four of them.

As his feet hit floor, Jack moves out to give Ianto room and then consults his wrist console. "We're not alone down here," he says as quietly as he can.

"Oh, of course not," Owen says harshly. "That'd be too easy. Which path for least resistance?"

Jack gestures left after briefly studying the map of the sewer system his console shows. "This way." He heads off in a jog in the direction he indicated, confident the others will follow. "I think I can steer us away from the hotspots if we're quick enough. Weapons out, team. As soon as we're free of the shield radius, we're out of here."

He doesn't have much hope. If he can see the enemy on his scan, then they'll be able to see him too, and judging by the armaments scanned, they're the enemy all right. They show as red dots on the display, whereas he and his team show as green. Interestingly, there are some other green dots down here, green normally denoting 'friendlies', and some grey dots too. The grey could be weevils. They would be in Cardiff, anyway. That is, the old version of Cardiff. Who knows if weevils even exist in this brave new universe.

His team's counting on him, even without the right memories, so he has to act as if they have a chance in hell of getting out of here alive. He leads them down the high-ceilinged sewer pipe until they hit a junction. He takes the right fork, having to half-crouch now but maintaining the fast pace, splitting his attention between his surroundings and the console display.

The flashlight beams of the other three dart around in front of him, occasionally catching frightened rats or other small creatures in their glare. Everywhere that they're not shining upon is pitch black, and Jack's navigating more by his console map than anything else. Nonetheless, he speeds up further, running now, as much as he can hunched over. Some of the red dots are gaining on them, and Jack strongly suspects them of being hover-bots. They won't be slowed down by the cramped and dark tunnels the way human-shaped enemies are.

"Got some friendlies showing nearby," he says, his voice raised to be heard over the splashing of their feet. There's little point in trying to be quiet anymore. "Anyone else likely to have made it down here?"

"The sewers are a regular patrol zone, sir," Ianto says. "They were probably out when the attack happened. Might not even know about it, No warning or alarm made it down to us, after all."

Owen chooses that moment to trip and fall. Rose hoists him back up before Jack has a chance to help, and they start running again. Owen mutters something dark about dysentery and cholera shots, but they have more immediate problems right now. Jack ups the pace still further, despite the conditions down here. The red dots are getting very close, but he and his team are only a few hundred yards from the edge of the transmat block. They might just make it.

The quickest route by far takes them straight to the green friendlies on his display. There's seven of them, which seems a lot for a simple patrol, but what does he know about what's normal around
here? He'd prefer not to lead the pursuit directly to these potential allies, but he doesn't seem to have a lot of choice about it.

"We're about to hit that patrol," he tells the others. "Weapons lowered, guys, but unholstered just in case."

Sprinting through the sludge, Jack leads them around the corner and is temporarily blinded by bright lights shone straight in his eyes. "Allies! Hold your fire!" he shouts, skidding to a halt and lifting his hands up. Someone runs into his back, but they both manage to stay upright.

"Well, well, well," a strangely familiar female voice says as the beams continue to shine straight into his eyes. "It's not often we get to see our illustrious leader down here with us sewer rats, is it, men?"

"There's pursuit directly behind us," Jack says urgently. "Drop the sarcasm and get running!"

"Suzie?" Owen's voice says from behind Jack. "Suzie Costello, is that you? For fuck's sake get the torches out of our eyes! It's us."

Suzie. Of course that's whose voice it is. Jack has a bad feeling about this. Shielding his eyes, he looks down at his wrist console. Between the glowing white splodges the flashlights have left on his retinas, he can just about make out that the pursuing red dots have stopped moving a couple of tunnels back from where they now are, just close enough to prevent any possible retreat. "This is a trap," he says hoarsely.

A trap he's just led his team straight into. God damn it.

"Quick as always, Captain," Suzie's voice says with a laugh. "Not quick enough to save yourself though. Oh, Borusa'll be beside himself when I hand over you and your right-hand fuckbuddy. Owen and the bleached bitch are expendable though, so I wouldn't suggest resisting. Drop your weapons."

"Do as she says," Jack orders. He has no idea who Borusa is, though the name is vaguely familiar, but it hardly matters anyway. It's clear enough Suzie means it, and he knows from experience that she's capable of murder. There are clatters and splashes as the others obey.

"Always thought there was something up with you, Costello," Rose says bitterly. "Mum thought so too. Said you were fake, that you didn't care for no one but yourself, not really."

"That'd be Jackie Tyler who couldn't even pass a Grade D aptitude assessment, would it? Oh, how I fear her opinion." Suzie laughs. "Was she caught upstairs when the swoop and lockdown happened? Oh dear, I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Shut up, you bitch!"

Jack catches Rose as she tries to run forward. "Don't rise to the bait," he hisses.

"She's just gagging for an excuse to have us shot, Rose," Owen adds. "Let it all just pass over you."

Suzie laughs again, the noise echoing in the tunnels. "Face the walls, hands raised. Any reluctance to obey orders will be taken as resistance and treated accordingly."

As Jack does as he's been told, making sure Rose does too, the flashlight beams finally drop from his eyes. He can make out the soldier types arranged in the tunnel in front of them, some kneeling, others standing behind them, all with automatic weaponry pointing at him and his team. He leans
his hands against the slimy sewer wall and tries desperately to think of a way out of this.

He feels hands patting his body down, removing his wrist console and all his other weapons, one by one. They must have a damn good scanner since they even find ones he didn't know he had, hiding behind personal displacement fields. Beside him, the others are being similarly treated.

Jack's hands are cuffed behind his back, and some kind of metal collar is placed around his neck. He feels pinprick pains as something in the collar punctures the skin over his spine. Not good. Things are looking pretty damn desperate here. "So what's the plan then, Suzie?" he asks, trying to sound unconcerned as if confident of rescue, but really he just manages defiant. "Where are you taking us?"

"After we transmat to Asia Central, you and Jones the cocksucker are going to have a nice little aircar ride across the sea to meet our lord and ruler, who must be just about coming in his undies at the thought of it. The Overlord'll grant him a new set of regenerations at the very least for your capture, and Borusa'll pass some of that gratitude down to me. Enough that I'll never have to wade through a sewer again, that's for sure."

"Sewers suit you, Suzie Costello," Owen says. "You always were a foul-mouthed harpy." The Suzie Jack remembers hadn't been, not really. He wonders if this Suzie and this Owen were lovers once as they had been in the past he remembers.

"Oh, Owen, do please continue in that vein," Suzie says, a grin obvious in her tone. "It would be a pleasure to play slice and dice with your scrawny body after having to spend so long pretending to find it attractive, all in in the name of infiltration."

Well, that answers that one. Jack can hear Owen growling like a damn weevil. Rose says in a low voice, "Let it all just pass over you, remember?"

"Okay," Jack says loudly. "So Ianto and I are off to party with local bigwigs. What about Rose and Owen?"

There's movement behind him and then Suzie speaks close to his ear. "They'll stay with us until you're handed over, to ensure your good behaviour. After that, well, maybe I'll let them go. You never know."

"Pull the other one," Rose says bitterly. "Resistance membership carries an instant death sentence. We all know that."

"Well then," Suzie answers gaily, moving back from Jack. "Maybe I'll do you the favour of a quick kill rather the standard 'torture until full confession' deal. If Captain Harkness does as he's told."

Considering he's weaponless, cuffed, and has what he strongly suspects of being an obedience collar around his neck, Jack feels almost complimented by Suzie's conviction that he's capable of doing anything other than what he's told. "I'll be a good boy," he promises grimly.

"Set up the transmat," Suzie orders. Jack can hear men moving behind him, presumably obeying. He shuts his eyes and tries the Matrix again, refusing to accept the 'out of order' message.

'Oh really, Captain,' says a cross voice, female this time. 'You're our only source of data on this new dimensional graft. What is it exactly that you think the Matrix can do for you right now?'

'At this point, I'll clutch at the shortest of straws,' Jack replies. 'Someone lurking in all those Matrix pocket dimensions must at least have some advice to offer.'
'Keep calm. Keep your team calm. Watch and listen at all times, and if your enemy seems conducive to chatter, encourage them to do so. If the unlikely should happen, and an opportunity should arise to escape, take it. Remember that keeping the Matrix from the hands of the enemy is more important than the lives of your team. There now. Did you really need to be told all that with your military training?'

No, of course he didn't. Sighing, he disconnects from the Matrix without answering. It's interesting that the Matrix considers this dimension's Time Lords to be the enemy though; he wouldn't necessarily have predicted that if he'd had the chance to give the matter some thought.

"Get them in the centre," Suzie is saying.

Jack's arm is grabbed, and he's moved roughly into the middle of the tunnel in a tight clump with his team and the soldiers. Rose is directly in front of him, and he can feel her body trembling against his. He bends his head to kiss her hair, the best comfort he can manage currently. She shifts and pushes back against him slightly.

"Prepare for transmaterialisation," Suzie says. 'Three, two, one..."

The normal sickening lurch is immediately followed by another, which is not at all normal, and for a moment Jack feels like he's being wrenched in two directions at once. Then he's on his knees on hard metal, blinking and very dizzy in a gold-green light. Nearby, someone is retching.

"Oh lovely," a supercilious male voice says. "And of course, he had to have floors that are more holes than solid surface area."

Jack knows that voice. Not well, but they've spoken more than once. He lifts his head and blears in the right direction. "Braxiatel?"

"Hello there, Captain. You've led us a merry dance, I must say. Hold on, we'll get you and your fellows out of those cuffs."

Brax is freeing them? Is he a good guy in this universe too? Jack does his best to look around, his eyes now starting to focus again. He counts nearby blobs that approximate to Rose, Ianto and Owen. It's Rose retching apparently. She seems to suffer badly from transmat sickness in this universe. Some do. As a time agent, Jack had the anti-nausea gene treatment well over a century ago. Or at least he did have, back in the old dimension, and the Matrix has presumably made sure his body retains the modified genes.

There's a familiar background noise here, and as Jack's hands are freed, he brings them to his face to rub at his eyes so he can check he's really hearing what he thinks he is. "A TARDIS? We're in a TARDIS?"

"The only TARDIS in existence, Jack," says a female voice behind him, presumably the person who released his hands. "The new breed of Time Lords have developed slightly different ways to travel spacetime."

Now that voice he'd know anywhere. He scoots around on his knees. "Romana!" She looks older, just a little but enough to be noticeable. Her hair is pulled tightly back from her face. "Is it really you?" he checks, lifting a hand to her face. "The Romana I know?"

She nods. "It's me, Jack. Like you, we remember the old reality, although for a different reason. We were there when this one sprang up from the corpse of the old one. It's been just over a half-century since we last spoke, relative to our timelines. Billions of years if you prefer to be linear."
She smiles. "It's good to see you."

"It's been, hmm, a day or so for me," Jack tells her. "I'm still very confused."

"Er, excuse me?" Owen's voice. "As you seem to be our gallant rescuers - and don't get me wrong, suitably impressed and grateful here - but before you get into detailed explanations, d'you think you might have a medikit I could cadge? Need to give Rose here the once over; she's been transmatted far too often today for someone in her condition, and those bastards in the sewers stole mine."

"What?" Jack stares at Rose. "Tell me you're not pregnant!"

"Oh, for..." She gives him an exasperated look. "Not that it'd be any of your business if I was, but Owen's just talking about me not being long out of recuperation."

Ianto seems to have shuffled to Jack's side without Jack being at all aware of the movement. He says quietly, "Rose was very badly injured in the line of duty, sir. She was in Regen & Recoop for a long time."

"Sorry," Jack says to Rose, meaning it. "Never did get to the memory back-up."

"If you'd care to follow me," Braxiatel says to Owen and Rose, "I can take you down to one of the med-rooms. Still reasonably well equipped even in these impoverished times."

As he watches the three of them head downstairs, Jack finds Romana moving around behind him again. "Keep still, Captain," she says, using a sonic screwdriver on the thing around Jack's neck. "Let's get this obscenity out of your nervous system, shall we?"

Jack stiffens and yelps wordlessly as a bolt of searing pain shoots up and down his spine, but then the collar falls into his lap. "Thanks," he says, rubbing at his sore neck. He takes a deep breath and sighs, assessing the situation.

So far, today isn't getting any less insane, but currently it's a kinder form of lunacy. He's sitting on the floor of a TARDIS - no, the TARDIS - sandwiched between Ianto and Romana. Really, things could be a hell of a lot worse. He manages a very genuine smile to share between two of his favourite people.

"Ianto Jones, meet Lady-President Romanadvoratrelundar of old Gallifrey. I'm sure she'll let you call her Romana since she's lovely that way. Romana, meet Ianto Llewellyn Jones, my very own adjutant and right-hand..." He remembers Suzie's words and winks at Ianto. "My right-hand pretty much everything really."

"Delighted." Romana smiles at Ianto. "We've heard a lot about you as we've waited for Jack to show himself, most of it libellous propaganda, I'm sure. The news networks seem to enjoy hypothesising about you almost more than they do the Captain here."

"I've heard a fair amount about you too, Lady President," Ianto says, bowing his head respectfully. "Which I imagine is a lot more based in truth considering my source. It's an honour to meet you."

"I'd thought we were done for," Jack tells Romana. "Your rescue couldn't have come at a better time."

"It couldn't have come at any other time, in fact," she says, settling into a cross-legged position and apparently unbothered by the hard metal beneath her breeches. "We had no idea where you were, you see. After all, if all the might and resources of New Gallifrey couldn't locate you, what chance
"Did the two of us have?"

"Your headset?"

"Destroyed by the rebel Time Lords at the time of the dimensional split, as was the Doctor's. All our attempts to put things right have failed, sometimes disastrously. That's how we lost Nicina. Our only remaining ideas for fixing this mess all involved finding you. We were certain you'd still exist, thanks to Matrix continuity, but where and when was another matter."

"So you had to wait for the New Gallifreyans to find me?"

Romana nods. "By a process of cross-triangulation, Brax was able to calculate roughly when in time your capture took place. We've been lurking in the Vortex, monitoring communications and setting up a beam interceptor. Having the only TARDIS has been an advantage. Some of its technology was never developed in this reality and can't so easily be blocked as a result. We're back in the Vortex now, hiding."

Jack nods. "I, uh, I'm not sure I want to ask this, but the Doctor?"

Romana leans forward and puts her hand briefly on his knee. "He's dead, Jack. I'm sorry. He's been dead for over three and a half billion years by now. His death is what started this whole mess."

It seems weird that something so long ago can hurt so much. "Tell me?" Jack says, staring at his hands.

"He was killed by the Master's genetically altered Time Lords, the ones who rebelled. From then on, all our plans fell apart. Brax, Nicina and I only just escaped with the TARDIS and our lives. We fled to the future, only to find the future corrupted beyond recognition, much of the universe under the yoke of a dark Time Lord empire."

"How bad is it?" Jack asks, not looking up. "I really haven't had a chance to find out anything yet."

"Very bad if you're any race but human. Slavery on a galactic scale and complete genocide of many species." Romana's hand settles on his leg again. "Oh Jack, the atrocities are countless. By stripping the resurrectees of their moral instincts, the Master created a race of hyper-intelligent sadistic monsters. We selected only the cream of Time Lord intellects for looming at the start of New Gallifrey, and the Master's scheme didn't change their innate talents, only their... tastes."

He puts his hand on Romana's and squeezes it before she takes it back. He looks up. "But humans have it... easier?"

"Because of you. They couldn't risk changing things too much on Earth for fear you'd never be born in humanity's future. Your reality transcends the universal paradigm, but you still needed to be born to appear in this dimension. They want the Matrix badly, considering it vital for future expansion. Borusa controls things very tightly, but on the whole, Earth is permitted to develop and prosper."

Jack takes a breath and holds it for a moment or two before releasing it. If the Matrix maintains a continuity in his memories and physical state from the reality in which he was made the Matrix, what has happened to the Jack who was born in the future of this reality? Not that Jack was his name back then, but close enough. He tries to force it all to make sense in his head, but largely fails. Even with his amplified panatronic brain, there are still concepts he's better off leaving to the Time Lords.

"That's why we spend so much of our time on Earth, sir," Ianto says quietly. "Easier to hide there,
or so we thought. I'd love to know how Suzie Costello made it through our psych-checks."

"If she had access to New Gallifreyan technology, it wouldn't have been hard," Romana tells him before looking back to Jack. "If anything, the new Time Lords have a technological prowess that exceeds what we had achieved by this century. They jumped over all those centuries in which we stagnated, forgetting so much of what we'd achieved. They were able to emulate many of the great achievements of Rassilon and Omega, enough to follow our original plan and jump New Gallifrey forward in time, to beyond the event horizon of the Extinction Device. Then they just... took over. Everything."

"I guess the Master had a lot to do with that," Jack says darkly, "both the emulation and the hunger for dominion."

"Oh no, Captain, not directly." Romana reaches out again, but this time pulls back before actually touching him. "The Master... oh, well, see for yourself." She gestures to the central console. No, to over the central console, to the other side of the room.

Jack stands up and looks. There's a body curled up on the captain's chair, a cover of some kind thrown over it. Swallowing, he walks over there, Ianto following, and he crouches down to study the face of the person. Despite the sunken features, vacant staring eyes and rangy beard, Jack can still recognise who he's looking at.

The open eyes don't follow Jack as he moves. Other then slow breathing, the slight body doesn't move at all. One hand is manacled to the chair, but that seems unnecessary to Jack.

He twists around to look at Romana. "If the Master is with you and is, as he seems, catatonic, then who's this Overlord I've been hearing about ever since waking up in this dimension?"

"Well, no one." She smiles weakly. "An iconic fiction. To start with we believed the lies too, but we managed to infiltrate their base by going back to when they were still new in the modern age. That's where we found him, pampered but mindless, with mute and mind-chained servants to tend to his physical needs."

"Oh God," Jack says in a hushed voice, looking back at the curled body. "Losing the Doctor broke him."

"Yes." Romana walks around to Jack. "The violent destruction of the entrelacement so soon after freeing him from the drums would have been too much for most minds to take, let alone one already so... damaged." She sighs down at the Master. "They've been using him as a figurehead, forging broadcasts from him for millennia. We're not sure why, but suspect it has something to do with the loyalty the Master genetically forced upon them. There's barely a sentient creature across several galaxies who wouldn't recognise the face under that beard and blame him for everything that's been done in his name."

"And they both seemed so hopeful after we kicked the Dancer out from his headspace." Jack pushes over-long hair from the Master's face. There's food or something in his beard. Maybe they should have stolen away a mute servitor or two at the same time they snatched the Master. God, that name was laughable now, looking at this poor bastard. "Wouldn't it be kinder to, you know..." He looks around at Romana again. "Just let him slip away?"

Not that it would be as simple as letting a brain-dead human die through passive euthanasia. Would starving him work, or would his body automatically regenerate at the point of death? Jack finds an unexpected lump in his throat. Who would've thought he could ever feel so sorry for the Master of all people?
Romana's frowning at him. "No. We haven't given up on him, on either of them. The Master would be an invaluable ally in our fight against New Gallifrey. We feel fairly certain he could recover if his link to the Doctor was restored."

"But how...?" Jack freezes; suddenly he understands what Romana wants. It's not just desire to use the Matrix as a general data source that's propelled her search for Jack; she wants the Doctor, his biodata. "Oh God. Oh no, Romana. I'm so sorry."

Her face becomes expressionless. "Has the Matrix become damaged somehow?"

"Not in the way you probably mean. The Doctor, he... Well, the day after the Master's attack on me, the Doctor distracted me and used the time my attention was elsewhere to wipe himself from the Matrix. I only found out when I died earlier today. He left me a Dear John note." Jack laughs entirely without humour. "He's gone, Romana. Really gone."

She stares at him. "Why? Why would he do such a thing?"

"He claimed it was a last ditch preventative against the Master's evil, and looking at what his death seems to have done to the Master, I can see his point. But even so, if you want my opinion..." He pauses, checking Romana's expression for permission. She nods ever so slightly, so he continues. "I think the Doctor's been wrestling with a death wish since the Time War. I've met his past incarnations. There's a... There was a darkness, a desperation in the last two that just wasn't there before. You must have seen it yourself."

"The War asked too much of all of us," Romana says brusquely, turning away and walking off a few steps. She's obviously upset and equally obviously wouldn't welcome a hug or offer of a shoulder right now.

Jack stares at her back, feeling bleak and still a little dizzy. He'd like to blame the transmat or something else physical for the dizziness, but he knows it's just that his brain, his supposedly superior amplified panatropic brain, is having problems keeping up. For a moment, he wonders if everything he's experienced today could possibly be a malicious illusion created by the pod creature he'd been wrestling when he died. That's just wishful thinking though. He wants all this to be a lie, wants it desperately.

He wants the Doctor to be alive.

Jack feels an arm slip around his waist and squeeze. With a sense of utter gratitude, he turns sideways and pulls Ianto close. Warm arms close around him, and Jack buries his face in the crook of Ianto's neck. He tries to stop thinking, to do nothing at all but breathe in the scent of the man, his man, for as long as this nightmare will allow it.

Which isn't all that long as it turns out. Footsteps sound on the metal staircase up to the Console Room, and Jack reluctantly lets Ianto go, stepping back.

Braxiatel appears at the top of the stairs. "I left them both down there. I don't think the medic trusts me. I can't think why when Time Lords have such a glowing reputation in this wonderful new dimension." He pauses, obviously taking in their expressions. "What's happened?"

Jack takes a deep breath, but Romana answers before he can figure out how to phrase things. "The Doctor isn't in the Matrix. He wiped himself from it shortly before his death in an apparent attempt to protect the universe from the Master."

"What?" Braxiatel screws up his face and scrapes his fingers back through his hair in a gesture
strangely reminiscent of the Doctor. "How on Gallifrey would that protect us all from anything? Beyond more of exactly this kind of stupidity from him, that is."

Romana gestures unhappily at the Master. "Do you really need to ask that?"

Braxiatel stares at her, clearly holding back strong emotion. Then he turns to the side and releases what sounds like a groan of pure exasperation, his fists clenched around the railing. "You know, I'm not even surprised, not really. If ever there was an irrational, nonsensical or completely insane way to do something, that boy would find it. His mind followed paths far... far..." He stops talking and clamps his lips together.

"It isn't your fault, Brax," Romana says softly. When Jack flicks a glance in her direction, he sees her eyes are closed.

"You and I both know better than that, Romana," Braxiatel answers eventually. "I had control of the forcefield, but let's not have that argument again." He sighs heavily. "I suppose a substantial rethink of our plans is in order."

"Not necessarily," Jack says slowly, staring down at the Master. "Your plan was to restore the Master to sanity, yes? Use the real Overlord against the empire of the fictitious one?"

Romana nods at him, looking a little puzzled. "That and, well, irrational or not, the Doctor's particular genius would have been enormously helpful too."

He gives her a tight smile. "Give me a chance to try something, would you?"

"What sort of something?"

Jack kneels down beside the Master, pushing that persistent lock of hair back from the man's face again. "I can't bring back the Doctor." However much he wishes that he could. What wouldn't he give? "But I may be able to recover your friendly neighbourhood overlord for you."

"How, Jack?" Romana asks, coming closer.

"Are you absolutely sure you want him back?" Ianto asks, almost at the same time.

Jack forces a reassuring smile for Ianto before answering Romana. "There's a thing I've noticed about this brain you've given me; it remembers. Okay, maybe not the histories of newly created realities that don't mesh with the Matrix reality, but the things I genuinely experience. Everything I witness, even if consciously I'm unaware of it, gets stored and never forgotten. Of course, I need to know it's there before I can use it, but thanks to the Doctor's letter I was able to rewind and discover how he deleted himself. I think I can use the same method reversed with the Master, get the up-to-date version of him into the archives. And then... well, we'll see."

He looks at Romana -- it has to be her choice -- and she nods. "Yes. Do it."

Jack turns to Ianto. "After uploading, I'm going to be inside my head for a while..."

Ianto nods. "I'll make sure you're comfortable, sir."

There's nothing forced about the smile Jack gives Ianto now. "You're a godsend."

He looks back at the Master and wonders how best to do this. He's sure a kiss isn't necessary and that the Doctor employed it mostly as a decoy for catching the attention of lustful Matrix keys. On the other hand, sticking to the blueprint laid out by the Doctor couldn't hurt. He takes his clean
handkerchief from his pocket and wipes the Master's lips. This is going to be almost like kissing a corpse, not that he hasn't done that before and more than once for various not-fun reasons.

Taking the Master's head into his hands, he gently presses their lips together, using the contact as a bridge and encouraging the Matrix to upload whatever it finds in the Master's mind. The data flows effortlessly through him. It all happens so easily he wonders why he hasn't tried it before. Well, the fact that Time Lords are generally not amenable to being kissed by a virtual stranger might have something to do with it, he guesses.

It doesn't take long, far less time than uploading via the headsets has taken in the past. Once the Matrix has it all, Jack pulls back from the kiss, and keeping his eyes shut, he opens the lakeside mindscape.

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Only it's not there. The base-level program is, but it opens only to a bare, white-walled room. A few seconds' thought tells him that the lakeside setting has been lost since the sensor fields that constantly updated it were disabled or destroyed back on prehistoric New Gallifrey.

Oh well. He can quickly create something perfunctorily, he's sure. Using the interface that the Doctor created just for him threatens his composure, but he keeps control as he puts together a simple room.

He already knows that Matrix personalities, however they were feeling just before their imprint was captured and uploaded, remain calm when in the Matrix, which is why he's fairly confident he can make contact with the Master this way. It's not that they don't have emotions, but they lack all intensity. Whatever drove them as living Time Lords no longer compels them to act as stored memories.

Despite this, Jack takes care to design a room that will, at the very least, not aggravate his guest. Sleek office furniture of steel and charcoal grey sit on a floor of polished ebony. Large windows look out high over the bright lights of a prosperous metropolis by night. He has a vague memory of the Master enjoying whisky during some of their unpleasant scenes together, so he adds a decanter of good single-malt and a pair of crystal tumblers. A stark black and white art print in a silver frame takes up a few square feet on the emptiest wall and that's it. Any more would, he thinks, be clutter to the Master's taste.

He sits down in one of the two executive chairs by the glass and steel coffee table and pours a generous measure of whisky into each tumbler. Then, after taking a sip from his, he leans back, takes a deep breath, and summons the Master to attend him.

The neat form of the Master appears in the other chair. Clean-shaven, suited, and with his hair smartly clipped, he's a far cry from the ruin Jack left curled up in the TARDIS.

The Master takes a look around himself, sees Jack, and snorts softly, the corners of his mouth twitching up. "Do you know," he says, "ever since it became clear you were the Matrix key, Captain, I've been waiting for the day you would turn the tables on me, be the one in charge. This," he waves a hand casually about him, "is not what I expected."

"What can I say?" Jack says wryly. "I've lost any taste I ever had for torture."

Leaning forward, the Master picks up his tumbler. He moves his hand in a gentle circular motion, creating little waves in the whisky. "Is this all for me? The room, the décor? It hardly seems like your taste."
"I did my best. If there's anything you'd like changed, feel free to suggest it."

The Master shakes his head, still half-smiling. "You notice a great deal, don't you? I thought I'd stopped under-estimating you, but well done! Not many manage to surprise me so often." He toasts Jack with his tumbler before sipping from it. "Am I dead? I don't seem to be able to remember."

"Not dead, no." Though Jack suspects the Master may wish he was when he finds out the truth. "What's the last thing you recall?"

Frowning, the Master, brings the fingers of his free hand up to rub at the bridge of his nose. Then he smiles. "Sex. Really damn good sex with the Doctor in the woods." He licks his lips and then smirks at Jack. "Would you like a play-by-play account?"

Jack rolls his eyes and says, "No, but thanks for the offer." He steadfastly ignores the little voice inside him that wants to know every little pornographic detail. "You can't remember anything after that?"

Tipping his head back a little, the Master taps at his teeth. "Ah ha!" he exclaims, holding up a pointing finger. "Our pleasant afterglow was interrupted by an alarm from the TARDIS. My idiotic rebels were coming down from the hills; they wanted to parley. They... they..." The Master's eyes widen and fill with something that may be horror, and he bites his lip hard.

Jack leans forward, ready to act, though what he can do to help, he's not sure. A vivid red trail drips down from the Master's biting teeth, over his chin. This is the subdued, Matrix version of the emotions, Jack reminds himself. The real world event must have obliterated the Master's mind instantly. "I'm so sorry."

The Master moves suddenly, shoving the coffee table violently aside so that the decanter slides off it and smashes. The sour smell of whisky fills the air. He drops to his knees before Jack and grabs at his sleeves. "He's here though, isn't he? In the Matrix. Let me speak to him, see him, please? Please, Jack."

The irony of having the Master on his knees before him, begging so earnestly, is not lost on Jack. Shouldn't he be laughing that it's come to this? Instead he feels like his heart is being crushed in a fist. "I would if I could, Master. Oh God, believe me, I would."

"Why... why not?"

Jack shakes his head, leaning back, away from the Master's pain. It's too real, and it's making it very hard to ignore his own. "See for yourself," he says roughly, conjuring the Doctor's letter with a thought and shoving it towards the Master.

The Master takes the letter without a word and sits back on his heels. Jack looks away, not wanting to witness his reaction. Eventually the Master gets up, and Jack turns to watch him walk stiffly to the windows to stare out over the image of the city. The letter lies discarded on the floor where he'd knelt.

The Master lifts a hand and places it flat and slightly splayed on the window pane. "I thought you had no taste for torture," he says in a cold, distant voice.

"I take no pleasure in your pain, Master, and it's not my... my objective in talking to you."

There's a long pause before the Master says, "You mentioned that I'm not dead."

"That's right."
"I assume therefore that I'm in a coma or something equally fun."

"Catatonic stupor would be my best amateur guess," Jack says. "You've been like that for what must add up to a lot of years, apparently."

"Oh lovely. How not at all humiliating. I begged him not to let me live mindless, you know? He promised me he wouldn't. Lying bastard, hope those sodding lasers hurt like hell."

Jack closes his eyes. "I suspect they did."

"Do you know the details of how it happened?" the Master asks. Jack hears him stride over. "Is our dear Lady Prez out there in the real world? Did she tell you?"

Jack opens his eyes. "Only that he was killed by the rebels, not how."

"Want to see it?"

Jack levels gazes with the Master. "Show me."

The Master smirks coldly. "I knew you would. You're two of a kind, you and him." He starts gesturing theatrically. "Care for another slice of guilt, sir? Don't mind if I do, my good man! It's a particularly fine vintage you have on offer today. Yes, sir. We make it ourselves from full-fat sin, hand-milked then pressed and matured in tubs made from honest contrition." He reaches out and touches Jack's temples. "Here, have the whole bloody wheel! Your arteries will love it!"

Jack watches in horror as the Master's memories replay against his eyes. He listens to the rebels explaining their distorted reasoning, sees the hostage freed, and the rebel raise and fire his makeshift gun. The view whirls around, and Jack sees the Doctor, cut nearly in two by the lasers, falling to the grass. The camera, or rather the Master, hurtles forward to the Doctor's body.

The Doctor's mouth is open, making little gasping noises as his autonomic nervous system continues to try to breathe without pneumatic pressure. Jack watches close up as hands, the Master's hands, move frantically over the wrecked body.

The Master turns to the gunman and says something; for some reason Jack doesn't get to hear what, though he sees the gory results of it splattering everywhere.

Along with the Master, Jack groans with relief as the regeneration process begins in the Doctor's body, and he feels how the Master experiences it via the entrelacement link. In other circumstances, it would be an incredible sensation. But then the Master is dragged backwards, helpless to interfere as laser beams fire unceasingly at the Doctor's body. Clothing and flesh blackens, falling from bones in small piles of greasy ash. The bones themselves sear and crack, steam rising from the breaks.

The regeneration is stymied, the Doctor dead, and the Master screaming his way into black oblivion.

Jack's vision clears to see the Master pulling back, straightening. There are tears on the Master's cheeks, though his expression is still cold and angry. Jack feels dampness on his own face and wipes at it with an impatient hand. "Master..."

"Don't you dare feel sorry for me. Don't you dare." The Master takes out a neatly folded handkerchief and dabs at his face as if at a small wound. "Pity yourself if you have to feel sorry for someone. You loved him."
"So did you."

The Master raises an eyebrow. "I thought I couldn't love? I thought I was a psychopath?"

"I was wrong. The Dancer took..."

"I miss her," the Master says savagely, turning away. "Do you think if I called loud enough she'd hear me and come back?"

Jack sighs, feeling incredibly weary. "You won't do that. I won't allow it."

"So masterful, Captain." The Master whirls back round, grinning manically. "I know, we should swap titles! I could gad about like Casanova on Viagra, fucking anything vaguely humanoid that's prepared to let me near enough, and you, you get to rule the galaxy!"

"Actually that would still be you, Overlord."

"Huh?"

"Thanks to your genetic fiddling, the Time Lords have conquered and oppressed multiple galaxies, all in your name. The universe is a very different place, and you are the face on every credit chip."

The Master stares at him. "Oh, there really is a limit to how much irony anyone can be expected to take. So I get to be ruler of the universe only when I'm a catatonic vegetable? Too cruel, Captain. Your revenge has slipped into the ridiculous."

"I am, unfortunately, telling the truth. Ask the Matrix. You can do that."

The Master scowls and walks a few steps away, but Jack, with his control of the indices, can tell the Master's doing what he's been told. Most of the information the Matrix can provide will come directly from Jack's memories of today, of course; hardly the ideal way for the truth to be revealed.

After a few minutes, the Master comes quietly over and sits in his chair. "I look like a human tramp," he says miserably. "A meths-rotted failure at life. Is there no way I can persuade you to kill that husk, Captain?"

"I'd do it if Romana didn't need your help so much."

"What can I offer that she needs me so badly? Has she forgotten how all this fun and games in empire building came about? I could advise, I suppose, but that's not going to save the universe from my dastardly minions. Maybe I should just claim what they've so helpfully created for me? Do you think I should do that? I have, after all, always thought the universe would be a lot happier under my benign will."

Benign? Jack snorts and shakes his head. "No, I don't, and judging by what you just showed me, while I think your corrupted empire builders would be overjoyed to have a real figurehead again, the only times they'd obey your orders would be when they were going to do it anyway." With a wave of his hand, Jack restores the coffee table to its previous position, complete with unsmashed decanter and tumblers. "Do you really want to rule the universe, Master? Wouldn't it be like reading the end of a book before you start it? No surprises left."

"There are other universes out there," the Master says, his lips smiling but his eyes ice-cold. "Infinite space means infinite challenge."

"The Doctor was wrong in his letter? Is that what you're saying? Even without him to witness it,
you'd still *veni, vedi and vici* your way through existence?"

The Master just watches Jack silently, not answering, his expression bland.

Jack sighs. He could use his Matrix god-card to force the Master to answer, to admit that he is indeed 'all about the Doctor', but what would that really achieve? "Romana wants you out there in this universe," he says in the end. "In your body. The Overlord on the side of the resistance. Used cleverly in ways I'm sure you could come up with, it might even make a difference."

"It won't. Why should I help anyway? What did old Gallifrey ever do for me?" The Master pours himself another drink and then gestures with the decanter at Jack, offering to pour for him too.

Jack nods, pushing his tumbler over. "You helped in the Time War."

"In a conflict between Skaro and Gallifrey, Gallifrey wins as far as my tenuous loyalty is concerned. But you're asking me to side with two people who've never had the slightest respect for me, against a Time Lord empire that I could rule." The Master smiles, his gaze distant. "Ooh yes, give me a decade as their figurehead *in situ*, and I'd be their leader in truth as well as name. You know I could do it."

Jack nods. "Do you want to do that? Answer that fully, please." He has to force this one to make sure bringing the Master back is not a terrible mistake.

The Master gives him a sour look. "I could at least take revenge on Drexin if I did. Don't you want him screaming for what he did to the Doctor? I could take him apart, little bit by little bit..."

"Master," Jack says sternly.

The Master winces then purses his lips angrily, but finally he says, "No, not particularly. I don't fancy this particular throne. Happy, boss? That the answer you wanted?"

"Don't you want to rule the universe anymore?"

Obviously hating the enforced honesty, the Master says, "Not on my own." He sighs and then seems to relax, pouring whisky into Jack's tumbler and pushing it back towards him. "I always wanted to rule it with him. I kept offering..."

As if the Doctor ever would. "I didn't think you'd want to now, but I had to make sure. I'm sorry. I'm sure it must be unpleasant to be forced to talk."

The Master flicks him a glance. "Well, you'd know."

Jack allows the Master that one under the circumstances.

The Master leans back, sipping his drink. "You should also know that I won't do what Romana wants either. Anyway, what makes you think you can get Tom of Bedlam out there *compos mentis* again?"

"The Matrix has returned the order to your mind that trauma corrupted. I think I can put the 'you' you are in here back into your mind so you can take control of yourself again. If your current brain can't be rewritten like that, then we can loom a new you and do it that way." Jack swigs back the last of his single-malt. "Look, I'll go back out there and shave you myself if it'll help. I'm not a bad emergency barber either."

The Master's expression is surely deliberately comical. "The shame of it would force me to suicide
the instant I had control of my body again!"

Jack shakes his head, beginning to feel annoyed. "Master, you've seen the inside of my still living body more than once. You've made me beg using words you dictated, made me weep, scream uncontrollably, lose control of my physical functions, and, oh yeah, come hard even as I wanted desperately to kill you. Almost all of it while the Doctor was forced to watch. If I can survive all that and still maintain my dignity, then you can damn well cope with me doing a little nurse-maiding. Or are you really so weak that you'll let a little humiliation kill you?"

The Master looks at him sullenly then turns away. "I'm sorry about the torture," he says awkwardly.

Jack snorts. "Sure you are."

"I can't lie to you here, boss man, remember? I don't expect you to be impressed; don't worry." The Master breathes in heavily through his nose and then sighs. "Even if I do what you want, it won't change anything. My new-breed Time Lords have had centuries to create an invincible empire. They may have seemed idiotic because of the way I played with their characters, but each one of them remained a genius in his or her own field. Simply introducing a rebel who looks a lot like their fictitious leader, however cleverly we do it, isn't going to make a difference to the status quo."

"Do you have a better suggestion?"

The Master slants his mouth. "I do, but you're not going to like it... Actually, I might be wrong about that."

"Try me." Jack folds his arms.

Smiling without humour, the Master says, "Using the Matrix's link to the old reality, return to the day Lucy shot me and stop yourself interfering. Let me die."

The universe would revert to one in which New Gallifrey was never founded. The Doctor would be back, alive, but alone and needy, and Jack's not, just not, going to let his thoughts go along that track any further. "Is that even possible?" he asks instead.

"Yes, it can definitely be done providing I do it," the Master says. "That is, I do the technical genius side of things. Someone who wasn't there the first time better do the physical stopping. We don't want to attract any reapers, do we? Nasty things, reapers. Ever met any? No?"

Jack shakes his head, still trying to persuade himself he doesn't love this idea.

"Oh well. You're lucky." The Master toasts Jack with his tumbler. "Anyway, I'd have to play with the TARDIS, and you'd have to be prepared to be wired up like a component for a short while..."

He nods, smiling distantly. "This is the sort of thing I excel at, playing with time and space."

"It sounds like another over-elaborate suicide plan to me," Jack says, then frowns. "Only you had a get out of jail free card, didn't you? Your ring."

"By all means have your other self instructed to confiscate the ring." The Master turns the memory of said ring around on his finger. "Destroy the Laz Labs machines. Make sure I can never come back."

"You don't want to survive this?"

"Drums and no Doctor? No, it doesn't appeal. Not now." The Master closes his eyes briefly as if
hiding from something, but then looks at Jack. "Once you reset the universal timeline, do me a favour and kiss the idiot? Get his memories back in here where they belong. Maybe you'll let us visit each other occasionally. You know, just to rub in how much better a man you are than I, Gungajack." He winks, but his joviality isn't hiding the resigned need behind his words.

Jack ignores the dig easily. "I can promise that kiss, presuming I remember all this, and I think I will. The Matrix gives me a kind of linearity that transcends the rewriting of history. I don't get your parallel memories, but a straight chain that jumps dimensions and stays coherent."

"You'll remember providing the Matrix is awakened in the 'you' we're reverting to. We'll have to write that into the plan." The Master nods again. "Of course, this all hinges on you being right about enabling me to take control of myself again."

"And on you being able to convince Romana that returning to a Gallifreyless universe is a good plan. I'm not sure she's ready to give up."

"Oh, I think I can persuade our dear Lady Prez. Like the Doctor, she has a conscience and so is easily manipulated. And of course, she'll still be in that little black box in the Cloister Room. It will be entirely up to you whether you tell the Doctor or not. I want nothing more to do with it all after we've fixed this mess. I've had enough of the universe, and I suspect it's rather had enough of me too."

Jack snorts. "Feeling a little responsible, are we?"

"Captain, bitchiness does not become you. Leave the sharp tongues to the evil geniuses in your company. Strong-jawed hero types are meant to be above that sort of thing."

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"Ow! Rassilon damn this junkyard box to the death zone!"

Rose giggles quietly beside Jack as the Master's highly irritated voice wafts up from below the Console Room, and Jack shakes his head, smiling.

The TARDIS has been rewired before by the Master and apparently isn't keen to repeat the experience. The isomorphic settings on the controls have long-since been removed by Romana. Now, however, every few minutes or so, the TARDIS seems almost to be taking pleasure in resetting controls back to 'isomorphic with warning electrical bursts'.

The Master's been working on and cursing at the TARDIS for several hours. After Jack reset his mind with the straightened out Matrix version, the Master rose from his stupor exactly how Jack hoped he would. He didn't say much at first except for some muttered complaints at Romana and Braxiatel about his unkempt condition, but he refused all help despite his obvious tremble and weakness. After re-emerging from the bathroom with clean clothes and considerably less hair, he called for a meeting.

All seven of those aboard the TARDIS attended. The Master wasted no time in putting forward his scheme and arguing his case, which was simply that the universe was better off the way it was after the Time War, with no Gallifrey around to interfere with it, and it would still be that way if something no longer a natural part of a linear universe had not interfered.

That unnatural something being Jack. Of course.

He didn't like, and still doesn't like, the implicit accusation that he's ultimately to blame for this whole mess. The Doctor had been heart-broken, and he'd just been trying to help when he kept the
Master alive. What about other crux moments Jack has 'interfered' in? Should he have left Abaddon to consume the world? Of course, Abaddon may never have arisen if Jack had never taken over Torchwood Three. Oh God. Dare he even breathe?

After some thought, Romana starkly agreed to the Master's plan. She didn't have much choice; the Master refused to help with any scheme but his own, and they owed it to the universe to put things right even if that meant Time Lord extinction again.

Romana herself would be the one to right wrongs on the Valiant because only she could awaken the Matrix in the Jack of that reality. Jack and the Master went over their memories of events towards the end on the Valiant together, and it was decided that Romana, protected by a perception filter, would intercept Jack on his way back from destroying the paradox machine.

Before the Master was allowed to even touch a sonic screwdriver, Jack forced another kiss on him under Romana's instructions and uploaded a quick update. Back in the Matrix, he was able to double check that the Master didn't have any duplicitous plans, which he didn't, beyond looking forward to the death Jack had denied him.

After being perhaps the greatest survivor the universe has ever known, the Master now looks forward to death.

It's just a question of waiting now while the Master works, so here Jack is, waiting to be plugged into the TARDIS and trying very hard not to feel happy at the prospect of a universe with a needy Doctor and no Master in it.

There's another brief flash of light from below the grating floor and another cry, followed by, "Is that po-faced idiot Braxiatel up there?"

"No," Jack calls down. "Just Rose and me currently. Do you need something?"

The Master sticks his neatly cropped head up through the grating. "Yes, I need someone who understands tesseractulator circuitry. Does that describe you, Captain?" He lifts an eyebrow. "Or the delectable Miss Tyler perhaps, how about you? Your counterpart in the other universe stared into the heart of the TARDIS and destroyed thousands of Daleks with a thought. A spot of transinfratonic welding should be easy after that."

Jack and Rose roll their eyes at each other. "Tell you what," Rose says, "I'll use my super-dooper TARDIS power to go fetch Brax up here, shall I?"

The Master tips his head to one side and smiles in a way he probably imagines is 'sweetly'. "Would you? So kind. I can quite see what the Doctor saw in you."

Rose snorts and stands, heading down the spiral stairs. As soon as she's out of sight, the Master's smile drops into an expression of disgust. Jack folds his arms and frowns sternly at him. "You can stop that before you even start.

The Master raises his hand to his open mouth, play-acting shock-horror. "Was I bad in posse? Will you have to spank me?"

"You should be so lucky." Shaking his head, Jack points out, "I do actually know some TARDIS tech, and what I don't know, I can learn fast enough." He points at his temple. "Amplified panatronic, remember? I can handle the calculations."

Dropping the theatrics abruptly, the Master nods. "Possibly, but in a few minutes, it's you I'm going to need help wiring in. Enjoy your freedom to move while you still can, Captain." Without an
exaggerated expression to animate his face, the Master looks worn, too thin and sallow-skinned. He's decades older than the last time Jack saw him, of course, but the weariness goes beyond simple age.

"A tetchy TARDIS aside, how are you doing?" Jack asks.

"I'll last as long as I need to last." The Master strokes his thumb over the sonic screwdriver in his hand. "Soon you'll be the only living being with a memory of this wacky fun reality where I get what I've always wanted far too late for it to mean anything at all. Are everybody's lives this soaked in twisted irony or just mine? What do you think?"

"I've certainly had my share, and I'm a fraction of your age. Sometimes I think someone out there has a convoluted sense of humour."

The Master looks at Jack appraisingly and then nods. "Do you ever wonder if it would have been better to be one of the sheep? Accepting whatever nonsense you're told, obliging all social expectation, never having ambitions beyond the mundane, and never, ever pushing at any boundaries? Do you think they're happier, the sheep?"

Jack scratches his head, unsure what to make of this previously unseen philosophical side to the Master. "Well, by only ever doing what they're told, I guess they always at least have someone else to blame when it all goes wrong."

"Whereas people like us, Captain?"

"When we try to change the world, we only have ourselves to blame when it changes into something we don't like."

The Master smiles ruefully, biting his lower lip, his gaze falling to the grating. People are coming up the stairs. "Ah, Braxiatel," he says as the other Time Lord climbs into view. "How obliging of you to come when summoned, giving me the happy illusion of power."

"I, of course, live only for the opportunity to bring you such joy." Braxiatel smiles emptily at the Master. "I suppose you want me to hold a nail in place while you hammer clumsily at it." He walks over to the Master as Rose climbs to the top of the stairs behind him.

"Something like that," the Master says, disappearing below the grating again. "Ever considered a career in electrical insulation?"

As Brax disappears below floor level, Jack stands up and starts doing a series of stretches, taking the Master's advice seriously. The fact that showing off his body like this pulls all sorts of appreciative glances from Rose is just frosting on the muffin.

"So how much longer do we all get to live then?" she asks as she watches.

Jack winces and straightens in order to study her for a few moments. "Does it feel like that to you? Like you're going to your death?"

She moves close to him. "Jack, you get to live and to remember. The Time Lords, well, they've got a guaranteed retirement home thanks to you, haven't they? Me, Owen and Ianto though, this is goodbye for us. And for everyone back on Earth. I mean, tell me if I'm wrong." She puts her hand on his chest. "Please tell me I'm wrong."

It's very hard not to look away. "You're not wrong. I'm sorry." He lifts a hand to touch her face. "You do have living counterparts in the other reality though. Admittedly, yours isn't exactly in the
same dimension as the rest of us."

"So you said."

"But you're free. No Time Lord empires. No midnight raid death squads and big brother thought police. You're happy with your mom and dad. Mickey Smith, too."

She smiles sadly. "It'll be nice to see him again. Only I won't, will I? Won't be me seeing him. It'll be this other Rose, your Rose, with the long hair and all her fingers. No scars, either, I'll bet."

He pulls her close and hugs her. "Do you want us not to do this?" he asks, stroking her hair. "We did say we all had to agree for this to happen."

She shrugs in his arms, pushing her face into his shirt. "I would've said at the time if I'd wanted that. Mum's dead, and I've kinda lost the will to keep fighting an enemy that always wins. Just promise me something?"

"Anything."

"The old reality that'll replace this one, promise me it's better? People are happier, right?"

"Things aren't perfect," Jack says carefully. "Especially on Earth. The Time Lords have done the Earth a few favours with their technology and enforced peace. Some humans of this time period are better off in this dimension than the old one. But taken as a whole, the universe is a far, far happier and more diverse place without the Time Lord regime."

They stand still for a while, just holding each other, and Jack wrestles with his guilt for wanting this big reset as much as he does. Rose's maimed hand moves slightly on his chest, the remaining fingers stroking.

Eventually she says, "So you met me through this Doctor bloke back in the good old 'verse, did you?"

"Kind of." Jack smiles. "It was 1941 in London, German bombers filled the skies, which I guess they never did in this reality. You were there with the Doctor, but I met you first, not him. You just fell into my arms, literally."

"Oh yeah?"

"Oh yeah! I rescued you from peril, and we drank champagne and danced to Glenn Miller in the light of Big Ben's clocktower as bombs fell all around us." Hearing Moonlight Serenade in his head, he starts to lead Rose in a slow shuffle.

Rose laughs. "Pull the other one!"

"It's true! Then we went to meet the Doctor and a near perfect ménage à trois was born."

"Really? Me, you and a Time Lord, all at it together?"

Jack chuckles. "Not quite, but I was working on it."

"Who's Glenn Miller?"

"If there's no Glenn Miller in this reality that just proves it's all wrong." Jack hums the tune that's in his head and closes his eyes, moving his hands slowly over Rose's back and remembering when he held her like this before.
"Oh captain, my captain?" The Master's voice cuts into the dance like another suitor. "Much though I'd rather not witness so touching a mutual grope, let alone interrupt it, I'm here to say come in number sixty-nine, your time is up."

"Ready for me?" Jack looks around to where the Master's head and shoulders are sticking back out of the hole in the floor. "I'll be right down." The Master disappears from view again, and Jack pulls away from Rose with a regretful smile. "Time for me to become a hard-wired modem for a little while."

"I'd better go find Owen anyway," she says. "When I went to fetch Brax, he and Ianto were building up to one of their squabbles."

Jack winces. "Just keep both of them away from any firearms, would you?"

She lifts her eyebrows. "Do I want to know?"

Jack shakes his head. "No, you really don't." He kisses her softly on the cheek before she leaves.

After clambering down into the cramped space below with the Master and Braxiatel, Jack finds himself being sat down on a cushion they've found from somewhere. He leans back against the central column, and the Master fits a modified headset onto his head. It's now connected by several lines straight into the uncovered TARDIS workings down here.

"What precisely is it that this set-up's meant to achieve?" Jack asks, thinking he really should have asked for the details before now.

"I'm linking the Matrix directly to the tesseractulator via your internal interface," the Master says from where he's crouching close beside Jack. He's fiddling with some controls, trying apparently to balance out some graph lines on a nearby panel. "I had to use Romana's presidential seal to ensure the Matrix would let me in, but it should work."

"And this will allow us to reach the old reality?"

"The idea," Brax says from further away, "is to go back to before the founding of New Gallifrey, say to 12 million years before Rassilon, and then come forward again, using the Matrix memories of events rather than external reality as our guide through time. This should, the Master claims, force us into the currently redundant version of things, where we can change things and reset the universe."

"I don't just claim it," the Master says tetchily. "I know it. Really, Brax, I'm a much better temporal engineer than you. Why not just accept my word on this for once?"

"I've generally made it a policy never to accept your word on anything, Master, ever since I first met you as that insolent little toerag at the Academy, leading Thete into ever more ludicrous misadventures with each passing semester. It's a policy that's stood me in good stead over the years since."

"He led me into far more trouble than I ever led him," the Master mutters, low enough that perhaps only Jack can hear it against the background noise of the TARDIS engines. "He was simply much better than me at looking innocent and slightly confused whenever we got caught."

Jack smiles, looking down, able to visualise the two boys together surprisingly easily.

"I'll head up and find the Lady President, shall I?" Brax says. "I take it we're soon to be ready for her touch on the controls above?"
The Master nods at him, and Brax lifts himself up to the higher level and heads off. Jack turns his head as much as the set up will let him and looks at the Master, whose hands are rather obviously shaking. "Have you eaten since regaining consciousness?"

The Master smiles a slanted smile. "When you woke me up like Briar Rose with your oh so delicate kiss, you mean? Unless I've forgotten an occasion, you've forced your lips on mine four times now. Is there something I should know? Or have you just got such a hard-on for Time Lords that even my nasty old mouth will do in desperate times?"

"You've forced far worse on me," Jack points out calmly, having no intention of answering the question. It's not like the Master answered his, after all.

"So I have." The Master looks away, using the sonic on a small component in his hands. "Not that I'm in any way doing this for you, but take consolation in the fact that you'll soon have the Doctor all to yourself."

"I'm not unaware of that," Jack admits cautiously. "It'll be strange, being the only one in the universe to remember all this, like you said."

"You and a handful of Matrix ghosts, anyway. The Doctor may start to remember some of it too, like a dream he once had, as he lives again through the days he spent on New Gallifrey. Such is the Time Lord brain."

Jack frowns. "Do you want me to tell him what he's remembering, if he does? For that matter, should I admit to him I'm the Matrix key?"

"Your choice, Captain. Or Romana's if you'd rather. Whoever fucks up this time round the merry-go-round, it won't be me." The Master smiles at Jack, but then the expression fades, and he looks down. "Do you know, I really can't be having with emotions. Appalling, irrational things. I feel positively grateful to the Dancer for saving me from them for so long." He snorts, apparently reviewing his own words.

"Apart from anger and hate," Jack points out. "She didn't save you from those. I have very clear memories of you feeling those."

The Master nods. "Like a dalek, and there's yet more of that ubiquitous irony for you." He closes his eyes. "Gods, it hurts. No Doctor, no Dancer. Just emotions I lack the experience to handle, and his TARDIS, his friends all around me, smelling of him, even tasting of him in your case, and how the hell have you managed that? I can't stand it, any of this." He shivers. "I don't expect your sympathy."

"You're doing very well," Jack says, unsure what else to do. "Not much longer now, and you can rest in the Matrix. I'll let the two of you have access to my mindscape whenever I don't need it, if you want that."

"Where you will of course have complete awareness of everything we do together." The Master laughs.

Jack shrugs. "I can't help that. Would it really bother you?"

"Me? No. I probably owe you a few dozen uncomplicatedly cheap thrills. The Doctor, however, possibly."

"And the lack of a physical reality, will that bother you?"
The Master turns his back on Jack to refit the component he's been working on. "The universe, this universe, isn't real without him in it. He's the quantum god who creates reality simply by being there to witness it."

Reality for the Master is wherever the Doctor is. How could Jack ever have thought the Master didn't love the Doctor? 

Above them, Jack can hear people in the Console Room, shadows moving over the holes in the grill that forms the ceiling down here. He closes his eyes and doesn't open them when the Master says, "Won't be long now. Do try to remember to stay still when the datafeed activates." Jack nods, and he hears the Master move away, heading up to the others.

Oh God. The guilt Jack's feeling for wanting the Doctor to himself - well, comparatively - is growing ever more entrenched, and yet he still wants it. His breath still catches at the thought of it.

It'll be different from before, since now he knows what he is. Immortal, capable of superior understanding, tasting of Gallifrey and awash in artron energy, how will the Doctor be able to resist Jack when there are no real Time Lords left?

Of course, it'll mean deserting his team, and he's not sure how he feels about that. He just got them all working together, bonding like the family they should be, after the nightmare of the Rift opening and Abaddon. And he'll be going back to a time when that will have only just happened so they'll need his help all over again, won't they?

Neither is he sure how he feels about deserting Ianto in particular. Ianto needs him, and now, especially after experiencing the unquestioning support offered by this dimension's Ianto, Jack's not so sure he doesn't need Ianto right back.

What was that the Master said about irony? He closes his eyes and tips his head back.

In the end, he isn't wired in for too long. The TARDIS moves back to the early prehistoric, and then the Master switches over to Matrix control. Jack's aware of the vast amounts of data passing through him, but only in the same way he'd be aware of river water flowing around his legs. The TARDIS moves forward to 2008, Earth time, and emerges from the Vortex. Happy cries coming from above suggest the Master's plan has worked perfectly.


"The Matrix has the plan for this set-up in case the Doctor ever needs to use it again. You better go and make your goodbyes. Romana's wearing the perception filter bracelet; she's impatient to leave. Short time window and all that."

Jack rises into a crouch, all he can manage in this cramped space. "Aren't you coming up?"

"No, I think I'll spend my last few moments human-free, if you don't mind." The Master sits down on the cushion Jack just vacated and draws his knees up to his chin. He stares straight forward at nothing Jack can see.

Jack considers arguing, but in the end decides the Master's earned it, if that's what he wants. He himself wants company as he waits for this version of himself to fade away, and his team deserve his presence at the end.

As he heads up through the hole, the Master calls out, "Captain?"

"Yeah?"
"Look after him for me? Keep him from his most idiotic follies and watch for that death wish we both know he has."

Jack pauses and looks back at the Master, who appears almost childlike curled up so tightly back in the gloom. "I'll do my best."

"He likes to be treated a little roughly, and ooh, leather gloves. You mustn't forget them."

Jack winces. "Master..."

The Master's eyes seem to shine briefly in the shadows. "Just... just make him happy, Jack. I did, for a little while."
"So," Jack says, holding the cuffed Master by his collar like a naughty schoolboy.

Watching from halfway down the stairs, the Doctor can see there's something wrong about Jack... Well, of course there is. How anyone could survive what he's been put through and remain sane, the Doctor'll never know. The only way the Doctor coped with being made to watch it was by concentrating on how unbroken Jack always remained, no matter what, every time he returned to life. Perhaps the unnatural process healed Jack's mind as much as it did his body.

But there's something wrong with him right now, something wide-eyed and strained. Did destroying the paradox machine cause it somehow?

Oh, his poor TARDIS.

"What do we do with this one?" Jack asks, and his voice has an edge to it too, like he's on the verge of laughter or something even stranger.

"We kill him," Clive says from the platform.

"We execute him." Tish agrees, her voice hard.

"No." The Doctor turns around on the stairs to face them. "That's not the solution." He didn't put up with a year of hell only to lose the Master now. He's so close to what he wants, what he's waited so patiently for.

"Oh," Francine says in a low voice, "I think so." The Doctor whirls around to see her raising a gun to point it at the Master. Where the hell did she get that from?

Oh God. The Doctor comes slowly down the stairs behind her. He can't let this happen. Not now. Please, not now.

"Cause all those things," Francine's saying, "they still happened. Because of him." Her hands are shaking in a way that's a little terrifying. God knows, she's got reason enough to feel this way, but murder won't make her feel better, not in the long run. "I saw them."

"Go on," the Master hisses, looking defiant and dishevelled in a way that the Doctor can't help noticing. He saves the memory up for later, for when he has time to appreciate it. The Master sneers at Francine. "Do it."

The Master doesn't mean it; the Doctor knows that. It's just like he said on that cliff-top a few minutes ago, relatively speaking; the Master fears death more than anything else. Nonetheless, the Doctor's gaze moves nervously between the Master and the trembling gun.

"Francine." He raises his hand slowly, wincing inside at the pain in the sobs that escape her fierce control. "You're better than him," he tells her. As he gently encourages her arms to move down, she drops the gun and turns into his arms, still trying to stop herself weeping.

Thank Rassilon. After holding her for a few seconds, he hands Francine over to her daughter's care. The Doctor faces the Master, who's looking fed up, a bit sulky. His very best plans have been scuppered, so of course he's sulky. He'll get over it. They've played out this game so many times, the Master and him.
"You still haven't answered the question," the Master says. "What happens to me?"

The Doctor takes a breath, girding his mental loins, then says, "You're my responsibility from now on. The only Time Lord left in existence."

"Yeah..." Jack, who's been watching closely over the Master, now strides over to the Doctor. "But you can't trust him." There's a pleading note in his voice, which is hardly surprising. The man's bright enough to see where this is heading. Oh Jack. Poor Jack.

"No," the Doctor says, but he's agreeing with Jack's comment. He shakes his head firmly and tries to look grim, to look like he's taking this seriously, which he is, of course. But he's also having to fight with a feeling of rising joy. He's free, he's himself, and the Master is going to be his. "The only safe place for him is the TARDIS."

"You mean you're just gonna... keep me?" The Master seems to be having problems processing the idea. It's such a very, very good idea, and the thought of it has kept the Doctor going through even the worst of the screaming.

"Mmm." He nods as if only now considering it. "If that's what I have to do." He swallows down an uncomfortable knot of inappropriate emotions and turns to Jack, trying not to see the pain in Jack's eyes, the way Jack's arms are wrapped protectively around himself. "It's time to change," the Doctor tells him. "Maybe I've been wandering for too long. Now I've got someone to care for..."

He looks back at the Master, only to see him stagger suddenly back as a horribly loud bang sounds right by the Doctor's ear. It's only as he registers that he also heard the clink of a spent cartridge hitting the floor that the Doctor understands what he just heard, what that single red poppy blooming on the white field of the Master's shirt must actually be.

Oh God, no.

The Doctor scoots forward to catch the Master before he falls. "Put it down," he hears Jack say in the background, but while the Doctor casts a quick glance that way, enough to see Lucy disarmed, all his senses are concentrated on the Master. He's all that matters.

"There you go," he soothes as he drops to his knees, cradling the Master in his arms. "I've got you. I've got you."

The Master grunts and grimaces, obviously in pain, but not giving into it. "Always the women," he says. He seems to be trying for a wry grin, but doesn't quite make it.

The Doctor swallows. "I didn't see her." No, he'd been too busy counting his chickens before the eggs were even laid.

"Dying in your arms," the Master says, voice low enough almost to be a whisper. "Happy now?"

"You're not dying. Don't be stupid." The Doctor casts a look down where the white shirt is slowly soaking through with red. "It's only a bullet." It hasn't even hit one of his hearts, the Doctor doesn't think, though close enough to stop one beating. "Just regenerate."

"No." The Master looks defiant, provoking... increasingly pale. Oh God.

"One little bullet," the Doctor urges, awareness pressing of how little time the Master's body has left if he doesn't either regenerate or enter a healing trance. "Come on."

The Master's starting to tremble, perhaps with the force of will needed to control his reaction to the
pain. "I guess you don't know me so well. I refuse."

Oh God. He can't mean it. He just can't. "Regenerate, just regenerate. Please." The Doctor lifts his arm, giving the Master a little jolt. "Please! Just regenerate, come on."

The Master unclenches his teeth long enough to say, "And spend the rest of my life imprisoned with you?"

Yes, the Doctor wants to scream at him. Yes! The rest of their lives together, long enough to cure the Master of the drums and whatever else afflicts him. Long enough to win back the boy the Doctor once knew. Long enough to become friends again.

He can hear the strain in his own voice as he pleads, "You've got to. Come on. It can't end like this."

The Master's face seems to relax a little, his eyes widening as he listens. Maybe the Doctor's getting through to him. Please let it be that.

He sees his own tears hit the Master's face. "You and me. All the things we've done. Axons, remember the Axons? And the Daleks. We're the only two left and no one else." The Master has to live. He has to. Otherwise all of this will have been for nothing. Teeth-bared, terrified by what's happening, the Doctor stares down at the Master, and he's almost yelling when he cries, "Regenerate!"

The Master laughs, not loudly but it's a genuine laugh. "How about that?" he says. "I win." He manages a rather wide-eyed grin, but then grunts in pain and swallows, his whole body tensing.

The Doctor can feel the Master's body dying, and he can't believe this is happening, that the Master would do this, just let himself die because he's realised how much the Doctor needs him; 'cause that's what's going on here, isn't it? Why can't the Master understand how good it could be, just the two of them, the whole of spacetime their oyster?

"Will it stop, Doctor?" the Master asks suddenly, urgently, his muscles so tense it's like holding a board. "The drumming, will it stop?"

Before the Doctor can answer, the Master's eyes roll up as his eyelids shut over them. His body slumps as his second heart stops beating, and for a moment, the Doctor can think only about how peaceful his old enemy looks now.

Then it hits him. He's alone again. He'll always be alone now. The Face of Boe's last message in the end meant nothing. All the Doctor's hopes, nothing. Everything was for nothing.

The Doctor hugs the body of the Master tight to his chest, and he sobs.

Time passes; he doesn't give a damn how long. His throat aches, but it's nothing compared to the pain in his chest, a sucking vacuum claiming everything there's ever been in his life. A year he waited for his chance; nine lifetimes he waited for the possibility of peace between them again, but the Master preferred death to life with the Doctor.

The Master's body is cold in his arms, but a warm hand falls on the Doctor's shoulder. He looks up to see Jack crouching down beside him. "Let me take him, Doctor. I'll make sure he's treated respectfully."

The Doctor's arms instinctively clench, holding the corpse closer, but he makes them relax again and lets Jack take his burden. It's just dead flesh, meaningless now. If his life has taught him
anything it's that not even Time Lords can keep hold of what's past, however much they sometimes try to play Canute.

As Jack rises to his feet and settles the body against him, the Doctor notices the Master's wrists are still cuffed at his back. Oh God, he... it... the body seems so slight in Jack's brawny arms. Hearts, a distanced part of the Doctor thinks, are rather like Jacks. There seems no limit to the number of times they can break and break again.

Oh, he has no patience for this, all this maudlin bollocks. It's never really been him, but Rassilon knows, it's going to be hard to get back up and keep taking it after this one. It's not just the Master he's mourning, but the whole of Gallifrey; he realises that. Sometimes it seems all he does is lose.

But he could've fixed the Master, given time; he's sure of it, and in fixing him, he could maybe have fixed himself a little too.

The Doctor forces his sore eyes to focus as Jack heads away from him. He looks around the Valiant control room. Not many people left in here now, just a few UNIT soldiers. He wonders when and where the Joneses went and hopes distantly that it was before he really lost it.

His gaze falls on his hand in its Torchwood storage tank, and he calls out to Jack, who's just going through the door after sharing a few words with the UNIT man on guard there. "Don't let anyone touch him but us. We don't want anyone getting ideas regarding his DNA."

Jack turns round and nods. "I'll lay him out if you want; field embalming is one of many strange skills I've picked up over the years."

The Doctor gets to his feet, only to almost fall straight back over again, so constricted are his muscles from kneeling for so long. "Asking you to do that seems cruel, Jack."

Jack shakes his head. "I don't mind." He hoists the body tighter against himself. "I'm so sorry, Doctor. If there had been any way to help..."

Shaking his head, the Doctor closes his eyes. "I'll come and find you when... Well, just when. No need to do too much in the way of embalming. We... I'll build a pyre somewhere once we head down to solid ground."

Jack turns and walks off down the corridor. The Doctor thinks he catches another 'I'm sorry' before the door slides shut.

He walks up to the windows, ignoring the UNIT personnel he passes, and stares out. Earth looks clean and shiny from up here, like a brand new planet rather than one simply reset. The Master shouldn't have messed about with so vital a planet though. More significant than even the Time Lords, humans are, looking at history as a whole. With both the Time Lords and Daleks now gone, there's no contest.

But the Master didn't care about that. He messed about with Earth because the Doctor cared about Earth. It was that simple. The Doctor sighs.

He should go tend to his TARDIS, assess the damage and whether he's got a hope of fixing her. What happened to the Master's TARDIS? It took the Master to the end of the universe, but had it been reclaimable, surely the Master would have done so, rather than be stuck with the crippled navigation circuits of the Doctor's.

Oh, does he really need to think about this now? He's tired. He's so very tired. "Aww, Koschei," he mutters beneath his breath. The Master looked so peaceful just after death; it made the Doctor
realise how much mental pain he must've been in all the time when alive. But still, to just give up...

Not that, right at this moment, the Doctor doesn't understand the appeal. "Wherever you are now," he whispers, "rest easy in the fact that you really have won, old friend."

***

Two weeks later...

"Wow," Jack says. "It's beautiful. I didn't expect that."

The Doctor's forced to agree; it's almost enough to ease the ache of capsule-free time travel. They're standing together in an obsolete observatory perched on a mountaintop on Crafe Tec Heydra, a desert planet with a breathable atmosphere on the edges of the Silver Devastation. The Devastation, a gigantic asteroid and dust field, causes a constant aurora effect in the heavens here, and that's what they're staring at. It's a play of silver and white swirling clouds with highlights of flashing iridescent colours against the blackness of space.

"Every destruction creates something new," the Doctor comments a bit fatuously. He wonders what the aurora looks like to Jack, who won't see the effect through more than three dimensions. The Doctor sees the past and the future like ghosts drifting around the present. He sees the calamity that brought the Devastation into existence, and he sees the metallic swirl fading into ultimate oblivion as the universe ends.

He even sees the phantom of the timeline that was replaced by this one, a timeline in which the Devastation never existed. That's very faint now though and as much an illusion of memory as really out there to be seen.

That's what's 'wrong' with Jack, of course. When the Doctor looks at him, he sees only Jack: no past, no enticing possible futures, and no choice, just an everlasting now. Just Jack. It doesn't seem so very wrong anymore though. Nah, the idea of such permanence is starting to appeal more and more. It's a perversion for a Time Lord, that, to desire the end of change and entropy, to want things to stay as they are, but it's a common perversion for his kind... or it was, when the Doctor had a kind.

That's why regenerations are limited to twelve. Too much life is bad for the soul. When the desire for things to stay the same starts to outweigh that rightful sense of delight and wonder in the ever-changing cosmos, then you know you're getting old.

Jack shoots him a quick glance. "Does it hurt, being here?"

The Doctor shakes his head. "I'm beyond that now."

"Is that really true?" Jack says, and the Doctor turns his head to frown at him.

"Whether it is or isn't, it might've been nice not to argue."

"Sorry," Jack says, not really looking it and staring out into space. "Maybe it's a little comforting that the Kasterborous system is still beautiful?"

"As a corpse? An exquisite silver corpse?" The Doctor savours the idea like a new flavour, but then shakes his head. "It's the validium causing the aurora. Not even a device as powerful as the one that took out Gallifrey could destroy validium completely, and we'd a gigantic stockpile of the stuff built up over millennia. Even by the end of the War, there was still a small mountain. No longer an Everest, but a Snowdon at least. It was atomised and dispersed by the destruction, but the
extinction couldn't completely eradicate it the way it did all else of Gallifrey. Now the particles cling to whatever rock fragments they can find in the contamination and fluoresce as photons hit them." He smiles sadly. "It's like they're calling out to each other in their own way."

"Is it still sentient?" Jack asks a little sharply.

So he does know about validium then. The Doctor isn't really surprised; Jack's always been a wellspring of the unexpected. "Nah. It only ever reached sentience when shaped into large enough masses. There's enough out there for that many times over, of course, but it's still practically atomised. If it hasn't managed to reform into some kind of whole by now, here, at nearly the end of everything, then I don't think it can be all that aware."

Can sentient metal go mad? the Doctor wonders. So many millennia drifting in space, broken into tiny pieces, would that be enough to do it? Aww, he's probably just projecting.

Jack turns to face the Doctor and puts a hand briefly on his shoulder. "Shall we do what we came here to do?"

"Yeah," the Doctor agrees, but he feels weary at the thought. He feels weary at most thoughts right now and supposes that means he's depressed. Doesn't matter, he'll keep going. He has to. There's only him now to hold back the dying of the light, to stop those who would play with time and space as their toys. And the 21st century humans, they need him most of all. Yeah, he has to keep them safe for what's coming.

Jack's his lieutenant in that respect, stationed on Earth, watching over it, knowing what's on its way. The Doctor really should stop dragging him away from Torchwood, in that case. Selfish of him, wanting Jack's company like this. Now Martha's with her family, the Doctor's got no one else, but that doesn't make it right to monopolise Jack.

It was with this in mind that he allowed the TARDIS to be transported in a tortuously slow and rather humiliating 21st century human way to Cardiff. She's currently parked in the Torchwood 3 'Hub', much to the bemusement of Jack's team, at least two of whom seem to be veterans of Torchwood Tower in London. They're suspicious of the Doctor to say the least.

He's kept inside the TARDIS in the main, not wanting to socialise, but Jack has come and gone, trying to do his job as the Torchwood leader simultaneously with helping along the TARDIS repairs. As Jack doesn't sleep these days, so he claims, he seems to be able to do both. The Doctor knows Jack's got some big project going on in the Hub basement; Jack keeps having to pop out of the TARDIS to attend to it, but he never takes long.

The Doctor's not asked for details of the project, or of any cases the team's currently working on. He got himself in enough trouble when he tried to confiscate a Dorvox radial cotroxiphon from Toshiko, who was using it as a paperweight. Humans shouldn't have access to such technology for another two millennia, at least, but Jack showed unexpected backbone and insisted the Doctor should give it back to her. She could be trusted with it, he said. Captain Harkness, it seems, can be extremely assertive in defence of his team's ability and honour. The Doctor finds himself smiling over at the man in question.

Jack puts down the small toolbox he's carrying and opens the cover on his wrist console. "So what should I be scanning for?"

"Let me," the Doctor says, taking hold of Jack's wrist and digging out his sonic screwdriver. Jack sighs, but doesn't fight him. The Doctor resets the scanner to search for artron energy. It finds his own high levels immediately, of course, and also... Jack's?
Frowning, the Doctor bends his head and licks the back of Jack's hand.

"Hey!" Jack says. "Not that I'd normally mind your tongue on me, Doctor, but what is it you're always telling me about time and place? Anyway, I've got much nicer places to lick..."

"Why are you more awash with artron energy than even me, Jack?" The Doctor licks him again, just to check that wasn't a fluke. It tingles on his tongue. "This shouldn't be possible."

"What about me is?" Jack asks wryly. "I don't know. I was made this way by TARDIS energy, you said. Well, that's artron, isn't it?"

The Doctor nods; Jack's point's a good one. "These levels would kill a normal human. You don't seem to be radiating it, but you'd better check your team just in case." He rubs his thumb over Jack's hand, over the damp patch his tongue left, and tries to resist the urge to lick him again. "You taste like a Time Lord," he says quietly.

When the Doctor looks up, he catches a small, strange smile on Jack's face, which quickly vanishes. Jack says, "So, can you see a TARDIS anywhere?"

The Master's TARDIS, that's what they've transmatted here to find. Travelling all the way to the end of the universe via Jack's vortex manipulator was no more fun than going the other way, and it certainly won't have helped Jack's artron levels.

If the Master really did arrive in this era on the edges of the Silver Devastation like he claimed, then it has to have been here. Crafe Tec Heydra is the only habitable planet within ten kilolight-years by this point in time. It was a favoured tourist resort for much of post-War history, run by the Boekind for millennia, and then, eventually, a human variant known as the Krish. The swirling luminescence of obliterated Kasterborous was considered a romantic backdrop by many, few understanding what they were really gazing at.

Both Boekind and Krish are long gone by now, of course. Even the Face of Boe himself finally died in the Doctor's presence. Mind you, as the Doctor has a sneaking suspicion the Face of Boe could transmat through time as well as space, who's to say that his old friend isn't somewhere out there right now. It could explain a few things.

Anyway, when the Master came here, if he really did, the Silver Devastation would still have been the Kasterborous system and surrounds. Gallifrey still stood in the timeline. The Master must've been able to see what was coming though. The Doctor can remember tasting the consequences of his actions on the winds of time days before he'd even made the decision to take said actions. So the Master knew at least enough to pick a planet outside the radius of the four-dimensional annihilation zone.

God, the Doctor can just imagine his fear, knowing what was coming, but having no way to stop it. All the Master could do was run. But it wasn't the Daleks wielding the Cruciform that destroyed Kasterborous in the end. The Doctor beat them to it.

The Doctor looks back down and extends the scan, first one way then another. There's nothing. No sign at all of anything that could be a TARDIS on this planet. Was his guess wrong then? He shakes his head. "If it was ever here, it's gone now."

"Try scanning for plasmic metals or crystalline zyton-7," Jack suggests. "Both together would be great."

That could work, the Doctor supposes, wondering just when Jack became quite so knowledgeable
about TARDISes. He's worked on the Doctor's often enough; he could've just picked it up in passing. The Doctor can't help remembering the small but growing frond of coral he's seen on Jack's office desk though.

However Jack knows, it's a good suggestion. The Doctor extends the scan and finds a lot more than a trace of zyton-7, a significant concentration of both materials in fact, so far to the east that it's almost on the other side of the planet. Now he knows where to look, he also finds a fading signature of artron energy. It's not a working TARDIS, that's for sure, but it might well be what's left of a dead one.

"Lucky guess?" he asks Jack.

"Something like that," Jack replies in a way that strikes the Doctor as evasive. "Found it?" He tries to turns his wrist in the Doctor's grip so he can see his own scanner.

"Prepare yourself," the Doctor says, refusing to release his grip. "I'll take us there." Once Jack's picked up his toolbox again, the Doctor activates the vortex manipulator to take them to the area scanned.

The jolt's as sickening as always, and it dumps them straight into hell. They appear outside on bare rock in the middle of what seems to be a violent sandstorm. The Doctor's respiratory bypass system immediately kicks in, but Jack doesn't have that advantage and doubles over, coughing violently, which of course forces his lungs to draw in more of the glittering brown fog that's swirling around them.

The Doctor, his eyes closed to a thin slit, keeps one hand on Jack's arm, holding him up, and with his other hand, he tries to shield his eyes enough to be able to read Jack's console through the haze of particles. As quickly as he can, he drags Jack forward over an uneven rocky surface to what looks like a lighthouse or beacon tower, its light a wavering patch of brightness above them. It's the Master's TARDIS.

Jack collapses to his knees, hacking and wheezing by the door, as the Doctor brings his screwdriver up to work on the lock. Not the first time he's broken in to the Master's TARDIS, of course, but this is a later model, type 90 or 92 maybe, and the Doctor's not sure what to expect.

He can't see what he's doing; this is taking far too long. His hands are bloody from being sandblasted, and Jack's curled up into a ball at his feet. Not a great survival tactic as sandstorms are always worse lower to the ground, but the Doctor doubts Jack can stand currently. He should've transmatted them both straight away from here the moment he saw the storm.

He only has a few minutes left without the need to breathe when the door finally clicks open. The Doctor drags Jack through and slams shut the door behind them.

The Master's console room is a sleek and icy efficiency. There's enough black and chrome here for even the most dedicated of 1980s Earth ad execs. The Doctor doesn't have time for anymore than a glance though as Jack's in trouble. He's wheezing on the floor, slumped against the wall, and although his face has been reddened by the sandpaper of the storm, his lips are blue. He clearly can't get enough oxygen.

The Doctor reverts back to breathing and checks this TARDIS has air; it does. He runs his screwdriver over Jack. "Oh, my friend, your alveoli are shredded. I'm so sorry. Vitreous sand, extra sharp, and it's having some sort of chemical reaction in your lungs too. I need you to hold on while I find a med room."
"Thanks," Jack manages to whisper and even produces a ragged smile to go with it. "Do me... a favour... and just kill me... Doc? Speed the... process... up?"

The Doctor rears back at that; he can't help it. The idea appals him. "No need for that. A few days' rest..."

"Oh, come on!" Jack says with more volume, only to immediately curl up with hacking coughs, blood splattering out onto his hands.

"Yeah," the Doctor says reluctantly, staring at the blood. "It's the logical thing, isn't it?"

Gritting his teeth, he turns the screwdriver to a setting he almost never uses and holds it to Jack's temple. "It'll be quick," he says, screwing up his face. "See you soon." He lets a directed beam of intense sonic vibration, exploding all the blood vessels of Jack's brain, and catches the lifeless body as it falls.

Too much death. There's been altogether too much of people choosing death over available alternatives. It all started with Romana of course, giving him the extinction device and making him choose, dooming him to play Last Man Standing for the rest of his rotten existence. He's not sure he can ever forgive her that one.

All of Gallifrey's gone bar the Doctor and two TARDISes... and, in a funny kind of way, Jack. Because Jack's right; he was made the way he is by the power of the TARDIS filtered through Rose. In Jack, the essences of human and Time Lord meet, fused together for eternity.

The Doctor knows he should get up and investigate the Master's TARDIS. There will be traps to disarm; there always are. Instead he just leans against a roundel and cradles Jack's upper body, his fingers moving through Jack's hair. Jack won't leave him. He may come and go from the TARDIS, but he's not going to die and stay dead. Whatever happens, the Doctor'll always have one friend that stays.

Now the Doctor knows to look for it, the surge of artron energy as Jack's body jerks back to life is obvious. It feels good, and not just because at least one of the Doctor's long trail of corpses back through history is returning to life.

Jack looks up and smiles broadly at the Doctor. "Now this must be one of my best awakenings ever. Do I get a kiss, my handsome prince?"

"You're already awake," the Doctor points out, moving his arms and encouraging Jack to sit up.

"Spoilsport," Jack says, but he's still smiling. He looks perfect, his breath silent and skin unreddened. There's barely a hair out of place.

Jack pulls himself up to his feet and holds a hand out for the Doctor, who takes it and stands, saying, "Don't move from this spot yet. There'll be traps."

He takes a look around. The chameleon arch is packed away in its casing; the Master always did like to leave things tidy. Jack's scanning with his wrist console, so the Doctor uses his screwdriver to do the same. It finds nothing. This TARDIS is running basic life support and lighting, but nothing else.

"No obvious traps," Jack reports.

Sucking in his cheeks, the Doctor takes a step forward and then another. Nothing happens. He makes it to the console and tentatively places his hand on the nearest control. He can tell
immediately that they are isomorphically locked. "Hmm," the Doctor ponders out loud. "Quickest way to do this may be to access the Imprimatur circuits."

Just on the off chance, he flicks at a switch, preparing himself for a painful zap. It doesn't come, but he's certainly not prepared for what does. The holographic projector clicks on, and the Doctor finds he's staring at himself. Well, himself a good five regenerations ago.

Jack laughs loudly. "Oh, two Doctors? I think I've come-to in happy-captain land!" How does Jack know that's him? Oh, Torchwood's bound to have access to UNIT files, of course. He'll know what most of the Doctor's previous incarnations looked like.

The hologram Doctor looks around and then coughs slightly. "Ah. This is rather awkward, isn't it?"

"What this is," the fleshy Doctor replies, "is the Master's thoroughly dodgy sense of humour." He should probably feel a little pissed off by this and not... flattered. Well, thinking about it, 'pissed off' would be just a wee bit hypocritical actually. Better to stick with 'flattered'.

"Well, yes," the hologram says. "He never did have much subtlety. How many regenerations on are you, if I may ask?"

"Another five." The Doctor studies his younger self. It's a good quality hologram, solid-looking and complete with subtle motions such as a 'breathing' chest and realistic hair movement. Hair's a little too long though, surely.

"That many?" the hologram asks. "Oh dear, I've been getting through them at a fair rate, haven't I?"

The Doctor combs the fingers of one hand into his hair and finds it extremely gritty thanks to the storm. He scratches his head. His hands are sore; unlike Jack, he needs more than a few minutes to restore himself to an unwounded state. "Are you his own programming or has he been rifling our biodata again?"

"Ah." The hologram smiles. "The latter, to be shamefully approximate. I was part of a deal with Romana upon resurrection. I possess this incarnation's personality and all our memories relating to the Master up to this body's regeneration. That's all. He seems fond of this form in his own twisted little way. I've kept him company during the War, that and provided a... Well, a witness."

"Got to hand it to the Master," Jack says, still sounding rather too amused by all this. "He had the best taste in Doctors."

"New companion?" the hologram enquires.

"More or less," the Doctor says, taking out his handkerchief to dab at his abraded hands. "Sometimes more, sometimes less, in that he comes and goes from the TARDIS."

"Comes running and gets abandoned, more like," Jack mutters.

The Doctor gives him a look of fond warning. "Meet Captain Jack Harkness: ex-51st century human time agent and current 21st immortal, enhanced impossibly by... well, it's a long story." He turns back to the hologram. "He's actually very good, providing I can keep him from chatting up the locals for long enough to show it."

Jack crimps his lips. "Shall I pretend to be offended?"

"Delighted to meet you," the hologram tells Jack. "Any friend of the Doctor's..."
"Is a friend of yours?" Jack laughs and steps closer in full teeth and charm mode.

"Right," the Doctor says quickly, taking out his glasses and donning them. "Moving on. What's the situation with this TARDIS? The Master's dead in my timeline, the War's over, and our TARDIS, thanks to the Master, is doing a good impression of a real police box in that it's stationary, on Earth, and good only for a museum or the scrapheap, unless..."

"Oh, you're here to cannibalise?" the hologram asks. "Do help yourself. I can't stop you and wouldn't if I could. I'm not programmed with any artificial loyalty to the Master. He liked me to be..." The hologram's face forms a wry expression. "Well, he called it 'feisty'."

The Doctor winces. "Do I even want to know what you were made a 'witness' of?"

"Do you know, I very much doubt it?" The hologram stuffs his hands in his pockets and rocks on the balls of his feet. "You say the War is over?"

Wiping his face of all expression, the Doctor says, "Yes," as he runs his sonic over the console. This TARDIS is asleep, deeply asleep. The hologram seems to be powered by an independent source.

"Didn't go well, I take it?" the hologram asks.

The TARDIS is a Type 95 mark III. A top notch single-operator martial TARDIS, the best of its kind outside of the Type 100s, and the Master wouldn't have wanted one of those. "There's only me left."

"Oh." Out of the corner of his eye, the Doctor can see the hologram standing stock still. "No one else at all?"

"No one. Gallifrey burnt, as did the Daleks. It was the only way."

There's silence in the console room. The Doctor uses the time to test out a few more controls. They don't respond to him, but they don't shock him either. They're merely dead.

He sighs and looks up at Jack. "Controls are unpowered. There's nothing to stop us taking whatever we want." He frowns. "That isn't what I'd expect of the Master."

"When we arrived here, he was in a tearing hurry," the hologram says. "The Daleks had won the Cruciform. Time itself was in imminent danger of implosion. No Time Lord was safe anywhere in spacetime, so the Master decided to use the chameleon arch. He sent this TARDIS into dormancy for fifteen years. It's due to wake in just under twelve now. When it does, it's to probe the universe, see if it's safe to re-emerge, and if so, travel to wherever the Master is and spur a reawakening for him too."

Makes sense. The Doctor nods. Over in Malcassairo right now, Professor Yana's no doubt working on the early stages of his great contraption. Oh, the temptation to head there is so very strong: to talk to him, befriend him again, to try to find a solution for the surviving humans that's not the Toclafane spheres. Aww, to try to change other things too, fix the drums while the Master's still human, make sure the Professor's secure before awakening the Master within him...

Impossible to believe the Master's really dead this time. He always came back, even from a black hole. Even after burning up on Sarn he came back, and the Doctor's still unclear how he managed that one because he saw the Master burn. But unlike all the other times, the Doctor felt the Master die on the Valiant. He burnt the Master's body to ash himself. This time, however hard it is to accept it emotionally, the Doctor knows the Master's gone for good.
The universe is better off without the Master's ever more bonkers power games, that's for sure, but the Doctor's far from sure the same applies to him.

He knows better than to mess with pre-established events in his own past, though. The Professor must be allowed to do what the Professor has already done in the Doctor's personal timeline. It's one thing coming here to nick parts when he already knows this TARDIS won't wake up the Master when it's apparently meant to; that's merely fulfilling the Novikov self-consistency principle. It'd be a completely different kettle of cod to deliberately change things from the way he's already experienced them, effectively splitting the timeline into alternative futures.

That's the sort of thing the Academy drummed into them again and again that they must never do.

Course, during the Time War, both sides created strings of cascading loops and paradoxes, tying the universe up like a buggered up cat's cradle. It's healing now, but there are still scars to be found just about everywhere. What a legacy his kind has left behind them. Sometimes he catches himself thinking it's a good thing they're all gone now; then he wonders what the hell the universe'd do if another Dalek-like threat should arise when there's no Gallifrey to stop them.

"Doctor," Jack says, making both flesh and holographic versions turn to him. "We meet the Professor sixteen years from now. This TARDIS obviously fails to wake him up on schedule."

"Hardly surprising," the Doctor says, sitting down on the floor to open a panel, "as I'm about to remove the navigation circuits."

Jack snorts. "That'll do it." He seems to have got a small display screen working on the TARDIS wall, no doubt providing temporary power via his wrist console. He's looking at schematics. "Have you seen the armaments on this thing? There's enough here to wipe out several solar systems."

"It's a war TARDIS," the two Doctors chorus.

"Let me take some of this out to fit in yours," Jack urges.

"No. No way, Jack," the Doctor says, using his screwdriver on a conduit valve.

"Why not?" Jack asks. "Think how useful something like these neutron scramblers would've been back on Game Station that day."

"I said no, Jack." The Doctor casts him a stern look over the top of his glasses. "I might let you salvage some of the passive defence systems; those we could use, but weaponry in my TARDIS is just not going to happen."

"Quite right too," the hologram says.

"Just what is it you have against big guns, Doctor?" Jack asks. "Bananas won't save you from anything but potassium deficiency... and maybe some kind of slapstick deficiency too, I suppose."

"Isn't it obvious?" The Doctor shakes his head as he eases parts of the circuitry gently aside to get further in. "Guns kill people."

"That's the general idea, yeah. Preferably before they kill you."

The hologram chuckles, and the Doctor looks up to see him pulling his hands out from his pockets. "You seem quite a bit more bloodthirsty than the people I had travelling with me, Captain. Is your rank a military one?"
Jack nods. "I've served in several forces."

"Not UNIT by any chance? I ask because you remind me a little of an old friend. He was very fond of blowing things up too. He was much more British, of course."

"Let me guess," Jack says. "Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart? I was seconded to work under him for a few months back in the eighties. He had a lot to say about you. In fact, it was difficult to stop him from talking about you once he'd discovered I knew you."

The Doctor's now lying on the floor with his head under the exposed circuitry he's pulled out from the console pillar. "You never told me you'd met the Brig," he says as he works on the nav-drive casing.

Jack snorts. "You never showed much interest in those one hundred and forty years between you abandoning me at the Game Station and my fun trip through the Vortex clinging like a baby monkey to the outside of the TARDIS."

"And just when have I had time to show an interest? Grudge-holding really doesn't suit you, Jack. Thoroughly unattractive."

"Doctor, I'm never unattractive. You must be confusing me with someone altogether more resistible."

The hologram barks with laughter. "I'm rather too used to 20th century humans, I think. Clearly we've expanded our horizons."

"Or had them expanded for us," the Doctor says dryly, detaching the counter-positional axis leads. "If Jack were any more open-minded, then, ooh, his skull would fill up with water every time it rained."

"If you must discuss me like I'm not here, you could at least mention my devastating charm," Jack says, and the Doctor finds it easy to imagine Jack's hands on his hips as he says it.

"Oh, I don't know," the hologram says good-humouredly. "A bit too brash for my taste."

There's a few moments of silence above the Doctor and then Jack says, "I throw a mean bodyline speedball, and my wicket-keeping is infamous amongst opposing teams."

The Doctor snorts. Trust Jack.

"Really?" the hologram says. "I may have to revise my opinion."

"There's nothing I like better than a nice long innings," Jack continues, obviously on a roll now. "Plus, I look fantastic in flannels."

"Jack," the Doctor warns despite his hidden grin. "Stop it."

"What? He's you! I thought you were the one person I was allowed to flirt with."

"Just behave. Get on with taking off the shield around the time rotor if you need something to do."

"Okay, okay." The noise of Jack's toolbox opening reaches the Doctor's ears. "We're taking this whole thing?"

"Well, you Al-Caponed mine into little bits. I don't fancy touring the galaxy with a time-rotor held together with Pritt Stick and sellotape. Wasn't far off that even before you gunned it down."

"No, no," the Doctor says. "It's fine. Just get on with it."
Doctor slides himself back out into the open and stands up. "Gonna have to disconnect the GCS coupling from the dynamorphic power station downstairs. Can I trust you to behave yourself while I'm gone?"

"What am I going to do, Doctor?" Jack asks, starting to sound a little aggrieved. "This other you's a hologram, remember?"

"And you're an exhibitionist." The Doctor turns to his other self. "Just use a firm tone, and he'll stop whatever it is."

"Perhaps a rolled newspaper on the nose?" the hologram replies, hands back in his pockets. The Doctor remembers doing that a lot. Well, he still does it now sometimes.

Jack sighs pointedly. "No one respects me."

The Doctor pauses on his way out of the console room, wondering if Jack means that. "Now, you know that's not true," he says quietly before heading out into the corridors beyond.

Pocketing his glasses, he heads off through the corridors. He does indeed intend to head to the dynamorphic power station eventually, but there's somewhere else he wants to visit too, somewhere that seems to be calling to him. He's not sure if it's psychic instinct, an odd fancy of his not particularly stable right now mind, or a genuine calling from something external to him, but he can't resist the impulse to find whatever it is any longer.

Fortunately, it seems the Master never had either time or inclination to change the default internal layout of this TARDIS. The living quarters are exactly where the Doctor expects them to be.

The Master's bedroom's so bare that the Doctor thinks it's just an empty room 'til he spots a book on the table by the bed. He walks over and picks it up; it's Conan Doyle's *The Valley of Fear*. Oh, how very apt.

The bed's neatly made and looks unslept in, despite the book. The bedside table has a single drawer, and inside it, the Doctor finds nothing but a few vials of Psianthadene. For the drums, he supposes. There's no *My Secret Supervillain Journal* for the Doctor to nose in, much to his disappointment. Not even a pad or note-taker.

The room also holds a wardrobe, a dressing table, and an empty bookshelf. The wardrobe contains very little - a single black suit in the late Chavic Fice style, a few identical white flouncy shirts not unlike the one the Professor wore, a pair of black shoes, and a caped coat.

The Doctor has a feel around the suit for pockets and finds the tissue compressor eliminator in one. Of course, the Master couldn't take it with him as a human. It must've hurt though, giving it up, at least 'til the chameleon arch took the memory of it away. Almost without thinking, the Doctor slips it into his own jacket pocket.

The dressing table turns out to hold the best treasure haul, not that that's saying all that much. Drawers contain the expected comb, hair wax, sonic depilator, manicure set, and some neatly folded handkerchiefs with the monogram 'M'. Less expected is the silver engraved hip-flask containing, ooh, best New Earth cognac judging by the taste. There's also a few recording crystals, which, when the Doctor sets them spinning, turn out to hold Gallifreyan chamber music. It seems so sedate compared to the tastes of the Master's latest incarnation.

The Doctor takes the crystals, the handkerchiefs and the flask. He's noticed the flask's engravings show pornographic scenes of two young lads together. Better he takes it then than let it fall into the
He's about to leave the room when something makes him stop and look under the cot bed. Oh, and look at that. Yeah, that's it. That's what brought him here, all right. The Doctor holds his breath for few moments, staring at the metal box he's found hidden; then almost reverently, he pulls it out. It's about the size of a hat or shoe box, undecorated, relatively lightweight, and made, according to his screwdriver, from a titanium beta-C alloy with a high palladium content. Tri-bonded too. This is a strong box designed with both travelling and long term storage in mind. It's locked and sealed, of course, and the sonic screwdriver doesn't seem to be able to open it.

After a few minutes of pointless attempts, the Doctor has achieved nothing but to ascertain that the lock has a psychic component as well as a thumbprint genetic verifier and a complex bioelectric mechanism. It'll take hours if not days to crack. Therefore, the box is coming with him, and he'll just have to field any nosy questions from Jack with his very best avoidance tactics.

That's never hard with Jack, though it can be guilt-inducing. The Doctor just has to sound a little stern, and Jack slips straight into kicked puppy earnestness. It's an aspect to their friendship that started with the Chula ambulance and has never really changed. Jack hates the Doctor to disapprove of him, and guilt or no guilt, the Doctor's not above using it when he has to.

He runs his hand over the top of the box possessively, closing his eyes. It may contain nothing more interesting than he's already found, or more likely knowing the Master, a deadly trap to be avoided. But it's the last thing left of the Master in the universe, and now it belongs to him.

Hoisting the box under his arm and whistling to himself, the Doctor heads off to find the dynamorphic power station. For some reason he's feeling better than he has for a long time.

***

One month later...

"Well, that's the essential repairs done if still in need a bit of a dusting," the Doctor says, pocketing his sonic. "Fancy a test drive before we start on the upgrades? Anywhere, any time. Your choice."

Jack looks up through the hole in the Console Room floor and smiles. He's gained a rather adorable oily smudge on his cheek from somewhere. "Yeah, sounds good."

"Your project needing a little attention before we go?"

"Nope. As of last night, that's over bar the shouting. I should check on my team before we dematerialise, but then I'm footloose, fancy-free and raring for some night on the town action. I say we celebrate. We've done good work here."

Yeah, they have. The second-hand time rotor looks dead impressive at the centre of the console island. Huge improvement on the old Type 40 rotor in terms of technology, and the Doctor's hoping for a smoother ride as a result of that and the new chrono-axis stabilisers. Every last particle of paradox machine has been micro-scrubbed away, the sonic-fused navigation circuits replaced, and various smaller components upgraded so that the cannibalised parts will actually work with the Type 40 foundation.

Given time and encouragement, the TARDIS could've fixed herself, but this way's easier on her resources, which have been far from unlimited since the destruction of the Eye of Harmony. She hasn't looked this good in years, and that's before they even start on all the non-essential upgrades they pinched wholesale from the Master's poor TARDIS before programming it to never wake
again.

He can only hope this'll all go a little way towards healing his TARDIS's less physical hurts. Rassilon knows what the Master's tortures did to her already rather wibbly-wobbly semi-sentience. The Doctor runs his hands over her consoles, soothing and praising. You look wonderful, old girl. Like a TARDIS half your age.

Jack hauls himself out of the hole and bends to replace the grating over it. The Doctor watches over the top of his glasses, his eyes drawn to the outline of Jack's bum in his trousers. Were he human, he'd definitely find that bum attractive. He's been noticing things like that a lot recently and can't help wondering a little about it.

"So," he starts, "somewhere with a bit of razzle-dazzle then?"

"Yeah, but more Audrey Hepburn than Paris Hilton," Jack says, turning around and grinning. "I know the perfect place: Thargos in the Limos system, early 27th century, Prime City Six, lower levels, a little place called 'Moonlight'. You'll love it, I promise."

"Sounds good. I'll set the coordinates while you're gone. We need to dress up for it?"

"A tux would be perfect for Moonlight. It's Earth-retro chic, but not tacky." Jack heads to the door. "I'll be twenty to thirty; time enough to shower and smarten up as well as leave standing orders with the happy few."

The Doctor watches the TARDIS door close behind Jack and wonders what to do with himself for half an hour. Getting changed won't take long. He could go play with the Master's metal box again. He's got it hidden in the attic where no one but he ever goes, thanks to the complex locks and perception filters. It's a good place to store dangerous things that should never fall into the hands of curious companions.

Despite the many hours the Doctor's spent on the box's lock over the last month, the box remains resolutely closed, but he almost doesn't mind that. It's a thing in itself, the box. It's closed, hard-edged and selfish to the point of cruelty. Sleek, minimal, and high-spec in design, it holds enticing secrets the Doctor can only guess at and obsess over. As an icon for the Master, it's perfect.

Putting his glasses away, he heads down the stairs. It's now six weeks since the Master died in his arms, and the bastard seems to be haunting the Doctor. Over this last month, fixing the mess the Master made of his poor TARDIS, the Doctor has often found himself casually aiming a comment or small joke the Master's way, only to then remember his co-engineer is Jack and not the Master at all. What's that about? Makes no sense at all.

He's been dreaming too, strange and often alarmingly erotic dreams he's made strenuous efforts to forget on waking, but they nonetheless stay with him, scenes and sensations coming back at totally inappropriate times during the day. And the thing is, Time Lords don't dream, not the way humans do. Their brains have no need to resort to surreal story-telling in order to make sense of their lives and thoughts. No, what Time Lord's minds do when asleep is to remember. Normally, anyway.

There's nothing normal about these dreams though, every single one of which has been about the Master. The Doctor seems to be having some kind of burgeoning sexual relationship with the Master's ghost within his dreams, and that's just weird. Super, mega, hyper weird. Weird off the weird scale weird.

And also hot.
It's enough to make him believe that the Master isn't dead and is instead having another cruel joke at the Doctor's expense. Or that the mystery box is really some kind of nasty psychic projector despite all the tests he's subjected it to which say it's not. Or maybe even enough to make the Doctor believe in those old myths of soul-catchings. Yeah, them. They seemed romantic when he was young, those stories, dying Time Lords, out of reach of either their TARDIS or the Matrix itself, passing their essential biodata to another Time Lord at the point of death, for safekeeping and eventual transfer to the Matrix.

Sadly, that's the plot of one of the better Star Trek movies and not the reality of Time Lord existence.

Maybe he's simply going mad. Really wouldn't surprise him, if so. What is surprising is that madness, so far at least, is so much fun. Perverted, yes; impossible, undoubtedly; but fun, oh most definitely. The dream Master's an incredible lover. Not that the Doctor has a lot to compare him with, but it's hard to imagine anyone better. Ooh, he really has to stop thinking about this, about him. Never was and never could be must give way to what is, and that means Jack.

Seeing Jack on a daily basis this last month has been a lifesaver. The man's so resolutely optimistic and upbeat. He's made it possible to resist the doldrums and even, just a little, look forward to the future. And, of course, the obvious and apparently pretty much unconditional regard in which he holds the Doctor is so very, very nice just now, like a warm shower after feeling dirty and cold for far too long.

A quick face wash, depilation and clothes-change later, and the Doctor's back up in the Console Room, fine-tuning the navigation console, having forsaken for now the lure of the attic and more time toying with the box.

Jack comes back through the door. He's wearing an old-fashioned tuxedo and looks, it has to be said, like an equally old-fashioned Hollywood movie star. Perfect for an evening of Audrey Hepburning it... though without the charming leading lady as the Doctor's so very not right for that role.

Jack grins at the Doctor, looking him up and down. "You should get out of those musty suits more often," he says. "You look hot. Will I finally get my long-awaited dance tonight, I wonder?"

"Depends if I get my long-awaited drink," the Doctor replies, grinning back and ignoring the 'musty'. "You look good too."

"I do, don't I?" Jack laughs. "People won't be able to keep their eyes off of us, Doctor. We'll be the stars of the dance floor."

Just the way Jack likes it, the Doctor thinks fondly, but he doesn't say it. He just hits his hand down on the transtemporal stabiliser, or the hand brake as he likes to think of it, and sets the TARDIS on course.

She doesn't even hiccup. Dematerialisation is as smooth as he's ever known it, and the flight through the Vortex is more like that of, say, a swallow than the usual demented bumblebee. Oh, it's lovely. There's something to be said for the Master's love of technological efficiency, even though the Doctor did sort of enjoy being thrown all over the place every time they took a trip somewhere.

"Good girl," Jack says, clearly appreciating the even flight. He strokes a hand over the consoles in a way that should probably make the Doctor feel a tad possessive, but Jack's put so many hours into healing the TARDIS that he's earned the right to talk like that to her. Instead, the Doctor realises with sudden clarity, the sense of 'his' he has with the TARDIS is somewhat in danger of
being extended outwards to envelop Jack.

Probably something to do with all that artron energy in the man; the Doctor can sense the TARDIS within him. That and Jack's offered himself both implicitly and sometimes explicitly to the Doctor so many times that the Doctor may be starting to believe at some level that Jack really does belong to him. Oh dear.

The TARDIS arrives at the coordinates, and the Doctor powers her down, sending the best psychic praise he can for pulling through like this.

"Right then," he says to Jack, with a smile. "Who's paying?"

In the end, Jack pays, but with fool's credit chips the Doctor wangles from the first auto-teller they find. It's theft, but the Doctor has never really cared about such petty misdemeanours. Moonlight turns out to be a large and yet friendly restaurant and ballroom. It's themed, rather sketchily in places, to 20th century Earth. Well, it was a very long time ago to the 27th century mixed-species clientèle, and the Doctor certainly isn't going to spoil anybody's fun by pointing out the numerous and sometimes hilarious anachronisms.

They have a light but delicious meal that the menu claims is based on the 20th century European diet. Other than the inclusion of something that might be a tomato, the Doctor can't quite see the basis for this claim, but it tastes good on his tongue and nothing else really matters. Just like, after the meal, Jack feels good in his arms as they take to the dance floor.

The ballroom has a domed ceiling in which hangs a huge free-floating globe, the 'moon' of Moonlight. It's some kind of giant lumiplasma ball, and even the Doctor has to admit it's nifty. Under its white gold light, the pair dance the evening away to the sound of the live band.

By the time they leave Moonlight, they're both a little wellied. Well, more than a little, but not on alcohol, not in the Doctor's case. He can't remember the last time he felt this relaxed. Maybe sometime before he lost Rose. Yeah, then. But never since 'til now. It's been a good night, full of smiles, friendship and being manhandled by Jack, who, it turns out, definitely prefers to lead. After forcing Jack to follow for one dance, the Doctor was happy enough to give up his lead for the rest. He'd made his point.

The physical closeness that began with the dancing continues as they head back to the TARDIS. As they walk up to the TARDIS door, Jack's arm is around the Doctor, low on his hips, and the Doctor's letting himself lean on Jack because, why not? Jack's firm and warm and wants to touch him, and the Doctor's run out of reasons not to let him. It's not like there's anybody left to judge what he gets up to with humans.

Not the first time he's used that argument with himself.

They have to separate to get in through the door, however, and when they're under the comparative brightness of the TARDIS lighting, it all suddenly feels a bit awkward, a bit icky. The Doctor deliberately heads to the opposite side of the console island to put a little space between him and Jack while he thinks about what in the name of lost Gallifrey he's doing.

He can feel Jack watching him, and then, as the Doctor sets the coordinates to return to the Hub, Jack leans over the console towards him. "You know," Jack says, "it'd be kinder to just say 'no way' than play the will-he, won't-he game with me for the rest of the night until I give up and head for my little cabin bed on my own again."

Well, that was upfront all right. Still, the Doctor probably shouldn't have expected anything less.
He stares at Jack and then swallows. "Thing is, I don't know if it is that. 'No way', I mean. It might be 'yes way'. I'm just... Jack, I'm the last of my kind, and yeah, I know I need to change if I'm not to be, well, a lonely old git getting ever more eccentric in my isolation, but this isn't easy... Time Lords don't do sex."

Jack snorts rudely as he straightens up from the console and folds his arms. "Nice line of bull, Doctor, but I know better."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"You can't possibly."

"Can't I?" There's a challenge in Jack's tone, and the Doctor isn't sure he wants to take him up on it. He's got a horrible feeling Jack's referring to the Master's rapes. Surely he understands that that wasn't about sex? That was about power and overt dominance displays. The Master saw and understood how humans worked, how rape's a common technique used by conquering human armies to quell a defeated yet still defiant populace, and he used that knowledge coldly to make a point about who was in charge.

"Well, okay, most Time Lords then," the Doctor hedges as he starts the TARDIS on the short trip back to the Hub. "Most Time Lords couldn't be arsed with it. It was considered to be, oh, you know, lower lifeform stuff. Something for the animals who didn't have a choice in their procreation methods or their instincts."

"Snobbery has never sounded less like fun," Jack says caustically, arms still folded.

The Doctor shrugs. "Sometimes passions developed, especially during youth, and if the passion-holder was really lucky, the passion would be returned. But it was considered a private and sordid thing, to be kept behind locked doors." Or in the corners of temporarily deserted classrooms, or in the long grasses of the hillsides overlooking the Academy, or even in their own bunks in as close to absolute silence as they could manage, their sleeping dorm mates all around them. Oh Rassilon, had they been insane? "For consenting adults only, that sort of thing," he finishes lamely and, let's face it, inaccurately.

"Well done at avoiding all personal pronouns in that little speech, Doctor. I'm impressed!"

The Doctor gives Jack an exasperated look. "Do you know something I don't know you know? And if you do, how the hell do you know it?" Oh God, perhaps the Master told Jack during one of the torture sessions the Doctor hadn't been forced to witness. He never considered that, but now that he is, it seems all too possible.

Jack raises an eyebrow. "Is there something to know? Something 'private and sordid' perhaps?" The Doctor opens his mouth to express... something, but Jack cuts him off. "Doctor, I know you feel sexual desire. Can you really be so much in denial of your own body that you're unaware how hard you were when we were dancing? And may I say, you've got an impressive length going for you there."

Oh dear, no, was he really? The Doctor has a horrible feeling now that he thinks about it that he probably was. Jack made them dance so close together, pressing his human heat and artron-infused skin against the Doctor, and the Doctor... well, he kept finding his attention slipping back to his dreams, the things the Master does to him in those dreams. That's very, very wrong of him, isn't it?
He finds he's staring rather helplessly at Jack. There's no possible way he can explain this one without things going from top-heavy to pear-shaped in a few seconds flat. So he doesn't even try. "I... Look, all I'm trying to say is, if we do this, don't expect it to be any good."

"First night nerves?" Jack asks, chuckling and relaxing his defensive pose. He walks around the island and pulls the Doctor close. "Just put yourself in my experienced hands, not-so-little Time Lord, and stop worrying."

Not so little? The Doctor snorts, presuming it's meant as a compliment. Humans and their size fetish; they never do change, do they?

The TARDIS has arrived. They seem to have been gone a little longer than planned, but just a few hours, nothing disastrous. He lets his arms wrap round Jack in turn and rests his face on Jack's shoulder. Is he really going to do this? Looks like he might.

Jack starts them moving in a slow dance again, his hand firm against the small of the Doctor's back as he hums tunefully. Perhaps this is supposed to relax the Doctor. He's not sure he should relax considering what apparently happened when he relaxed on the Moonlight dance floor. But instead, he ups the ante. He's clearly in for a penny here; he might as well make a grab for that pound

Turning his head on Jack's shoulder, he starts to lick and kiss at Jack's neck, enjoying the artron energy and the pulse of Jack's blood below the salty skin.

Jack stops humming, and his Adam's apple moves as he swallows. He moves his upper hand to the Doctor's hair. "That feels good."

Excellent. That means the Doctor can feel free to do it some more. He licks around Jack's jaw, and Jack tips his head back, so then the Doctor nibbles gently over the skin of Jack's throat. He smiles as he feels Jack gasp.

Jack's lower hand moves down to rest over the top of the Doctor's bum. They're not dancing now, just standing tight together by the consoles. He can feel a hardness in Jack's trousers pressing against him, and that's, well, really rather sexy actually. Handy that Time Lords and humans have such similar sex organs. That makes this cross-species stuff so much easier. Oh God, he really is going to do this, isn't he?

Jack slowly moves his chin down and then presses his lips against the Doctor's. Kissing is such a very human thing, but one the Doctor's experimented with a lot more than once. He enjoys it a great big bugger-off deal, snogging people he likes, and wishes he could get away with doing it to more people without them misunderstanding his motive. For him, a good snog can be a thoroughly pleasant end in itself. So many sensory nerves reside in a Time Lord's lips and tongue. Humans aren't exactly short on them there either, but Time Lord senses go further still.

Rose once told him he was just like a human baby, the way he automatically took things to his mouth to explore their taste and texture. He's tried to do it less since, or at least, less publicly.

But now he opens his mouth slightly and kisses Jack back, loving the taste of him - the artron energy, yeah, of course, but the more human taste too. Human spit has a flavour that he doesn't think humans are ever aware of; why would they be? Makes no sense to taste what's always there. But it's a nice flavour, faint and sweet like one of those mineral waters with a hint of fruit. When Jack opens his mouth wide enough to let him, the Doctor slips his tongue in and starts to explore.

Jack groans into the Doctor's mouth, his hands clutching at the Doctor's body. He turns them both so that the Doctor's bum is pressed against the consoles, Jack pressing hard against his front. The
Doctor just keeps kissing, his hands knotted in Jack hair, even while Jack unbuttons the Doctor's shirt and slips his hands under it to stroke bare skin.

Oh and that feels nice too. It reminds him of what the Master did last night. Only the Master's hands had been gloved in leather, cool over the Doctor's skin, whereas Jack's palms seem positively feverish. The Doctor can't help but remember what the Master's hands had gone on to do, and he moans in the back of his throat, inadvertently thrusting his hips forward.

Jack responds by grinding his own erection against the Doctor's, something the Master had also done, and suddenly the Doctor's feeling breathless. He breaks the kiss and tips his head back, exposing his neck, hoping Jack will take the hint and bite him the way the Master does every night in his dreams.

Jack, ever obliging, does try, nibbling over the Doctor's pulse points and sucking, but he's nowhere near as vicious as the Master gets, which should be a good thing, shouldn't it? But it isn't. Swallowing down his disappointment, the Doctor goes back to snogging. Because there's nothing that isn't perfect about that.

Jack doesn't seem to mind the Doctor's preoccupation with his mouth, but he does finally drag his head back long enough to say, "Wanna take this somewhere more comfortable, Doc?"

The Doctor's got no problem with that, so he nods and attempts to start kissing Jack again, but Jack rears back. "Hold on there, handsome. If we try to kiss going down stairs it'll end in broken bones. Come on." He takes the Doctor's hand and tugs him over to the stairs.

Oh, 'somewhere more comfortable' means the living quarters. Of course, it does. The Doctor follows Jack obediently down the stairs and through the corridors, but as soon as they're inside what turns out to be one of the few double bedrooms his TARDIS has, he backs Jack into a wall and starts kissing him again.

Jack laughs into the Doctor's mouth and starts undressing them both with impressive efficiency.

Somehow, a little while after that, the Doctor finds himself lying on a bed, naked, with an equally starkers Jack lying half on top of him. He's not entirely clear how he got here, but does it matter? It's great, all this touching and kissing. It's like lying in sunlight, being aware of so much of his skin at once.

He wonders if Jack will be satisfied with just this, but somehow doubts it, especially the way Jack's hand is currently curling around the Doctor's cock, squeezing and rubbing and making the Doctor need so very much more himself. Unfortunately, the 'much more' he needs isn't on offer. It can't be. This isn't his dreams of incredible connection with the Master; this is a reality where he's the only Time Lord left and a multidimensional mind link like that simply isn't going to happen.

But the Doctor can compromise; he's sure of it. He can 'make do' because something is almost always better than nothing. Will Jack be able to compromise too though? That's the question, isn't it? And somehow the Doctor doubts the answer is yes. Human instincts are too strong. Jack'll want to come, that's for certain, and he'll probably be after some kind of penetration too.

That thought wakes the Doctor up from the pleasant trance he slipped into during all that lovely kissing. He's not sure he's up for either side of the penetration equation, especially as he's already having such problems keeping the one person with whom he's ever engaged in such things out of his thoughts.

So buggery's out, but something else? One thing many humans definitely have in common with the
Doctor is an oral predilection. Yeah, mouths and tongues could continue to be good here. He shifts and begins to kiss and lick his way down Jack's muscular body. Ooh yeah, this is not at all unpleasant either, what with the fizz of artron on his tongue and Jack's appreciative noises from above.

He reaches Jack's navel and pauses, licking around it. The smell of human musk coming from what awaits the Doctor's attentions further down is a little off-putting. He's only ever licked one other cock before, and there was nothing alien about the way that smelled and tasted. This is going to be different though, isn't it?

He makes himself lick further down, moving out to the hollow of Jack's nearest hip to avoid the issue that little bit longer. Oh, this is just being silly. It's just another part of Jack's body, that's all, and he loves Jack. He really does, maybe not with passion but with genuine affection. And Jack's body is a perfect extension of Jack himself. Not many people manage that. Most get stuck with a body that doesn't quite express who they are inside, but Jack's whole in so many ways.

Closing his eyes briefly, the Doctor then very deliberately moves his hand to the base of Jack's bobbing cock and holds it still before licking lasciviously from base to tip. Jack gasps. "Doctor..."

Oh, the taste really is very strong.

The Doctor adores humans; they're endlessly fascinating company and often gobsmackingly bright or brave or inspired. It's rare, after all this time, that he really senses their alienness, their difference from what he knows, mainly 'cause, these days, humans are what he knows. But suddenly he can't help remembering they're a completely different species who just happen to look like his own when viewed with unenhanced sight. It's not just a question of their short lifespan and limited brain structure; their difference goes so very much deeper than that.

It's in every cell - their fixed double helix, 23 chromosome pairs, and primitive mitochondrion symbiotes. Compare that to the Doctor's triple helix, chromosomal numbers that increase with every regeneration, and the biogeneered Imprimatur symbiote Rassilon gifted them all with at the start of Time Lord society. Time Lords are similar to humans only in the same way that humans are similar to Madame Tussard's wax mannequins. In other words, they're not. The similarities are an illusion of external shape and the bending of light.

"Doctor?" Jack asks, sounding a little uncertain. His hand is resting in the Doctor's hair. "Everything okay down there?"

The Doctor looks up at him and forces a smile. "Yes, fine. Just working out a game plan."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to. You know that, right?"

"Of course." The Doctor glances back at Jack's cock. It's large and demanding, and for no rational reason whatsoever, it seems an animal thing. It seems wrong. "I want to."

"Hmm." Jack's frowning when the Doctor looks up, and he suspects he failed to keep his unease from his tone. Jack tugs gently with his hand in the Doctor's hair. "Come back up here."

Bugger. He's totally ballsing this up, isn't he? The Doctor lets his hand move over Jack's cock again. It's so hot in his hand. Time Lords never feel that hot unless they're very ill indeed. "Don't you want this?"

Jack's eyelids twitch and half-close, but he brings his other hand up to the Doctor's shoulder and urges him upwards. "Come back up here and talk to me."
"Was I doing something wrong?" The Doctor wriggles back up Jack's body. They lie on their sides, face to face. "Honestly, you can tell me. I've no pride to wound about any of this. I want to make it good for you."

"Yeah, and that's kind of the problem, isn't it?" Jack pushes hair away from the Doctor's eyes and then cups his cheek. "Because you're only doing this for me. You don't want it for yourself."

The Doctor frowns. "It's just new to me, Jack. You have to give me time to get used to... to our differences."

Jack shakes his head ever so slightly. "I don't think time will change anything. I think I've finally got it, what you've been trying to tell me all along. We're friends, aren't we?"

"Course we are." The Doctor beams, happy to find himself on more certain ground. "Best of mates, that's us. We work brilliantly together - look at the slap up job we made of fixing the TARDIS. Me and you, two of the most unique beings in the universe."

Jack's answering smile seems sad. "That's us." He closes his eyes briefly as if trying to trap something inside. "But we're not lovers, are we? And while I come from a world in which friends can fuck and stay friends, and it's all gravy, you don't. Sex isn't, can't ever be, casual for you, can it?"

Now the Doctor frowns deeply. "This is casual to you? I thought."

"No!" Jack interrupts hurriedly. "Oh God, no. There's nothing casual about this, about us, for me. That's not what I meant."

"Then what?"

Jack closes his eyes before speaking again, for a little longer this time. "My point is that you don't do casual sex. You can't. It's not in you to behave that way. Time Lords only have sex when rare passion overwhelms them; you said it yourself. But I'm your friend, not your passion. Oh, Doctor, you must be able to see where I'm going with this."

The Doctor heaves a great sigh and turns to lie on his back. "That's not possible for me anymore, Jack, that old Time Lord way. I've got to change. I can't be alone for the rest of my life. I need more. I have to learn..."

Jack's hand moves back to the Doctor's face, turning it to face Jack. "Is it fair to make me your... exercise book in a not exactly eagerly sought education?"

"Not if you don't want that, no." The Doctor presses into Jack's hand, smelling himself there. "I'm sorry, Jack. I, er, really don't know what to say."

"Then let me help you out," Jack says, before kissing the Doctor's lips softly and pulling back. "Say you're my friend, and you'll stay my friend, no matter what. Say you won't disappear for one hundred and forty year stretches and instead come to see me often. Say you'll ask me for help whenever you need it, and promise me that you'll do your best to... well, not die. Stay a part of my immortal life for as long as you can possibly can."

If the Doctor has ever felt the urge to suicide, he lets it go now. "I promise," he says, and he means it.

Jack strokes his thumb over the Doctor's cheek. "You don't want a non-Time Lord lover; it's not sex you're needing. You want a friend who's constant and who you can be affectionate with sometimes,
"Really?" the Doctor asks, as he'd just been finding himself a little depressed at the thought of no more kissing, which is where he'd thought this conversation was going. Seems he was wrong about Jack not being able to compromise.

"Really," Jack says. "I should never have let this go so far without saying it." He looks down. "I just had to know. I couldn't... not without knowing."

The Doctor isn't sure why Jack seems so regretful. He raises his hand to Jack's face. "You'll still travel with me, won't you?"

Jack doesn't look up as he says, "If you want me to," but he does when he adds, "Sleep with me tonight? No sex, just us?"

"Of course," the Doctor says and wriggles closer, wrapping his arms around Jack. "Any time."

Jack just makes a strange kind of noise that sounds half-stifled to the Doctor's ears and then closes his eyes, wrapping his arms tight around the Doctor.

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When the Doctor wakes up, Jack's gone. He's not surprised, and he's also a little relieved considering he seems to be embarrassingly messy under the sheets.

Now that's definitely not meant to happen to Time Lords. Strictly adolescent human males only. It's the Master's fault of course; aren't most things? They'd been in a heart-breakingly beautiful Gallifreyan forest this time, engaging in possibly the most terrifyingly wonderful, kinky sex he's yet had in his impossible dreams. Oh hell, Master. What wouldn't he give for this all to be real? But even had the Master lived, the dreams would never have come to pass. There's no Gallifrey, and the Master would sooner off himself all over again than admit the level of need he has for the Doctor in the dreams.

This really is a form of insanity; it has to be. Maybe a prolonged holiday on the Eye of Orion will allow the Doctor to work through it, or some time with the sisterhood of Cheem perhaps. They're good with mental detoxing and rediscovering inner peace, aren't they? Rediscovering, hah! As if he had any in the first place.

The Doctor hauls himself out of the sticky sheets and heads to the bathroom. A little while later, he's clean and dressed and climbing the stairs to the Console Room. There's a folded piece of paper awaiting him on the closest console. It has 'DOCTOR' written in large letters upon it.

He picks it up and unfolds it.

Doctor

No prolonged 'Dear John's from me. Ianto Jones is waiting for you outside in the Hub. He's got something very important for show and tell today. Something you'd definitely regret not seeing, believe me. No more regrets, my friend. Make sure you talk to him.

Always,

Jack
Huh. What's he meant to make of this? Ianto Jones - that's the Welsh one, obviously. The one whose manner is best British polite-with-a-soupçon-of-supercilious, but whose eyes are more like the deepest, most dangerous Welsh coal mines. Ianto watches Jack constantly; the Doctor's noticed that even during the relatively few times he's ventured out of the TARDIS here.

He huffs to himself, putting his hands in his pockets. Obviously Jack thinks seeing this whatever it is that the Jones lad has is important, but the Doctor could just run away: dematerialise, pretend he'd not seen the note, claim someone had contacted him, needing urgent help. Why would he want to avoid it though? He's not sure, but instinct or future sight is telling him that this is a big something. Maybe even the big something.

Could an object have fallen through the Rift? One that concerns the Doctor in some way? Some residue of the War, maybe?

No more regrets, Jack said. Oh, what the hell, he can't keep running all his life. The Doctor grabs his coat, drags it on over his arms, and walks out of the TARDIS door.

The Hub seems empty, though somewhere quite far off he hears something thump and rattle.

"Jack?" The Doctor calls out, turning in a circle to look around. "Hallooo? Anybody in?" No one answers. They're all out defeating some Rift-related nastiness, no doubt, and there's nothing to do but wait in that case. Hmm. After so much build-up, this is a bit of an anticlimax.

He climbs up to the area where Tosh and Owen have their workspaces and mooches around the desks, nosing through papers and raising an eyebrow at one or two of the things he finds just lying around. The Dorvox radial cotroxiphon is back doing its job as a paperweight. After a furtive glance around him, the Doctor picks it up again. He doesn't care how responsible sweet Toshiko supposedly is, she shouldn't have access to this level of tech.

He's just slipping the dome-shaped object into his coat pocket when he hears a noise from Jack's office area. He looks around to see Ianto Jones sauntering out, shaking his head and tutting. "That's not yours to take, sir, is it? As, I believe, Jack has already told you once."

The Doctor frowns and doesn't return the cotroxiphon. "You have something to show me, I'm told."

Ianto looks at him steadily for a few moments and then smiles slightly. "This way, sir," he says, turning round and walking down and around to the side of the armoury, heading apparently for the lift to the basement.

"What's down here?" the Doctor asks as they walk through the short corridor to the lift doors, not caring if he sounds suspicious 'cause he is. Something odd's going on here.

"The thing Jack wants you to see. It's not far." Ianto presses one of the buttons outside the lift and steps inside when the door opens. "No need to worry yourself, sir."

Shrugging, the Doctor follows Ianto in. "So it's something Jack wants me to see, not you? Jack's note suggested otherwise."

"Oh, it's very much Jack's project, sir." Ianto presses the button marked 'LB', and the lift starts moving. They both face the doors as one does in lifts. "I've just been helping where I can. You know, making the tea, holding the toolbox, that sort of thing."

"According to Jack, you do a hell of a lot more than that," the Doctor says dryly.

Ianto looks around, seeming surprised. "Really?" He shakes his head, like a dog trying to rid his
ear of a flea, and looks back at the doors. "I suspect I don't want to know."

The Doctor snorts. "Let's just say it's generally very flattering and leave it at that."

"Probably for the best," Ianto says, but his tone seems slightly warmer now.

The Doctor puts his hands in his coat pockets and swirls the coat around his feet. "If it's Jack's project, why are you the one to show it to me?"

"Oh, discretion and valour, sir. Discretion and valour."

The lift stops, and the doors open, revealing a dank, cold corridor with wet floors and the smell of bleach and oil. "Lovely," the Doctor says as Ianto steps out. "This where you keep the aliens you don't like?"

"No, they would be in the cells," Ianto says, gently correcting. "This place is rarely visited and also secure. You'll see why that's necessary."

Ahead are heavy wooden doors with a small meshed glass window and red security light above them. "So the project's in there?" the Doctor says. "Locked in there," he adds after noticing the hefty sliding bolt.

"Yes, sir. That's right." Ianto slips a heavy key into the door's main lock and turns it. Then he pulls the bolt back. He rests his hand on the handle. "Now you'll see. You should prepare yourself for a bit of a shock, I imagine."

He opens the door and holds it open for the Doctor, who reluctantly walks in. The room is as unfriendly looking as the corridor outside, but it's warmer at least. There's an electric heater chucking out dry heat by the bar-load. A mishmash of lights hang from walls or stand on small tables all around the edges of the room. In the centre is a large contraption, raised from the ground and roughly rectangular, with a heavy canvas cover thrown over the top of it and a great many cables leading to it over floor and ceiling. A slow steady beep is coming from the contraption.

The Doctor hears the door close behind him and whirls around, alarmed, but Ianto's still with him and not doing anything overtly menacing.

Ianto holds up his hands. "Just keeping the heat in. You wouldn't believe the electricity bills for this place."

The Doctor nods and turns back to the contraption. "What's under there?"

"Why don't you take a look, sir. And when you're ready, I'll do my best to answer any questions you have."

The Doctor steps forward and picks up the edge of the canvas, but then he hesitates. The sense of biggest of big deals is becoming overwhelming. He swallows and shuts his eyes briefly, preparing himself for Rassilon knows what, and then sweeps back the cover.

Oh God.

Oh no, no, no, no, no.

He stumbles back, unable to stop himself. "This can't be. It can't."

"Do you need to sit down, sir?" Ianto Jones asks, ridiculously under the circumstances.
The Doctor shoots him a desperate look, pointing repeatedly at the uncovered contraption. "That, that, that... It can't be him!"

"It's just a body right now, sir. Empty. Whether it ever becomes more is up to you."

"What?" The Doctor boggles at him. "What?"

Ianto eyes him worriedly. "As I understand it, that's a clone of Harold Saxon - that is, the Master - made by the machine in which the body's rests. Jack called it a 'loom'. It's some kind of genetic manipulator and fabri-"

"I know what a loom is! Why the bloody hell have you got one in the Torchwood basement? And why, why, why have you loomed the Master?"

"Erm. I think Jack thought you'd be pleased."

"Pleased?" Oh God, he's so very much more than that, but he mustn't give into it. He mustn't. This is just a body, no biodata, no... And that's good. That's really good, isn't it? The last thing Earth needs is the Master back. The Doctor stares at the still face of his oldest friend and enemy. "Don't you know what he did?"

"Yes, sir. Well, some of it. Jack told me a little."

The Doctor's willing to bet Jack told him sod all, in fact, at least of Jack's personal experiences. He's certain no one but he and Jack, and maybe, oh God, the Master will ever know the truth about what happened to Jack on board the Valiant.

He steps forward again and holds out a hand to touch the Master's face with his fingertips. His fingers are shaking. The Master's naked, like all loomed bodies, the canvas cover still over his legs. The Doctor pulls it up a little way, giving him the illusion of decency. "The loom, where did you get it from?"

"Jack built it."

"Impossible." The Doctor gets out his sonic screwdriver and starts to scan, walking around the loom. It's not standard build, bits of it have clearly been jerry-rigged, but many parts seem to have been significantly improved over the usual design. This is like a loom with turbo fuel injection and go-faster stripes. "No way. Jack's clever, but without schematics and, and... there's just no way he could've made this."

"Ah," Ianto says in a very Welsh way. "Well then, I suspect he had schematics, don't you, sir?"

The Doctor's gaze falls on something familiar sticking out of the control panel. He makes to grab it, but changes his mind just as Ianto releases a note of warning.

"I think you should leave that. At least 'til you've made your decision."

"That's the Master's ring." The Doctor points at it. "And this..." He sweeps his hand over the whole loom. "This is Laz-labs' bollocksed up tech, isn't it?"

"Some of it, but all completely, erm, unbollocksed up. We cannibalised many pieces of alien and otherwise advanced hardware to make this. Jack got a few vital bits and pieces from the future too. We also used some parts from a..." Ianto's steadfastly even tone falters briefly. "From a cyber-conversion unit."
"A what? Are you insane?" The Doctor strides over to stand right in front of Ianto, letting his shock and confusion flood out as righteous anger. "They were meant to be destroyed! All of them! Bloody Torchwood, you lot are about as responsible as a... a two year old with a box of charged power tools! I'd rather trust a Judoon to show mercy than you lot with a rubber band. You stupid bunch of ret-" He stops suddenly, realising that Ianto's looking genuinely upset. More upset than an admittedly rather fierce dressing down would normally provoke. "Oh God, you were there, weren't you? In Torchwood Tower, when the Cybermen came? I'm so sorry."

Ianto nods, and he looks down as he says in a thickened voice, "They were destroyed, the units, all but one. That one survived a little longer is my fault, Doctor, and just mine. I've paid for it, over and over. It's broken down into very small components now, I promise."

That's the first time Ianto's used his name, the Doctor notes. He nods, feeling a little guilty now for shouting. But dear God, they've woven the Master's body on a loom made from that idiot Lazarus' utterly flawed gene-manipulator and Cyberman tech. That's beyond bonkers.

He looks around at that passive body, and it's as much as he can do not to sob as he says, "Best thing you can do now is burn that, destroy it utterly. God knows what sort of monster it could become."

"No! Sorry, sir. But no, the body's fine. The loom is good. There's something you need to know. Several things actually, and I probably should have told you before we came in, only Jack's orders on the subject were, shall we say, a little ambiguous?"

All in all, Jack's been a lot more than a little ambiguous, the Doctor thinks. This is the project he's been working on while also helping the Doctor. Over a month of seeing the Doctor every day, and he never even gave the slightest clue about what he was working on down here. Last night... Last night would never have happened had he known, would it? And that's why Jack kept this secret. Course it is. What had he said last night before falling asleep? He 'had to know'.

Aww, Jack. The Doctor has never done anything to him but let him down.

He takes off his coat and lays it over a nearby chair and then walks over to the loom to touch the Master's face again. He looks like he did just after dying: so young, so peaceful. "Tell me," the Doctor says, his voice sounding hollow. "Tell me what I need to know."

He hears Ianto shift behind him. "Well, you see, it's Jack. He's the access to the Matrix, and while I'm not one-hundred percent on what that means myself, you will be, or so I'm told."

No way. No bloody way. The Doctor turns around and stares at Ianto again. "Is this a Keanu Reeves thing?"

Ianto shakes his head. "More like a Time Lord thing. Or perhaps a fairytale. The story, as told to me, is that someone called Romana recruited Jack during the Time War and rewired his brain to act as the index for a kind of supercomputer called 'the Matrix', which was then copied and hidden where nobody but Jack could access it. This was to keep it from the Time Lords' great enemy in the event of defeat. Jack was made to forget about this and only remembered what he is after destroying the dastardly paradox machine on the Valiant." Ianto raises his brows briefly, presumably in silent comment on the outrageous fable he just recited.

Scrubbing at his face, the Doctor tries to corral the wild thoughts stampeding around his brain. Could this really be true? He's not sure how Jack, let alone Ianto, could know the name 'Romana' if it isn't, but it's a wild story. Ianto's hit the nail square-on with 'fairytale'. That's what it is, all right, like the tales of the Toclafane, but this one's all about beautiful queens and chosen ones.
"That's how he was able to make the loom, you see." Ianto says quietly. "He had everything he needed to know at his, uh, mental fingertips."

If it is true, then... oh. But if it is, if it is, then Jack'll have access to the Master's biodata. That body, that small naked body, it could really become the Master. It could...

The Doctor swallows down what feels like a golf ball in his throat. "What else do I need to know?"

"That, if you choose to install the biographical dataprint, it won't be, quite, the Master you knew."

Oh. "No. No, of course not. It won't have his most recent memories. Won't know anything that's happened since the War."

"Erm, actually..."

The Doctor closes his eyes. "Just tell me."

So Ianto does. He tells the Doctor another fairy tale, one about the Master not dying on the Valiant, about the Doctor taking the Master with him on the TARDIS as he'd planned to, fixing the TARDIS with the Master's help, not Jack's. Ianto tells him, impossibly, of the Doctor and the Master becoming lovers, entrelaced lovers, and how they fixed the drums with the aid of Jack playing St George against the Master's personal dragon.

And Gallifrey. Oh beautiful Gallifrey, the home he'd never properly appreciated 'til it was gone. They'd found her still alive in the distant past, and they'd started to rebuild her.

But then everything went wrong. Evil shenanigans from the Master's drummed past led to the Doctor's death without hope of regeneration, and the Master was propelled into a catatonic coma that lasted centuries. Eventually fate in the form of Romana and Brax - Brax of all people! - brought the Master back into contact with Jack, who was able to rescue the Master from his coma via the Matrix. Because Jack, it seems, is a constant not only throughout time and space, but also through further dimensions. The Matrix keeps him that way because the Matrix is stored outside this whole continuum and doesn't change with it.

The universe had become a terribly dark place by this point, and the dark seemed too firmly entrenched to remedy. The revived Master proposed undoing all the harm he'd done by creating a new timeline from a nexus moment. Things were so bad that no one argued, not even Romana, despite them all knowing the full consequences of the proposal. A new timeline was created from the point that Lucy shot the Master on the Valiant. In this one, the Master was allowed to die so the twisted thing he'd done that had led to the terrible future could never now happen...

Only now, here he is again, or could be. Because apparently Jack has downloaded a copy of the Master's entire biodata into the small black box attached to the side of the loom. It only requires the touch of the Doctor's finger to install it in the body.

He could have the Master back, and not just any version of the Master, but one who has no drums driving him ever crazier, and who, by Ianto's account, loves the Doctor. Loves him! The Doctor's finding it hard to breathe. Because he believes this. Oh yeah, he's got no doubt it's true. Everything Ianto Jones just told him was like something he already knew but had somehow temporarily forgotten. And then there are his dreams, mustn't forget them. Time Lords don't dream when they sleep; they remember!

He's been remembering.

He finds himself leaning on the edge of the loom, panting, his gaze fixed to the Master's face.
"Would you like me to get you a drink, sir?" Ianto asks.

The Doctor shakes his head, just once.

"Then perhaps I should leave you alone now," Ianto goes on to say. "You've had the full disclosure."

"Yeah. Yeah, go." The Doctor closes his eyes. "And thanks," he calls out as he hears Ianto open the door.

"I'll be upstairs if you need me."

The Doctor waits until the only sounds he can hear are the steady beeping of the machine and his own rough breathing. Then he moves around to the other side of the loom, where the black box has been fitted. It has a hole in it, he's been told. He just needs to slip his finger inside, and then he'll never be alone again.

Yeah, and that's maybe not such an exaggeration if Jack's prepared to keep looming them both. Goes against Time Lord protocols, of course, but who's to argue? Oh God, he's giddy, totally intoxicated by possibility. He can feel the timelines ribboning their paths away from this moment, this choice. One's so faint, barely there at all, but the other is vibrant and strong. Even Time thinks the Doctor's already made his mind up.

He lets his fingers lightly dance over the top of the box, teasing himself. There's a design on the front, and oh, it's Rassilon's symbol. That's odd. That would make the box Time Lord technology, which'd sort of make sense as he'd swear he recognises it from somewhere, but since when has the Jack of this timeline had access to something like this?

Well, apart from the TARDIS, and the Master's TARDIS, wherever he got that coral on his desk from, perhaps some stuff of the Master's from the Valiant, maybe Rift jetsam, and quite possibly stuff the Matrix has told him about of which the Doctor knows nothing. Okay, Jack's had opportunity. It's just the Doctor never thought of Jack as a sneak-thief before. He clearly stole the Master's ring, and the Doctor never even noticed.

Jack, as a topic, is one that needs urgent reappraisal.

But not now. It's not that urgent. Not in the face of this, of the Master, of the Master of his dreams.

How can the Doctor not do this? He can no more not do this than Pandora could refuse to open her box. But like Pandora, he might release such evil on the world. The Master can't really have changed that much, can he? He never mentioned the drums in the old days yet still regularly committed atrocities in the way normal people regularly, oh, brush their teeth or feed the cat.

Leaning over the loom, the Doctor studies the Master's face, tracing its contours with his fingertips. He touches the Master's lips, running a finger down from the philtrum to the dip before the chin. The lips pull slightly apart as his finger moves down, but then close again. They seem so soft and just a little bit too red. Hard to believe those lips could kiss him as viciously as they do in his dreams.

Aww, but there's something almost little boyish about this regeneration. The Doctor remembers thinking that before, when he was in his gilded cage. It was impossible to hate the Master. Hate the things he did, yeah, absolutely. He could hate the forces inside the Master that drove him to those things too. But not him, never him. Oh, how ironic is it that it should come down to just the two of them in the end?
He bends his head and kisses those lips, first softly and then with a little more passion. They don't taste of much. This mouth has never eaten, never spoken, and here he is kissing it soundly. It's only as he slips his tongue in, his fingers pressing gently but firmly on the Master's cheeks, encouraging the lower jaw down, that he realises what he's doing is akin to necrophilia or, oh, sleep-rape or something equally distasteful.

He pulls back in a hurry. Swallowing, he closes his eyes and tries desperately to find a place of calm and sense inside himself wherein to make this decision, but there just isn't anywhere. The whole of him is thrumming, vibrating, like he's drunk a vat of coffee and then some. Oh God.

He has to decide now. He has to either leave this room and never come back, or put his finger in the damn hole. And there's just no way he's going walk out that door alone, is there? So for Rassilon's sake, just do it!

He does it.

To start with nothing visible happens, though he knows the loom's nanites are frantically writing over the blank slate of this body's mind. Then those far too fascinating lips part and move slightly, as if almost saying something. Finally the eyes snap open.

The Doctor leans over. "Master?"

"Doc... Doctor?" The Master's eyes widen, and there's fear in his voice when he says, "Uh. I can't move. What's going on?"

"You're in a loom. Just be patient a few minutes, and I'll have you out." The Doctor pats the Master's cheek, but then moves around to the back of the Master's head, checking the procedure has completed and then pressing the right buttons. He's grateful to be unobserved for the moment as there are suddenly tears welling in his eyes. Oh, he's really gone and done it now.

"A loom?" the Master repeats slowly. "What the...? When the captain told me he was letting me spend some time in his mindscape with you, this isn't what I imagined."

"Um, not sure what you're talking about, but this is real. Really me, really you, really a loom, unlikely as it seems. Jack made you a new body."

"What?"

"You were dead."

"Yes, I know that," the Master says irascibly. "I was in the Matrix. Why would the captain resurrect me? It makes no sense. Doctor, please..."

"I'm here." The Doctor finishes freeing the Master's head and moves around to the side. He reaches out and gently touches the Master's furthest cheek, encouraging him to turn his head in the Doctor's direction. "I think Jack felt he was giving me a gift."

"Me?" the Master asks, clearly disbelieving. "A gift? What did you do to earn yourself me?"

"Failed to be passionate about the alternative, I think," the Doctor says, starting work on freeing the Master's right arm. "I've been told about the alternate timeline, by the way. The one you come from. The one in which we..."

The Master stares at him with dark eyes, face expressionless. "Can't even say it?"
"Only 'cause I don't know how you'd prefer to define it." The Doctor pauses, staring uneasily down at the Master. "We were lovers, entrelaced. I've... I've been dreaming about it." He looks back down at the buttons.

"Remembering? Bound to happen. I told Jack that. Nightmares or...?"

"Far from nightmares. Incredibly erotic. Aww, Master, you're... the things you..." The Doctor frees the Master's arm, but continues to look down, trying get himself under control.

"Doctor," the Master says quietly. When the Doctor doesn't answer, can't answer, he watches the Master's freed hand move up. He feels it hook around the back of his neck. "Doctor, come here." The Doctor lets himself be tugged until he's leaning over the loom. The Master makes eye contact and keeps it, staring intently as if looking inside the Doctor for something.

"I... Do you want contact?" the Doctor asks. There's a voice inside him telling him he's bonkers for offering it, but this isn't the Master that voice remembers, is it?

The Master's face seems to twitch slightly, but then he nods, almost managing a smile. "Rummage away! You can step inside any time you fancy it, no need to ask. **Mi casa es tu casa. No more secrets.**" Suddenly, he frowns deeply. "Jack's insane bringing me back, after what I did."

The Doctor frowns too. "That's not why I offered. Meant mutual contact. I know I'm not the version of me that... that did those things with you, but I remember them. I do."

There's something very uncertain about the Master's stare now. He licks his lips, making them glisten, and he swallows, his fingers moving slightly on the back of the Doctor's neck. "All of them?"

"I don't know. How can I know?" Would the Master welcome a kiss, the Doctor wonders. He'd very much like to kiss those lips again and this time be kissed back.

"My memories might fill some gaps in. The good and the bad." The Master releases him and turns away slightly. "There's... there's a lot of bad. You know that though, don't you? You've been told?"

Oh well, maybe later on the kiss front. The Doctor nods even though the Master can't see him. "I know about the genetic manipulation."

"And Jack."

"Jack?"

"Ah."

The Master doesn't seem willing to say any more, so the Doctor moves down to the Master's feet and starts work on freeing his legs. "I know Jack was instrumental in removing the chronovore from your mind. That what you mean, by any chance?"

"Hardly. Why's he done this, Doctor? Why's he resurrected me? He knows better than most how... how dangerous I am."

"I don't know, Master. He skedaddled before I even knew you were down here in the Torchwood basement, leaving his assistant to do the necessary bean-spilling, and leaving me to make the decision to implant your biodata. Are you still dangerous then?"

"Of course I am. Same as you are. We're each capable of making or breaking galaxies."
"Still want to rule the universe?"

The Master seems to shiver. "Gods, I hope not."

"But you don't know?"

"How can I know? Two days after the drums were taken from me I was propelled into a coma that lasted centuries. I was awakened from that only to cease existing a few hours later. "The Master cranes his head up so that he can look down his body at the Doctor. "How can I possibly know what I'm capable of now?"

"Fair point." The Doctor, having finished the Master's legs, moves around to his remaining arm. "Well, I'll just have to watch you carefully then."

"Don't. Don't say anything I'll take as a challenge. I hid it from you before, and we were entrelaced!"

"Master, don't you think the fact that you clearly don't want to bugger things up again might actually stop you doing it? There's nothing alien driving you anymore. Yours is the only hand at the wheel."

The Master's staring straight up at the ceiling now. He says nothing.

The Doctor sighs and pauses before hitting the final three buttons that will finish freeing the Master. "Do you... Would you rather be dead again? Back in the Matrix?"

Turning his head, the Master stares at the Doctor. "Why did you do it? You said you got to decide whether to resurrect me or not; why did you do it?"

"I wanted you back."

"Why? Seriously now, Doctor, why? You never... I died in your arms on the Valiant, didn't I? That was the plan."

The Doctor nods, trying not to think about it. "That's what happened."

"And you... Tell me why you want me back? You're not my Doctor. You don't... can't want me, not like he did. That didn't happen overnight, you know!" The Master screws up his face, in obvious pain. "I made you ancient, put you in a cage, tortured Jack in front of you... Ooh, I killed so many humans just so you could see me do it. Why do you want me back? So I can do it some more? Enjoyed forgiving me so much that you want to do it again?"

Leaving the Master's arm attached to the loom, the Doctor leans over and rests one hand on the other side of the framework, supporting himself. He lifts his other hand to the Master's face, stroking slightly before resting his fingertips on the Master's temple. "Let me in?"

"I told you, any time," the Master says, but he cringes like someone about to have a particularly large needle stuck into their flesh.

The Doctor does nothing but gently stroke the Master's face with his fingers until he feels the Master relax. They're locked in eye contact, neither apparently willing or able to look away. "Master," he hears himself whisper as he pushes his psychic presence inside the Master's mind.

"Fuck," the Master mutters, his upper body muscles suddenly tense again. "Doctor, I..."
"Mmm?" the Doctor murmurs, not totally paying attention. He's far more interested right now in the stormy sea of the Master's emotions because the Master's mind is flooded with them, and they're all about the Doctor. He catches images of himself everywhere, there and then gone only to reappear elsewhere. Oh, he'd really like to dive in to this ocean. Waves of need, fear, uncertainty and desperate, desperate love are crashing on a shore of... of self-hatred and self-anger. Oh Rassilon, his poor Master. This isn't the way he should be. Where's the arrogance he's always had in spadefuls? The conviction and selfishness and pride?

'Doctor?' the Master's mental voice seems confused. 'What are you...? Oh. Look, I can't help it! It's humiliating enough without you witnessing it all. Come away.'

'No more secrets,' the Doctor quotes back at him. Emotions swell and swirl around him, and he just floats, letting himself by buffeted and releasing the joy that's been trying to explode from him since first pulling back the canvas sheet. He's not alone. The Master's alive. The Master needs him, and he... needs the Master.

Outside in the physical world, the Master's eyes are closed and his mouth open. The Doctor can't help himself. He bends a little further and starts to kiss him.

The Master's free hand slaps onto the back of the Doctor's neck and holds him tightly.

The kiss goes from 0 to 120kph in about three microseconds flat. The Doctor can feel his whole body responding, and it's as much as he can do not to clamber on top of the loom. The Master growls into the Doctor's mouth, turning on the loom bed to be better positioned, and the Doctor can feel his frustration, his need to move freely.

Pulling back, the Doctor says, "Let me finish liberating you." His voice is so low and passion-heavy that he hardly recognises it. "Get you out of here."

The Master's hand drops from him, but as the Doctor moves away, the Master groans again. "Doctor. Don't..."

"Don't what?" The Doctor frowns a little in confusion as he looks up.

The Master winces and seems to be forcing himself to talk. "Stop contact. Please. Stay."

Shutting his eyes, the Doctor replenishes his fading presence in the Master's mind. "You're welcome to return the favour, you know." He smiles as he opens his eyes again, seeing the Master looking so hungrily at him.

He's just pressing the final button when he feels the presence in his mind. Oh dear God, it's been centuries since he felt another Time Lord in his mind. Raising his head, he gulps in air. "Oh, Master."

"You want me so badly. Oh, you do." The Master sounds almost awed; his thoughts are all over the place. He sits up and swings his legs over the side. "Don't you, Doctor? Don't you want me?"

"I want you. I want us. Just like you do." The Doctor puts his arms under the Master's and helps him step off onto the floor. "Once you're recovered enough from your looming, we can remake the entrelacement if you want." He grins as he feels the Master's response; he definitely 'wants'. It'll even be sensible, entrelacing, as it means the Doctor'll be able to keep a closer eye on the Master. As an option, it pleases all sides of this particular argument.

"In the Zero Room, like before," the Master says, sounding a little sad, but only a little as his head is full of hope now. Vast improvement there. The Doctor himself is positively bouncing. Those
long days of the future that have seemed so bleak and tiresomely inevitable are suddenly as bright and warm as the Gallifreyan high summer.

"Didn't know 'til about thirty minutes ago that Jack had done this," the Doctor says, his arms still around the naked Master. "Or even that he could do this."

The Master shakes his head slightly. "Last thing I knew, he was going to be the one looking after you, while I spent a pleasant retirement in the Matrix, occasionally being allowed a meet-and-greet with your archived self in the captain's pleasurescape."

Pleasurescape? Oh, only Jack could use the Matrix that way. The Doctor smiles. "You still wanted to see me, even in there."

The Master just smiles back, looking almost shy. But then he says, "Now don't go getting far too big for those nasty trainers of yours. Otherwise I might be forced to take you down a whole handful of pegs to make sure you remember who I am, whose Master I am."

Frowning, the Doctor steps back. "Is that a threat?"

The Master rolls his eyes, tipping his head back to look at the ceiling. "You're in my mind, Doctor. Yes, it's a threat. Why not look and see what kind of threat?"

The Doctor looks. "Oh." He thinks he might actually be blushing. He stares fixedly at the Master's left shoulder. How can the Master, just loomed and starkers, take control so easily?

"And don't pretend you wouldn't enjoy that. I know better, don't I?"

"Um, yeah. Imagine you do."

"You're rock hard now, aren't you?"

"Pretty much."

"Good! Now get me out of this ugly room and to somewhere where I can fuck you. Hard."

The Doctor turns and grabs his coat from the nearby chair, offering it to the Master, who puts it on with a very dubious look on his face. It's too long for him, of course. "Soon as we get to the TARDIS, you can take it off again," the Doctor says cheerfully. God, he's feeling good all of a sudden.

"You want me too much," the Master says almost under his breath.

"What?" the Doctor feels his brow crease. "I thought you wanted me to want you."

"I do." The Master wraps the coat tightly around himself and turns away. "But I can see what you're up to in your mind. You're building all these Pollyanna constructs of the future again, just like before. Me and you, hand in hand, skipping through the stars together, happy ever after. You're such a hopeless sap."

"Well, you're about as romantic as a surgical scalpel," the Doctor says wryly. "So maybe we'll balance each other."

The Master shakes his head. "It's not that. I don't mind you being a sap. It's who you are. But you make these false futures in your head and then become blind to anything that doesn't fit in with the story they tell. That's how I was able to get away with my scheme for so long in the other timeline."
Well, that and the fact that I'm a genius."

The Doctor steps up behind the Master and, after hesitating, wraps his arms around him. How bloody wonderful is it to be able to do this? "I promise I'll be careful. I'll keep one part of my mind separate at all times, cold and clear, watching and analysing." He moves his hands over the Master's chest. "Please don't take that as a challenge."

"I'll try not to." The Master huffs quietly, putting his hands over the Doctor's. "It's such a pattern for us, challenge, genius matched against genius. You always win in the end, of course, despite my superior mind. Mainly because, no matter what the opportunity, I could never quite make myself kill you. Bastard."

The Doctor smiles at the fondness in the Master's voice. "You did once. Well, forced a regen."

"So I did. Into that pretty blond body you had for a while. I liked that one."

"So I understand. I met your, hmm, companion in your TARDIS.""Oh fuck. Really?" The Master laughs. "Isn't that typical of you? When we went there together I was able to wipe him before you even got near finding him."

"It was flattering. Well, sort of."

"Oh, Doctor, if you don't know I'm obsessed with you by now, there's no hope for you."

The Doctor kisses the Master's neck, just above the collar of his coat. "Wouldn't have you any other way. Shall we head upstairs?"

The Master looks towards the loom. "Jack constructed this by himself?"

"I believe Ianto Jones helped, but the expertise was all Jack's. Oh, you might want to claim your ring back."

"My ring?"

"In the big control panel."

The Master walks over to the other side of the loom, the hem of the Doctor's coat dragging over the damp floor. He studies the panel with interest. "His overt sex addiction and Hollywood teeth hide a rather too clever mind, don't they?" He pinches the ring between his fingers and pulls it out of the loom panel, which immediately powers down. "Cheeky sod, using this."

"There's worse," the Doctor says as he watches the Master slip his ring back on his finger. "There's cyberman tech in the loom itself."

"What?" Alarmed, the Master turns around to stare at the loom table.

"As far as I can tell it's mainly just the framework and a few of the conduits." The Doctor tries not to grin as the Master starts patting down his own body, looking highly perturbed. "Don't worry. There's no metal anything in you. I checked. Need to have some serious words with Jack though. Lots and lots of them, serious words overkill. Oh, and hobble his vortex manipulator again."

"Don't."

"Don't?"
"I still don't understand why, but he's given us back to each other, hasn't he? Don't punish him for that."

Well, well, well. This certainly isn't the Master who died in the Doctor's arms, the one who tortured and raped Jack repeatedly just to hurt the Doctor. The Doctor walks around to stand with him, wanting to touch him again, but for some reason holding back.

The Master looks at him warily. "Any cracks about me getting soft would not be wise," he warns, moving his fingers over the black box that had held his biodata. "I just owe him a lot. Anyway, Jack's not your responsibility any more. He belongs to Romana."

That makes the Doctor pause. "But she's... oh, in the Matrix. Of course. Should we try again with New Gallifrey, do you think?"

"No!" the Master steps back from the Doctor. "Don't let me anywhere near the place, Doctor. Serious now."

The Doctor nods. "Yeah, we should just travel around, me and you, going nowhere in particular while we both learn who you are now." Not that he wouldn't love to at least see the place. He'd thought he'd destroyed it utterly. To know it still exists... Best not to think about it. "Upstairs now, come on."

They head out into the corridor and along to the lift. A short ride later and they're in the vast central chamber of the Hub. The Master takes an appreciative look around, turning on the spot, while the Doctor waits. There's no one to be seen, but the Doctor's sure that Ianto will still be around somewhere, ready to respond to a call.

"So this is the house that Jack built," the Master says.

"Well, the house that Jack adapted to his use, yeah. The place is awash with totally dodgy hardware they've scavenged." Including, he notices with a frown, a certain Dorvox radial crotrophon back on Toshiko's desk. Young Mr Jones is clearly no more trustworthy than his boss.

He looks towards his TARDIS. Someone seems to have left a heavy looking suitcase outside the door. The Master's things, perhaps? He puts his arm around the Master's shoulders and tries to guide him TARDISward as it seems obvious he's going to want to have a poke around otherwise, despite his current flasher-mac status. The Doctor can see a very familiar glint in the Master's eye, that of a Time Lord on the prowl, sniffing out the curious and intriguing.

The Master lets himself be steered to start with. After three steps, however, he stops dead.

"What's wrong?" the Doctor asks.

"Either I'm suffering some kind of post-loomng hallucinatory state, or there's a pterodactyl on top of your TARDIS."

"Ah, that's Myfanwy. She's friendly, don't worry. One of the more animated anachronisms this place holds. She took a fancy to the TARDIS as a perch early on. I think she wants to be taken home."

"I hate saurians," the Master says, but he starts walking again, clearly prepared to take the Doctor's word on the matter.

Myfanwy screeches and flies off as the Doctor opens the TARDIS door. The Master flinches, but she has no interest in him. She's able to use the air currents around the central pillar and fountain to
gain height within the Hub, and she spirals upwards.

"Come in," the Doctor says, picking up the suitcase. "I'll give you a key, of course. Once you're settled."

"And there you go trusting me again. Idiot."

"One of us has to," the Doctor says dryly, closing the door behind the Master. He puts the suitcase down and turns around just in time to find himself being slammed back against the closed door. The Master's tight against him, trapping him there.

"Don't. Don't ever, ever trust me." The Master's face is screwed up with repressed anger, and the Doctor's still just about connected enough to feel it surging like fire through the Master's mind. He finds himself being kissed viciously, and oh, it's just like his dreams.

Moaning, the Doctor wraps his arms around the Master.

'Gods, you fool. You utter fool,' the Master sends mentally, suddenly large in the Doctor's mind again. He grinds himself against the Doctor, making him gasp. 'You're so needy for another Time Lord that you're willing to forgive anything, forget anything. Aren't you, Doctor? Aren't you putting the blinkers on right now, oh so blithely? And the headphones and the gag? Why not shackle yourself while you're at it? Those bloody monkeys have nothing on you!'

'You're not just any Time Lord, Master, and I don't need to justify that statement 'cause we both know it's true. And you're not angry at me,' the Doctor says, slipping his hands under his coat to slide over the Master's skin. 'Not really. You're furious with yourself, for what you did.'

The Master rips his mouth away from the Doctor's. "Oh, and aren't you the astute one? Well, if it's home truth time, how about this? You only want me, as opposed to any other Time Lord, because you think you deserve to be punished. Genocide, Doctor? Anyone? That's how you could forgive me my every crime on the Valiant, isn't it? Because my only purpose in your world is to make you hurt like you feel you deserve."

"Well, get on with punishing me then," the Doctor says as there's no way he's getting involved in that argument, and the easiest way to avoid it is to agree with everything the Master says. "Make me hurt." The Master's hand glues itself to the front of the Doctor's trousers and squeezes. Hard. The Doctor's eyes clench shut as he's suddenly gasping for breath. "That's more like it," he says in a tight voice.

"That's nothing," the Master says, releasing the Doctor long enough to open the Doctor's trousers and push them and his underwear down his legs. He grabs the Doctor's semi-erect cock and jerks it painfully. "There's no end to my repertoire of pain."

"I know," the Doctor says sadly. He tries to reach out to the Master's mind again, but finds his way blocked. So much for 'any time'. "Believe me, I know that."

"Moron!" The Master slaps him. Despite the rough treatment the Doctor's already received, this comes as a shock. He rears back, pressing his head against the wood of the TARDIS door, and he stares at the Master who cries, "Stop it! Just stop it!"

"Stop what? I'm not the one giving new meaning to 'mercurial' here."

"Stop accepting me. Accepting anything I say, anything I do. Fight back, for fuck's sake. What's wrong with you?"
The Doctor gives the Master an exasperated look, and he pulls his trousers back up. "Okay, right. Gotcha. So who wants punishing now then?"

For a few moments, the Doctor's convinced the Master's about to lay into him with the kind of physical violence that the Master's earlier incarnations always hated having to resort to. The Master's face is screwed up with absolute rage, his fists bunched and his whole body shaking. But then something seems to happen inside him, some taut string is cut, and he collapses against the Doctor, making odd noises and motions.

It takes the Doctor a surprising number of seconds to understand that the Master is crying. Nah, more like weeping really. Helplessly, convulsively weeping.

He wraps his arms back around the shaking body. "I'm here. I'm with you." The Master mumbles something between sobs, but the Doctor can't make it out. "Don't try to talk yet; wait 'til you're calmer. I know you can't help it. I'm not judging, promise."

"Bastard. Stinking, self-righteous, mealy-mouthed, hypocritical bastard."

Well, he heard that all right. The Doctor shakes his head, wondering what the hell he's taken on with this resurrected Master and, if he's honest with himself, loving every minute of it. Someone to care for, someone who really needs him. Even the slap felt good in a way. He combs the fingers of his upper hand into the Master's hair and holds him tight. "What you may be forgetting, Master, is that I'm your stinking, self-righteous, mealy-mouthed, and oh yeah, mustn't forget hypocritical bastard."

The Master pulls back, scrubbing angrily at his face before making eye contact with the Doctor. "Are you really?"

"If you'll have me."

That makes the Master tip his head back and laugh. "If? If? You mean to say I'm getting a choice?" Before the Doctor can answer, the Master moves closer again, his hands flat on the Doctor's chest. "I saw you die," he says in a low voice. "I saw you burnt into indistinguishable chunks and felt you die. Gone. Completely gone."

"That makes us even then, doesn't it?" the Doctor can't help but point out. "Really not keen to experience that one again. No dying without regenerating; we should make that a rule between us."

There's silence for a while. The Master seems to become calmer. He moves his fingers slightly over the Doctor's jacket, and the Doctor wishes he was as nearly-naked as the Master. He wants to really feel that touch.

"Jack kissed you recently?" the Master asks brightly, suddenly looking up. He's off on some inexplicable tangent apparently, tears forgotten.

"Yeah," the Doctor admits cautiously. "Why?"

"Just checking. You should let him kiss you regularly. Suppose I should too." The Master looks at the Doctor's face and presumably sees the confusion written there. He grins. "That's how he uploads us."

Oh. And there's another thing to add to the very long list of 'matters to discuss with Captain Jack Harkness ASAP'. "Sure we can find a way to get uploaded that doesn't involve mouth to mouth."

"Ah," the Master gestures breezily. "Why deprive the man of his small pleasures?" He fidgets on
the spot. "My feet are cold, Doctor."

As Jack's been spending so much time in the TARDIS, the Doctor has the environmental settings switched to human comfort levels again. Hardly an unusual state of affairs for him, but it does mean the Master can walk around naked without feeling the chill, something the Doctor can only thoroughly applaud. The metal floor, however, could be nippy under bare feet. Nodding, the Doctor kneels down by the suitcase, and laying it flat, he opens it. "Thought as much," he says, looking at the contents. "That's good of them."

The Master comes up behind him and looks. "Ah ha! Proper clothes." He's quickly naked, the Doctor's coat thrown to the floor, and rummaging through the case's contents. As the Doctor picks his coat up and brushes it down with his hand, the Master giggles. He turns around to the Doctor, his hands full of of plastic bottles. "He even remembered our favourite kind! The man's a regular trooper."

The Doctor peers and then blinks as he realises the Master's holding lubricant, silly amounts of the stuff. Scratching the back of his head, behind his ear, he asks as casually as he can manage, "How long, do you suppose, would it normally take us to get through that lot?"

"Oh, we won't have to stock up again for a few days," the Master assures him, a thoroughly wicked grin on his face.

The Doctor tries to grin back, but he's having trouble. His mind is suddenly pulsing with images and sensations from his dreams: his face pressed into fabric as the Master moves above him, making him ache inside, making him cry out, his fingers clawing. Or his back on the bed and his legs in the air, while the Master does his best to shove the Doctor all the way up the mattress, and then the wall, by the power of his thrusts alone. Oh God, the feel of it, of him. "Master..."

"Want something?" The Master puts the bottles down on the floor. "Something I can provide?"

"Master. Please."

The Master studies at him and then comes forward. "Want me inside you, Doctor?" he asks gently. "Mind and body?"

Yes, oh yes, he does. "Please. Please, Master."

The Master purses his lips together in a knowing smile as he looks the Doctor up and down. "Strip."

Without even thinking about it, the Doctor obeys, feeling a little shocked at himself, not that he stops. He's soon as naked as the Master, who has his knuckle in his mouth as he stares at the Doctor's body. The Master's cock is swelling and twitching, and the sight makes the Doctor's respond similarly, not that it'd exactly been soft to start with. He reaches out his arms. "Master, I really..."

"You really what?" the Master asks, sidestepping the Doctor's arms and walking around behind him. "Tell me."

"Really want you."

He feels the Master press against his back and arse, and he closes his eyes, relishing the sensation. "Tell me," the Master says again. "Tell me exactly what you want me to do."

"Oh God."
"Tell me, Doctor." The Master's arms wrap around him, hands exploring up and down the Doctor's body. "Whatever you can bring yourself to ask for explicitly, I'll give you. You have my promise on that. Isn't that kind of me?"

Eyes still closed, the Doctor loses himself in memories of his dreams, memories of events he never lived through and yet did, really did. "Kiss me. Lots and lots of snogging. Non-stop snogging, apart from when you have to stop to do other things even better than snogging. And touching, lots of that too. And a little of the more vicious stuff, 'cause I like a little of it. Well, maybe a little more than a little. You decide; you know me better than I do right now. And let me do stuff to you too. Make me do stuff to you, even better! And fucking, of course. You fucking me, as you don't seem to permit the other way, though I think you should, at least once. Um, unless you did, and I never dreamt that bit."

"Okay," the Master says, a smile in his voice. "And I didn't."

"Would you?"

"Don't know. Maybe? Maybe if we entrelace again. Not sure."

Well, that was a whole load better than the outright refusal the Doctor had expected. He lets out a breath as the Master's hand circles his cock and starts to gently stroke. The Doctor tips his head back, leaning into the embrace.

"So that's all you want?" the Master checks. "Nothing else?"

"That's all I want physically."

"Ah ha! I thought it seemed far too human a list to satisfy you. Shall I let you lead the telepathic duet? You do it so well."

"Do I?"

"Ooh yeah, you do." The Master rotates his hips, rubbing his erection against the Doctor's buttocks. "Don't worry about being new to it; you picked it up fast enough last time. You're a natural." He stops moving and says very quietly, "Thought I'd never experience it again..."

Suddenly, the Doctor finds himself being whirled around and just as abruptly pushed back so his arse hits the console island. The Master's hand whips around the back of the Doctor's neck and then they're kissing. Hard.

There's nothing graceful about it, nothing sweet. The kiss is full of clashing teeth, too much spit, crushed lips and growling noises, and the Doctor's harder than he ever thought possible. That's presumably what centuries of abstinence will do to a Time Lord when he's finally given back what he's wanted all this time.

Oh God. Oh Rassilon and Omega. Oh... Master! The Doctor clutches at the Master, his fingers digging into the muscles of shoulder and arse as his mouth is filled by an aggressively probing tongue.

The Master's hands grip just below the Doctor's buttocks and lift him, just enough to prop him on the console edge. Without breaking the kiss, the Master moves between the Doctor's legs. His arms tighten around the Doctor, crushing their upper bodies together.

'Master,' the Doctor sends, probing telepathically.
'Doctor...’ The Master's mind is suddenly wide open, so open the Doctor feels like he's free-falling into it. He pulls as much of himself as he can in with him, swirling himself together with the Master as he falls. Past, present and future, everything of them streaming together, so many faces, so many voices and versions, but all of them are them. It's incredible, to feel this joining again after so long, to feel it for real, to be it.

'Master. Oh God. Like my dreams. So like my dreams.’ The Doctor sends coruscating sparks out through their blending minds, making the Master groan.

'They weren't dreams, my beloved idiot.’ The Master's hands rise to the front of the Doctor and start pinching and twisting at his nipples, making the Doctor feel like he's corkscrewing inside. 'Oh, my sweet, divine idiot.’ The Master breaks the kiss to suck and bite at the Doctor's neck.

The Doctor's been called worse things, that's for sure. He tips his head back, exposing his throat for the Master's teeth, and reaches down between them to circle the Master's cock with his hand. Ohh. He feels so right in the Doctor's grip. The Master's breath is rough on his neck, catching as the Doctor strokes him.

Suddenly the Master moves, bringing his own hands between them. He grips the Doctor's hand, pulling it away just long enough to press both their cocks together, and then he presses the Doctor's hand back, trapping it against their touching cocks in between both of his hands. The Doctor looks down between them and sees the reddened heads of their erections tight together in a nest of fingers and palms, and he feels light-headed.

"Temporary entrelacement," the Master says with a ragged grin. He moves within their linked hands, sliding against the Doctor. "Good, isn't it?"

The Doctor isn't sure he can answer, He wants desperately to thrust, but the Master's got him trapped on the console, so instead he uses his free hand to drag the Master back into another deep kiss. As the Master fucks their hands, the Doctor moves in their mingled minds, gathering and twisting, joining them together like strands of DNA.

'Gods!' the Master cries out in their minds, shuddering and repeatedly losing his rhythm. 'Doctor...’

Every time the Master thrusts, the Doctor twists, tighter and tighter, spiralling them together like, ooh, bands of seaside rock, the fruity type with the rainbow colours swirling around the outside, the letters nestling safely within. What should the letters say? he wonders absently, most of his attention elsewhere.

'That my other half is a complete... oh God... complete and utter... Gods, Doctor... complete and utter lackbrain! Seaside rock!’

'Don't think they could fit so many letters in as that, Master.’

The Master growls into his mouth and pulls back, mentally and physically. He lifts their hands long enough to spit in them and then returns them to their job. Now he starts to thrust hard against the Doctor, his grip tight around them, and the Doctor finds himself making high-pitched yelping noises. It's almost painful, it's so acute, but it's beautiful. It's the Master, the Master and him, and it's beautiful.

The Master's panting, his thrusts savage, and the Doctor can feel neither of them are far off coming. But not yet, please not yet, not 'til the Doctor's done this last thing. With his eyes closed, the Doctor can trace the pulsing flow of signals from the Master's cock, through the pudendal nerve to his spine, and up to his brain. The Doctor rides the network, charging it up, making it frantic, 'til
the Master's leaning heavily against him, whimpering but still thrusting.

It takes all the willpower the Doctor has not to just give into the physical sensations he's experiencing, but instead hold on long enough to take his own network of somatosensory receptors and match it node for node with the Master's. Once it's done, he cries, "Do it," and then he sends every spark of telepathic power he has through his own neural network and into the Master's, forcing them both into violent orgasm.

"Fuck!" the Master yells, freezing against the Doctor as his body shudders and his cock pulses. "Doctor..."

"Master, Master..."

The Master slumps heavily against the Doctor, his no doubt sticky hands dropping to his sides. The Doctor keeps his clean hand on the Master's back, moving it in small, slow circles.

"I think I owe you a fuck," the Master says, a lazy smile in his voice as he brings up one of his hands and licks it. "Couldn't make myself stop touching you long enough to get the lube."

"Sure you'll tick that box on my list later," the Doctor says. He's not exactly feeling deprived.

With a quiet grunt, the Master pulls back enough to put his weight on his own feet and turns, backing up so that he's leaning on the console beside the Doctor. When the Doctor turns his head to look, he sees the Master has his eyes shut. Reaching out, the Doctor wraps his hand around the Master's, just to keep the contact going.

The Master's mouth forms a slow smile. "I'm a lucky bastard, aren't I? Ooh, Doctor, aren't I?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it? You and me, doing it again."

"Your second chance, my third. I fuck up a whole universe and get this as my reward? How cushy is that?"

"No more fucking up," the Doctor says, a slight note of warning in his tone. "For either of us."

When the Master casts him an ever so slightly nervous look, the Doctor squeezes his hand and adds, "Don't worry. I really will be watching. Learnt all those lessons from my alternate timeline self."

"Hope I have too," the Master says a little bleakly, but then he turns and grins at the Doctor. "Fancy a picnic?"

The Doctor raises his eyebrows. "A... picnic?"

"Yes." The Master grins and steps over to the Doctor's pile of discarded clothing, from which he grabs the shirt. He wipes himself sticky-free with it and then chucks it at the Doctor, who looks at it dubiously.

"I hope I'm not meant to be putting this on."

"Nope, just using it as a makeshift towel. I like us naked, don't you? It's fitting for the moment. Working with the paradigm, to use your words."

As the Doctor wipes himself clean, the Master stalks around to the other side of the console. "Going to allow me to set coordinates?" he asks, wiggling his fingers above the navigation console. 
"Go ahead," the Doctor says, smiling over. "The controls aren't locked."

"They probably should be," the Master says as he starts setting coordinates.

The Doctor knows the Master is right, that it's better to err on caution's side for the sake of... well, the whole silly universe apparently, but his impulse is nonetheless to trust the Master. *This* Master. He says nothing, trying to decide whether impulse is right on this one and not wanting to admit that his uncertainty on the matter is reason enough to tread only on the caution side of the white line.

"Ready?" the Master asks, looking up. When the Doctor nods, the Master hits the handbrake, and the TARDIS is on her way. Only then does the Doctor realise they're leaving the Hub without even a goodbye. Oh well. As the Master's keen to keep their Matrix records up to date, they'll presumably be returning frequently.

He wanders around to stand by the Master, putting a hand on the small of his back. "When you died..."

"Oh no." The Master turns quickly and places his finger over the Doctor's lips. "We've had enough of the sappy to last, ooh, a decade at least. Set your alarm for ten years down the line if you must, and I might allow you a few seconds of maudlin sentimentality then, if you've been really, really good." He smirks. "Are you going to be really, really good, Doctor?"

It's a bit unfair. The Doctor isn't exactly known for being a sentimentalist. If anything, he's known for running away at the first sign of an incoming emotional event. He can't help returning the Master's wicked smile, however, his lips upturning under the Master's forbidding finger. They'll still be together in ten years' time. Oh God, yeah.

The TARDIS arrives, and the Master turns back to the controls to power her down and... oh, extend the forcefield and environmental conditions a significant way outwards from the door. That's interesting. "Where are we?" the Doctor asks, trying to peer at the coordinates, but the Master moves himself bodily in the way.

"Let's go and look, shall we?" He seems very pleased with himself; his grin drips smug like golden syrup from a spoon. He takes the Doctor's hand and pulls him over to the door. "Go on, take a look."

The Doctor pushes open the doors and looks out. Oh. Oh, he knows this place. They're parked on a small asteroid, lent a faux atmosphere and gravity by the extended shield bubble. He's looking out into vast stellar dust clouds. Everywhere his gaze falls, he sees tiny explosions of coloured light flare and then fade, flare and then fade. "The Styrex Nebula," he breathes. "How did you...?"

"It was the first place you took me to after we fixed the TARDIS. Well, the second, but I didn't fancy endless, featureless glacier for some reason."

Did the Doctor hear that right? The Master's taken them back to... to the site of their first date? What the hell is this if it isn't sappy? Somehow the Doctor manages not to point this out. Instead, he watches the particles of tronium implode in tiny puffs of iridescence amongst the glittering debris, and he smiles. It's a smile that comes from deep in the core of him, from a place he'd thought long since buried under the rubble of Gallifrey, and it fills him with light and heat. "Isn't it glorious?"

"Oh yeah, beautiful," the Master says, but when the Doctor glances his way, he sees that the Master's watching him and not the light show.
Their eyes meet. For a long time they just stand like that, their faces one-sidedly acting as projector screens for the fireworks. Then the Master says, "So, picnic? Or just a stroll under Blackpool Illuminations?"

The Doctor reaches out and takes the Master's hand. "Stroll to start with. Clothes?"

"Oh, I think not." The Master grins and tugs the Doctor out of the door. The asteroid is rough and sharp beneath their bare feet, but that just makes it more real, more satisfying. The Master walks them out to the edge of the asteroid and turns, wrapping his arms around the Doctor. About them, stellar dust ignites in the thrall of Coroth's comet, scattering photons like blossom in the wind.

"This is our legacy," the Master says. "Our right."

"Mmm?" The Doctor pushes his fingers into the Master's short hair, holding his head and getting ready to kiss him.

"She kept offering me the stars, the Dancer," the Master says, half-closing his eyes, cat-like, in response to the Doctor's touch. "She seemed to think she could remake me into some kind of cosmic entity, one that could play as easily in the heart of stars as in the eddies of the Vortex. Fun, eh?"

"You would no longer have been you." The Doctor presses small kisses on the Master's face.

The Master nods, or tries to, in the Doctor's hands. "You and me, perhaps we can't dance in the flame of stars, but we can walk naked in the dust of a nebula. That's enough. Isn't that enough, Doctor?"

"Is it, Master?" the Doctor questions as gently as he knows how. "Nothing's ever seemed to be enough for you before."

"Was I ever allowed to keep anything long enough for it to be 'enough'?"

He has a point. "You, me, and the whole of spacetime. That's enough for me," the Doctor says, smiling. "Ooh, beyond enough. Lightyears - no, gigalight-years - more than enough. Just twenty-four hours ago I had... Well, I never expected ever to... Oh."

The Master snorts. "If I were you, I'd give up on words for now. Far too constraining, don't you think, Doctor? Far too two-dimensional for us. You and me, we break such boundaries."

He's right, of course. The Doctor moves his thumbs on the Master's temples and renews their mental connection, inviting the Master to do the same. As the Master's hands rise to the Doctor's face, the Doctor begins to share... everything. Everything he is, everything he's been, everything he could be, and everything he wants to be.

And the Master? He throws his head back and laughs.
Epilogue: Spiral Twist

Ianto watches the TARDIS fade away and then heads down the stairs from the balcony walkway to pick up the papers that went flying as air rushed to fill the space vacated. After that, he feeds Myfanwy, and then it's non-essential lights out, overnight security on, before he leaves through the airlock door and heads upstairs to the Bay.

He walks home. It's not far, though it is bitterly cold, and he bundles his hands under his arms to keep them warm. There's going to be a thick frost tonight. It's already forming, making car windscreens opaque and puddles potentially lethal.

As he walks up the stairs in his apartment building, he tries not to think too much. He'd been doing very well with all this loom business and hadn't had to lie to Jack about it once. But when the Doctor yelled at him like that, in *that* room, about *that* particular piece of non-human technology, it somehow brought it all back.

He puts his key into the door of his tiny flat, turns it, and heads wearily inside. Jack looks up from the sofa where he seems to have been sitting with his head in his hands. There are folders open on the glass coffee table, but Ianto's certain they weren't being read.

"What's wrong?" Jack asks, apparently in one of his more psychic moods.

"Nothing," Ianto says, turning his back on Jack to hang up his jacket. "I'm just tired."

"Come here and let me help you relax."

"Don't you want to know what happened?" Ianto asks, not moving.

"I don't know," Jack says, sounding just a little peevish. "Do I?"

Ianto turns around, keeping his expression neutral. "The Doctor did it, like you said he would. They left together in the TARDIS."

He watches Jack swallow, catches the hurt in the blue eyes before they look down. "Nope. Didn't want to know that." Jack sighs.

Feeling unaccountably tense suddenly, Ianto heads into his kitchenette. "I'm making coffee. It's bitter out. Do you want one?"

"Sure," Jack says. Ianto hears the springs creak as Jack stands up from the old sofa. It was Lisa's, second-hand from her grandmother when they were setting up home together, and he can't bring himself to get rid of it now. Jack comes over to lean on the counter that splits the kitchenette off from the main room of the flat. "Did it take him long to decide?"

"Not really." Ianto pauses as he fills the jug with water. "A bit of a pace and some hair-pulling. I put the CCTV footage in the special folder on your console."

"Thanks. I think."

"Should I make a third cup?"

"Yeah. Actually, ask her yourself."

Ianto turns to see Romana enter the main room from the bedroom. She smiles at him, saying,
"Welcome home, Ianto. Did all go as expected?"

He nods and gestures with a mug. "I'm making if you want some, Lady President."

"Thank you. That would be lovely." She's still dressed in Jack's clothing, which really, Ianto thinks, should look a good deal stranger than it does. He still finds the presence of Time Lords unnerving. They look so human, but they're not, not even slightly. She's beautiful though, and sometimes he catches a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye, and just for fractured moment, he thinks she's Lisa come home.

He busies himself making the coffee while the other two talk.

"Did you discover what he's done with the array?" Romana's asking.

"Yeah, finally," Jack answers, turning to lean back against the counter. "For a while I was beginning to think it would've been better for me to smuggle it in after all, however difficult. It took me a long time to find the place through all those perception filters he had draped over the door like heavy curtains, and then the locks were difficult to get through even with a sonic. He seems to be storing it in with a lot of other items. Damn scary items too, some of them."

"His attic probably," Romana says knowledgeably. "He never allowed me in there when we travelled together. That's perfect. With just a little luck, he'll forget about it up there now he has the Master to care for." She sighs softly. "It's time to activate it."

The coffee machine on, Ianto turns to watch as Jack opens his wrist console. Jack hits a few buttons and then a diagram drawn in blue light appears above it. "Sure we want to do this?" he asks, looking at Romana.

"I don't think we have a choice. I'd like the Doctor to be happy; he's done so much for us, but we can't be careless again as far as the Master's concerned. The array is the equivalent of what we did with you, Jack. It's our failsafe, that's all. Neither of them ever need know, providing the worst never happens."

Jack nods, but Ianto can tell he's still not relaxed about the idea. Not that Jack'll argue with Romana. He seems to consider her his superior officer - to be advised, aided, but never disobeyed.

"What does it do?" Ianto asks, feeling he should show an interest if he's not to be evermore the tea boy. "This array?"

Jack turns to him, and Ianto wonders if he's glad for a further delay before pushing buttons he obviously doesn't want to press. "It's the receiver for the signals transmitted by that organic device we implanted in the Master's new head as it was growing. It receives, stores and analyses all the data the device sends, and if the Master starts to think or act in a way the algorithms suggest is dangerous, the array will let me know immediately."

"And if he does?" Ianto suspects he already knows the answer.

"I report to Romana, and on her word, send the instruction to the array to activate the self-destruct mechanism in the device."

Poor bastard. Even his fresh start is marred before it's started. Ianto turns back to the kitchen, deciding to raid the biscuit tin.

Ever since that business with the Prime Minister, Jack's been trusting Ianto with so much more. That's a major U-turn from the 'you're better off not knowing' line. Apparently Jack's experiences
have allowed him to see Ianto's potential more clearly. Which is great. Just great. Now Ianto only has himself to live up to. That is, some kind of perfect version of himself from another dimension who looked hot in black ops gear.

Fortunate then that Ianto's ordered himself a set, really.

"Ianto?" Romana's voice.

He turns and manages a smile. "Yes, Lady President?"

She comes closer to the counter, putting her hand on it as she stands beside Jack. "You do understand that you must never discuss these matters with anyone but us, don't you? The captain thinks very highly of you, and I certainly trust him enough to trust you in turn, but I feel I have to say it."

"Of course, Lady President. No one shall hear about it from me."

She nods, her expression serious. He supposes it's something presidents are taught, like royalty, to listen in apparent seriousness to even the lowest plebeian presented to them. Romana turns to Jack now and says, "Time to do it, Captain."

Jack swallows and presses a couple of... well, they're just areas on a touchscreen really as opposed to actual buttons. A shiver of light passes through the projected diagram and then characters start streaming down across it. "Receiving." Jack says, rather redundantly Ianto feels. "Calibrating..."

"Where are they?" Romana asks.


"And how's the Master?"

"Happy predominantly. Very happy. Nothing to worry about."

Ianto knows the Lady President heard the edge in Jack's voice; she's frowning at him slightly now. "It's important," she says, "that you acclimatise yourself to knowing these things, Captain, however private they may seem to be. I need to know that I can rely on you to monitor the array. Any desire to avoid the information with which it provides us, while understandable, is unhelpful."

"You can rely on me, Romana," Jack says, his tone that of the loyal soldier again. "You know you can. I'll even hit the kill switch if it ever becomes necessary, but I'm hoping for the Doctor's sake that it doesn't."

She nods. "On to more pleasurable matters then. We have an empty loom now, and I'd appreciate Braxiatel back at my side..."

Ianto stops listening and turns to fill the coffee mugs. He's not sure how much he should care about Time Lords and their agendas anyway, but Jack cares, and so Ianto really has to.

He carries the coffees over to the sofa, an unopened pack of McVities chocolate digestives under his arm. They're not posh, but he fancies them. Without a word, the other two come over. Romana takes the armchair, and Jack sits down beside Ianto on the sofa. He claps his hand on Ianto's leg and squeezes before picking up his mug.

"Not much of a 'happy ever after' for them, is it?" Ianto finds himself saying after a few welcome sips of hot coffee. "More a 'have a happy ever after, or else' really."
Jack snorts. "You could put it that way."

"Does anyone get a perfect 'happy ever after' outside of stories?" Romana asks thoughtfully, and there are a few moments' silence then. Ianto bites into his chocolate digestive.

It's Jack, inevitably, who breaks the silence. "Okay then!" he announces, clapping his hands together. "Who's for pizza?"

End Notes

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