Summary

During their two weeks trapped on Floor 507, the Doctor asks the Master for help with a memory issue. Characters: 12th Doctor, the Master, Missy (briefly), Clara (mentioned... a lot). Gen, friendship.

Notes

Hello again, dear readers...

This is a multi-chapter fic, totally complete!! I will be posting a new chapter every day or so over the next couple of weeks. I'll start with two today, because I'm nice. ;)

Things You Should Know:
- SPOILERS for all of 12's story, all of Missy's story and consider any Clara continuity fair game. These are not small spoilers, so if you are not up to date on any of this, I advise against reading.
- This twelve-chapter fic is finished but the sequel is about 75% done. In case that bothers...
you.
- I don't like Missy. (See tag above.) She seems to me to be a very different character from
the Master and this fic contains an alternate explanation for her existence. Just FYI. I know
Missy has fans, I'm not trying to upset anyone.
- WARNING: You may find yourself rewatching The Doctor Falls and MANY other
assorted DW episodes after reading this fic... #sorrynotsorry ;)

And so, without further ado...
Chapter 1: How It Ends

"I do what I do, because it's right!" The Doctor was shouting, passionate. "Because it's decent!"

The Master kept a tight grip on his composure, not without difficulty. In the man standing before him now, it was impossible not to see the little boy with whom he had become best friends so long ago on Gallifrey...

So small, so emotional, so brilliant... So baffling.

So endlessly fascinating.

Irreplaceable.

That little boy had always been his weakness. Always would be.

"And above all," the Doctor gestured upwards towards the false sky, "it's kind. " His eyes traveled to Missy. The Master frowned, watching the Doctor try to place the origin of that word, trying to remember when it had first become so important...

But they both knew that memory was gone, lost.

The Doctor gave up, smiled, resigned but resolute. "Just that. Just it's kind."

Remembering but not remembering. A thread connecting to nothing.

In any other situation, the Master would have understood wanting to die rather than to live on like that... Or even worse, to become someone else entirely. Someone you didn't even know yourself.

Of course, in any other situation, it wouldn't have mattered at all.

But this was the Doctor.

"Hey, you know," the Doctor continued, "maybe there's no point in any of this."

Correct.

But when has that ever stopped you?

"But it's the best I can do, so I'm doing it!" He wouldn't be dissuaded. "And I will stand here doing it until it kills me."

No, Doctor...

Not today.

Not while I have anything to say about it.

The Master knew there was no point in arguing with his friend. The Doctor had given up instead of
just asking for help. Or rather, had only asked for what he needed to justify the decision he'd already made.

Oddly, as much effort as he put into saving others, the Doctor always ended up thinking too small when it came to saving himself...

The Master had no such hangups. His priorities were properly aligned when it came to the Doctor's survival. *No one* was allowed to stand in the way of that.

Not a few hundred nameless humans.

Not Time Lords from the Old Days of Gallifrey.

Not the Doctor himself.

And as the Master knew from long and strange experience... There was *always* a way. There was nothing in this Universe that wasn't fixable with enough patience and determination.

It was merely a question of commitment.

And the Master was nothing if not committed.

He would rip apart all of Space and Time, live a billion lifetimes, die a hundred thousand deaths before he'd allow the Doctor to go to his death like this... For *nothing*.

"You're going to die, too." The Doctor pointed at the Master and Missy, emphatically, trying with all his might to keep their attention, to convince them to stand by and watch him die up close.

It was a horrifying thing to ask of your friends, really.

*Selfish.*

*Stubborn, blind, selfish Doctor.*

But he was very convincing... He always was.

"How will that be, have you thought about it?" the Doctor asked, his tone somber.

The Master *had* thought about it. More than that, had *acted* on it.

He had died once, long ago...

The Doctor still didn't know why. He would never know.

It wouldn't come to that this time, thankfully. That had been a last resort. But the Master would do it again in a moment, if necessary, and with no regrets.

"What would you die for?" the Doctor demanded, as if it was a brand-new thought.

The Master already knew the answer to that question, had known for a long, long time...

*For you, Doctor.*

*Stupid, stupid Doctor.*

The Master looked away, fearing the Doctor would see the truth... Thankfully, he didn't seem to notice.
But the question had brought the memories back.

A little boy crying in the night...

A small plastic toy in a cluttered workshop...

A man with so many faces, always different, always the same...

It hurt.

"Stand with me," the Doctor said, stepping closer.

It wasn't a request.

It sounded a bit like an order ... And the Master didn't take orders.

Not anymore.

Not ever again.

"Why not," the Doctor asked, so clueless, so sincere, "just at the end? Just be kind?"

The Master felt the emotion overtaking him again... A rising flood, turbulent and chaotic.

Because the Doctor had reminded him of the things he had spent the last week trying to suppress.

Oh, the Doctor hadn't done it on purpose... Not exactly, anyway. He didn't have enough information for it to have been entirely deliberate. But the Doctor had good instincts and knew his friend well. He was manipulating, pushing his friend's emotional buttons.

And it worked.

It would always work.

They were far too similar, had shared far too much for either to ever be entirely unmoved by the other's pleas.

But it hurt to remember.

It hurt to feel his friend's desperation, to see the pleading in the Doctor's eyes and know that he would have to refuse to help him in order to save him from himself. It hurt to know he'd have to leave the Doctor alone. He hated the thought of the Doctor being alone and afraid, had always hated that. But he had to think of the big picture...

He couldn't fix any of this by standing at the Doctor's side while he self-destructed.

The pain was too much for one person. He had to share it.

And the Doctor was so vulnerable in this moment...

The opportunity was just too perfect.

He smiled.

"See this face?" the Master asked.
It was the face born out of the Time War.

The face that had taken everything the Doctor loved in vengeance for what had been done to him.

The face that had chosen to die in the Doctor's arms simply to watch him suffer.

"Take a good, long look at it." The Master pronounced each word slowly, deliberately, knowing the Doctor would have no choice but to hang on every syllable. "This is the face... That didn't listen to a word you just said."

The Doctor's eyes fell. The Master saw his friend's pain, his disappointment.

The Master smiled, cold as the void of outer space... And walked away.

He heard the Doctor start to follow.

Oh, if only...

That would make everything so much simpler...

But, no.

Nothing could ever be that simple with the Doctor.

He turned back to Missy, pleading with her. Trying to win the game.

The Master reached out mentally, drawing her to him, enticing her with the promise of clarity, stability...

It worked.

She deserted the Doctor, and rightly so. If he was going to insist on doing something as stupid as dying, he should do it alone.

Meanwhile, the Master would focus on something more productive.

Fixing the real problem...

Saving the Doctor.
Chapter 2: Old Friends

The Master sat inside the farmhouse, staring out at the engineered countryside.

It had been three days since they had arrived on Floor 507. That time had been taken up with resting, reevaluating, finding their feet before the inevitable battle to come.

Because the Cybermen would find them. It was only a matter of time, and they probably didn't have much.

The humans had been very welcoming, providing beds and food, asking nothing in return.

Fools.

Their lives on the line, and they asked for nothing?

The Doctor had spent his time doing what he did best - trying to be in five places at once and worrying needlessly about unimportant details. Such as reassuring frightened humans and coddling a Cyberman, of all things.

Typical Doctor...

Honestly, it was so frustrating watching the Doctor waste his time and energy on such pointless endeavors. The Master should have been used to it after all these centuries but... Somehow it just never got less aggravating. And after all, his life was on the line too. If the Doctor would just focus for once, they could all get out of this alive.

The humans were certainly doomed either way.

The Doctor was no idiot. He must know that.

The Master had tried to point out the need for priorities - tactfully, of course - but the Doctor had turned on him with that death glare... The "shut up and leave me alone" face. A Doctor standard, but his current regeneration wore it exceptionally well.

The Master had never learned to predict the Doctor's odd value system when it came to human lives but he had learned by now that when the Doctor started giving him that glare, it was best to just stand back and let him do... Well, whatever it was he was going to do.

So since the Doctor insisted on being his usual over-involved, scattered self, alternately mired in foolish sentimentality and running about in little circles, that left the Master with the task of figuring a way out of this on his own.

The Master sighed. Somehow, the practical parts always ended up being his job...

As if he didn't have enough on his plate already. He was already trying to work out:

1. How to fix his TARDIS's dematerialization circuit.
2. How to get back to his TARDIS.
3. How to get away from the Doctor, if it came to that - because you never knew, really.
4. Keeping an eye on the Doctor, because that was just best for everyone in the end...
5. Staying alive in the meantime.
Plus, of course, there was the whole Missy situation. Assessing that was a full time job all by itself.

The Master was... Concerned about Missy.

At first, he had believed she was his future self. Bill had certainly thought so.

But now? He wasn't quite so sure...

He had looked into her eyes and had seen his own mind reflected there, which of course was highly enjoyable. But what was she doing, travelling with the Doctor? Not that that was a problem in and of itself. It certainly wouldn't have been the first time, by any means... But there was something subservient in her manner and this rankled the Master.

So the Master spent time with her, watched her carefully, asked her questions. Her answers were... Odd.

Evasive, almost.

Purposefully so?

He wasn't sure yet...

So the Missy project was ongoing.

But the Master wasn't worried, not yet anyway. He knew that he could handle all of this. More even, if necessary. And everything would turn out fine... At least for the people who actually mattered.

He'd make certain of that.

He just wished that one of these centuries the Doctor would follow his example and start being more efficient with how he spent his time during a crisis. The Master had no problem waiting but he was sure that if the Doctor had chosen to contribute to the actual problem, they could already have been far away from this stupid little tin can of a ship.

The Doctor appeared at the door, rapping his still-bandaged knuckles on the frame. "Hey, can I borrow you for a minute?" Missy, seated in the other corner of the room, looked up. "Not you," the Doctor ordered. "You stay here."

The Master observed that she didn't even argue. He made a mental note as he assessed the Doctor's mood. The Doctor had many different attitudes in terms of approaching a situation. The Master had seen them all, countless times: Curiosity, excitement, performance, moral outrage... This was one of the seldom-seen approaches. The Doctor was personal. Direct, but slightly awkward.

The Doctor and the Master had a relationship which redefined the term old friends: they'd known each other for centuries, virtually their entire lives.

Somehow, strangely, they'd ended up playing the role of enemies.

Even more strangely, they'd never stopped being friends.

Occasionally, in the midst of their battles, they would hit pause and switch back to being best friends, as if they'd never stopped... Because they hadn't. And right now, the Doctor's manner clearly signalled that this was one of those moments.

So the Master acquiesced wordlessly, following the Doctor out.
This should be interesting.

They went into the Doctor's room. The Master let the Doctor go first, scanned the room quickly to make sure there were no obvious traps... Just in case. It all seemed clear, so he waited patiently for the Doctor to explain why he was here.

"So... Uh, I was hoping you could do me a favor," the Doctor said.

"And what would that be?" The Master inquired. It was the Doctor, so there was really no point in even guessing.

"I was hoping you could..." the Doctor gestured vaguely towards his head, "... take a look at something for me."

"Oh!" The Master relaxed, smiling. "Gladly!"

This was a rare opportunity. The Doctor was usually so guarded...

He narrowed his eyes, head tilted, already analyzing, looking for clues. "So what happened?" he inquired in a professional tone.

"Neural block." the Doctor told him.

The Master was familiar with neural blocking technology. Targeted, efficient, thorough... Irreversible.

"Of?" he asked.

"A friend," the Doctor replied shortly.

The Master gave him a reproachful look. "I might need a little more information than that." Honestly, for someone who never shut up, the Doctor often said so little...

The Doctor seemed, reluctantly, to see the sense in this. "Her name was Clara. She traveled with me."

"Human?" the Master asked.

"Is that important?" the Doctor retorted, fully knowing that it wasn't.

The Master was organizing, preparing, planning. He talked to fill the space. "It's always humans with you, isn't it? You know how big the Universe is, right? Give the other species a chance once in a while."

"Would you mind staying on track? I'd sort of like to get this over with, if that's alright with you." The Doctor was on edge.

He must be very desperate to ask for such a favor...

"Fine, fine!" the Master said, coming back to the task at hand. "So you want me to... Do what, exactly?"

"Check out the neural block for me," the Doctor said. “See if there's anything that can be done to... Counteract it.” He looked away for a moment, clearly knowing that what he was asking for was probably impossible.
But this was the Doctor... He had never let that stop him before.

"Neural blocks are generally very effective," the Master pointed out gently. He wasn't about to refuse a personal favor, especially one involving a trip into the Doctor's brain, but he felt obligated to manage the Doctor's expectations. The Doctor often blatantly ignored all rules of probability when setting his sights on a goal. It was one of his most endearing and maddening qualities.

"I know!" the Doctor said irritably. "Would you just...?" He gestured wildly.

"Ok! Fine." The Master locked his fingers, flexed his hands, rubbed them together. He stepped closer, trying not to look too excited. "Ready?"

"Whenever you are," the Doctor confirmed, clearly less enthused.

The Master reached out towards the Doctor. At the last second, the Doctor grabbed both his wrists, his gaze intense and warning. "Don't get any funny ideas while you're in there."


The Doctor gave him one more severe look and released his wrists. The Master wrapped both hands around the Doctor's head, closing his eyes as he established a direct telepathic connection.

He found himself in the Doctor's mind: a vast, sprawling, cluttered collection of odds and ends. There was no rhyme or reason to any of it... The Master surveyed the chaos in dismay.

Where to even start?

"You know, Doctor," he said, "you really should clean this up at some point."

"I like it," the Doctor replied, clearly seeing no problem with the disorder.

The Master shook his head in fond despair. "Of course you do..."

"Can you hurry up?" It had been all of ten seconds and the Doctor was already getting antsy.

Always so impatient.

"Hold on, just give me a minute..." It was like getting dropped in the middle of a galaxy of information but with no laws, physical or otherwise, to refer back to. "... How do you find anything in here?"

"It's never been a problem, ok?" the Doctor responded snippily.

The Master thought of the many, many times the Doctor had lost track of stuff, all the failed assignments at the Academy over the years. "Right..." he muttered dubiously.

The Master took advantage of his opportunity to explore. He wandered through the more recent memories, scanning for new information. He quickly found a couple of regenerations he'd missed out on. An intense, angry Doctor with a buzz cut. A floppy-haired, childlike Doctor with a chin the size of a small moon. The Master smiled, ruefully. He hated that there were whole lives of his best friend that he'd missed out on. The Doctor was so different every time he regenerated, and he didn't do reruns. Once you'd missed out on them they were gone for good.

"Taking the scenic route, are we?" The Doctor didn't stop him, just wanted to let him know that he had noticed.
"Just catching up..." the Master smirked.

The Master delved a little deeper, looking for secrets, locked doors... Because anything the Doctor was trying to hide was definitely something the Master wanted to know about. Just on principle, really.

Something interesting...

Something about Missy.

The Master went straight for it.

The Doctor shut him down immediately.

It was like a ten-inch-thick steel door slamming right in his face.

The Master chuckled. "You know, it's been a long time since we last did this... Your mental defenses weren't nearly so impressive back then. You're welcome for that, by the way."

"Are you seriously taking credit for my mental defenses?" the Doctor asked incredulously.

"Well, you have to admit I was an influence," the Master pointed out.

"Not everything is about you, you know," the Doctor said.

The Master considered this. "True, but... A lot of things are."

"Neural. Block."

"Fine, yes... Give me a second."

Now that he had his bearings, the Master easily found the block in question. It was... Extensive.

"How long did you travel with this girl?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that," the Doctor replied.

"Right." The blocked memories were sprawled out in a strange pattern. Mostly the Doctor's current regeneration and the one just prior, the floppy-haired one, but... There were hazy specks, bits and pieces missing here and there going further back...

Much further back.

"Who is this girl...?" The Master voiced his confusion aloud.

"What? What did you find?" the Doctor wanted to know.

"It's almost like -"

But that couldn't be...

No.

The Master found a memory, half-intact, of a white-haired Doctor and a young dark-haired girl, in a bay full of familiar metal capsules...

He watched the scene play out, dumbfounded.
So long ago...

He'd almost forgotten that the Doctor had ever been so young. And he'd never seen this. He hadn't been there that day.

He watched it again.

"What are you looking at? What is it?" The Doctor didn't like being left out, as usual.

The Master swallowed, tearing himself away from the memory. "It's, uh... It's Gallifrey."

"Oh." The Doctor sounded slightly let down. "Yeah, I was there. Before all this happened."

"No..." The Master shook his head, trying to find the words. "It's... It's the day you left."

"What?" The Doctor didn't believe him. "No, it can't be. You've made a mistake."

The Master explored the void, the missing information. There was no mistake. "See for yourself."

He showed the Doctor the memory he had found. Half of it was obscured by the neural block. Clara had been on Gallifrey. A human girl on Gallifrey thousands of years ago for one of the most important moments of the Doctor's life.

"How - ?" The Doctor severed the mental link, stared at the Master searchingly. "Is this a trick? Did you do this?"

The Master shook his head. No pretense, no agenda... For once. "No."

"But..." The Doctor was at a loss. "We met during my last regeneration. I'm sure of it."

"It seems you met a long time before that," the Master corrected him.

"But she's human..." the Doctor asserted. "We met on Earth, I'm sure we met on Earth."

"Should I keep going?" the Master asked.

"Yeah... Yeah, go ahead."

The Master reestablished the psychic link. He examined the neurally blocked memories, the spaces left where Clara had existed in the Doctor's mind. Neural blocks were designed to blur, to camouflage themselves over time. But here, the edges were clear, well-defined. A distinct, Clara-shaped void.

"How long ago did this neural block happen?" he asked, frowning. Because something didn't quite add up here...

"Maybe one hundred, one hundred fifty years?" the Doctor shrugged.

The Master was taken aback. "You've held onto these scraps of information for that long? That's..."

Astounding.

He would have said impossible if he hadn't seen the evidence for himself. And if it had been anyone but the Doctor... Because even the Master could scarcely comprehend the force of will it would take to sustain that level of control for so long.
"You will never cease to amaze me, Doctor," he said honestly.

"She was... Important," the Doctor said simply.

"Clearly," the Master acknowledged. *Important*, at that point, was a massive understatement.

"I don't like losing stuff," the Doctor added, obviously feeling that something more needed to be said.

"Well," the Master announced, "the good news is, if there's ever been a situation where something could be salvaged from a neural block, this would be it."

"So you can do something?" the Doctor asked, hope creeping into his voice.

"Perhaps." The Master wasn't ready to make any guarantees yet. "I'll try."

The Master took a deep breath, concentrating on the missing memories, looking for something, *anything* that had slipped through the cracks. Something the machine had missed.

But the neural block had done its job well. Despite the Doctor's gargantuan attempts at preservation, there was so very little left to work with. "Doctor, I'm sorry, there's... Wait."

"Did you find her?" The Doctor couldn't even wait a moment to ask.

The Master zeroed in on it, a little piece of blue... A snippet of a voice. "Maybe... It's... So small but... Maybe something."

"Anything. Please." The Doctor's tone was vulnerable, pleading.

"I'll see what I can do," the Master promised his friend.

The Master focused on the memory... Barely a moment, but there, *almost* there. He tried to reconstruct it, pulling the fragments back into shape, weaving them together into an image, a face... Slowly, it came into focus, gaining color, substance.

*A young, brunette woman in the snow, wearing a blue bathrobe. Calling out the Doctor's name...*

"What's taking so long?" The Doctor had the patience of a five-year-old child.

He'd greatly improved over the centuries.

"It will take as long as it takes," the Master stated calmly, ignoring the Doctor's resulting heavy sigh.

He worked on the memory, carefully, minutely, patiently. This was the kind of work where his skillset shone, and he wasn't about to present an inferior end product. Finally, he finished the memory and restored it to its place, shielding it in a bubble, safe from the entropy the neural block would keep attempting to spread.

He broke the connection. "There. There's your Clara, Doctor." He said it with no small amount of pride.

The Doctor smiled, seeing Clara's face, hearing her voice for the first time in so many decades. "Clara... My Clara."

The Master allowed him the moment. But then he had to ask, "Doctor, what was she doing on
Gallifrey? How could she be all over your timeline like that?"

"I don't know. Was there anything else you could find?" the Doctor asked. His eyes were begging.

More.

The Doctor always wanted more.

The Master shook his head, regretful at having to disappoint his friend. "I'm sorry, I don't think so. So much was just gone. I might be able to find more clues by analyzing the gaps, but... It would take time."

"Time is something I don't have," the Doctor said in a grim tone.

Regeneration.

The Master had seen that distinctive golden light, had wondered why the Doctor was suppressing his healing processes... Now he understood. "If you regenerate, the neural block becomes permanent. You lose any chances of getting her back."

"I can't let that happen," the Doctor stated.

"Why is she so important?" the Master had to ask. There was something he was missing and he knew whatever it was was vital.

"Wish I knew," the Doctor answered evasively.

The Master just looked at him, eyebrows raised judgingly.

Come on, Doctor... Is that the best you can do?

The Doctor sighed resignedly. "She... You saw how many memories I had of her. Whoever she was, she's a part of who I am. Without those memories, I'm..." He spread his arms wide, helplessly. "Someone else. I don't want to be someone else."

"So given the choice between death and life..." the Master clarified, wanting to be absolutely certain what the Doctor was telling him.

"I won't be someone else." The Doctor's tone was adamant, final. His expression said to drop the subject.

The Master could see that this conversation was over.

But no one had said that he had to respect the Doctor's wishes. After all, this choice affected him too...

"I understand," the Master said, faking sincerity. And doing so very, very well...

Maybe even well enough to fool the Doctor.

"What was all that about?" Missy wanted to know immediately when the Master returned.

He ignored her question completely. "Did the Doctor ever talk to you about someone named Clara?"

"Oh, yes, Clara," she said, recognizing the name. "One of the Doctor's pets. I met her. Little thing,
talked constantly. "

So Missy had met Clara. That was interesting...

"What was she like?" the Master asked.

"Umm..." Missy searched for the words. "Human, soft. Breakable. Why do you ask?"

This didn't make sense...

She couldn't have been just another human.

"Was there anything... Unusual about her?" he prodded.

"Not that I noticed," Missy seemed both confused and unconcerned. Distracted, as if she wasn't really following the conversation. "Seemed pretty ordinary, really. But you know, they all kind of blur together after a while."

"Do you know what happened to her?" the Master inquired.

"I never asked," Missy responded offhandedly.

Annoying.

Why would you not ask?

"There's a neural block on the Doctor's memories of her..." He looked at Missy, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "He never came to you for help?"

She seemed genuinely baffled by this idea. "How could I help with that?" The Master just stared at her. "Well, neural blocks are very effective, aren't they?"

"Yeah..." the Master agreed, slowly. "Yeah. They are."
Chapter 3: Sucker Punch

The Doctor came back again the next day.

The Master had been expecting him. "Ready for more?"

"You said analyzing the gaps might be helpful," the Doctor reminded him.

The Master nodded. "Possibly, yes."

"Let's find out, then."

Psychic link reestablished, the Master found himself back inside the Doctor's mind, searching through the blocked memories, trying to find the pattern, following the connections. He created a map of the web of memories. He saw that all of the outlying memories connected back to one main hub.

One single day.

One moment.

One decision.

"I think I've found something," he told his friend.

"What is it?" the Doctor asked immediately.

"I'll let you know in a minute," the Master said, patiently. "Try not to talk please."

"Because of the memories," the Doctor asked, "or just because... You?"

The Master shook his head, responding as he would to a small child. "Because it's distracting and I need to concentrate. Now, shush."

The Master looked closer at that day. It was largely intact, other than the key moment.

He skimmed through the incident on Trenzalore. The Doctor had had quite a motley crew that day it seemed... The Master made a mental note of the players involved, for later, as needed.

As the pivotal moment approached, the Master paid more attention, slowed down the memory, trying to extrapolate what might have happened from the missing pieces.

He saw the Doctor's timeline, broken open. "You died, Doctor?"

"Potentially," the Doctor shrugged, unperturbed. "But the timeline changed."

Indeed it had.

The Master knew all about that... Perhaps even more than the Doctor did.

He said nothing.

"I found the root of the outlying memories," the Master informed his friend. "You remember
"Trenzalore, visiting your grave?"

"Most of it, yes," the Doctor confirmed.

"I think..." The Master examined the remaining memories, playing and replaying over the gaps. "I think Clara stepped into your timeline..." He had to respect the audacity.

"But... That would split her apart into a million pieces... Scatter her all over my lifetimes," the Doctor realized.

"She must have really cared about you, Doctor." The Master had to respect that, too. He wouldn't have minded meeting this Clara. He felt they might have a lot in common.

"So she died that day?" the Doctor asked, but then realized that didn't add up either. "But no. I knew her after that. For years after."

The Master checked ahead and confirmed that Clara's main timeline did indeed continue forwards. "She survived, somehow." He had no guesses as to that one... But he knew the Doctor. He had no idea how he'd done it, but he knew with absolute certainty that his old friend was somehow responsible for accomplishing that impossible feat.

"So that answers the timeline question," the Doctor said, checking that mystery off the list.

"Hold on, something else." The Master had found another connection, not from Trenzalore, but from Clara's primary timeline. It headed back...

Far, far back.

Interesting.

"I just want to check this out, hang on..." he said, intrigued.

He followed the thread... It headed deep into the Doctor's past. The Master passed just about everything he'd ever known about his friend and still the thread led onwards.

The memories became dimmer, murky, the tone changing as he descended.

"Where are you going?" the Doctor asked, sensing the journey downwards.

"I'm not sure..." the Master said distractedly. "I'll let you know when I get there."

"Is this connected to Trenzalore?" the Doctor asked, puzzled.

"No, it's completely separate." The Master paused, suddenly realizing the magnitude of what he might uncover. "Do you want me to stop? This goes... Very far back." He had to give the Doctor the option to withdraw. There were a lot of things in both their pasts that they didn't want to encounter again.

The Doctor hesitated for a moment but, "No. Let's see where it's headed."

Of course. The Doctor had to know.

The Master was just as curious. "Alright."

He went on.
He made it to the end of the thread.

The destination was dim, the memory discolored with age. Blurred and indistinct as if submerged underwater or covered by a thick pane of glass.

"This is buried very deep," he informed the Doctor. "If you still want me to investigate, I'm going to need you to go to sleep so I can access it."

"Alright, I can take care of that," the Doctor agreed.

"Want any help?" the Master asked, hopefully.

"No, thank you, not today." It was a polite response but the tone left very little room for interpretation.

"Oh, Doctor, I'm hurt," the Master pouted theatrically, even though both their eyes were closed. "It's almost as if you don't trust me!"

"Ha ha," the Doctor said flatly. "Wake me when you're done, please."

"Have a nice nap," the Master said.

Effortlessly, the Doctor placed himself into a light trance state, stilling his mind so his conscious thoughts wouldn't interfere with the fragile memory in question.

The Master quickly and immediately checked to see if there was anything fun he could do while the Doctor was out... But the Doctor had walled him in, restricting his access to that one, single memory. The Master shook his head, slightly disappointed, but with a grudging respect at the Doctor's foresight.

And also a little bit pleased that the Doctor could predict his actions so accurately...

He turned back to the dim memory. Pushing through the barrier slowly and with difficulty, he found himself in a large room of some kind.

It was dark and smelled... Familiar. The Master recognized the scent but couldn't place it, which was unusual. He generally didn't have trouble recalling where and when he'd last encountered something.

The memory was so old, so degraded by Time. In addition, it was barely half intact due to the neural block. But being so old, the block had had trouble even reaching this memory. The Master couldn't see everything but he could almost hear Clara's half of the conversation, could get a sense of her contribution.

It was only when he looked at the Doctor that he finally realized where, or rather when he was.

This was the Doctor long before he had become the Doctor.

Before the Master had ever met him.

And he was nobody.

Not the Doctor, not the boy he had met that first day at the Academy...

Just a small, helpless, sad child. Frightened and alone in the night.
For one of the few times in his long and violent life, the Master was shaken, stunned. He almost felt as though he was intruding, which was a very abnormal sensation for him.

It made him feel... Uncertain.

He hated the feeling.

He could sense that Clara was comforting the child, soothing him.

He could hear the boy sobbing...

The Master broke off the connection, turned away, rubbing his eyes, struggling to retain control in the face of being confronted with such an unexpected and powerful experience. He hadn't been prepared for that, hadn't liked seeing his friend so small and afraid, so young.

It disturbed him on a level that he couldn't even process.

Behind him, the Doctor woke, roused by the severed connection. "What did you find?" he wanted to know.

"Nothing." The Master practically mumbled. He cleared his throat and tried again. "It was nothing."

He could feel the Doctor's piercing stare on his back. He shoved the feelings away, straightening his shoulders, forcing a facade of composure. He turned back around.

"It was a dead end." He tried to make it sound real. He hoped the Doctor couldn't read his expression, hoped he'd miss the slight moisture in his eyes.

But he of all people knew that the Doctor didn't miss much.

"Should we... Keep going?" the Doctor asked, unsure of what had just happened.

"No," the Master declared. "Not now. Later."

The Doctor narrowed his eyes, those eyes that saw everything. "Are you alright...?"

"Yes." The Master spat the word, angrily, vehemently, as if he could will it into reality.

He turned and left without another word.

The Master walked out to the nearby forest and leaned against a tree, trying to find a still point in the whirlwind of emotion.

He stayed there, where no one could see him, until he was ready to face the world again. Until he remembered who he was. Until everything went back to making sense...

It took him longer than he liked.
Chapter 4: Wandering Thoughts

The Master avoided the Doctor the next day, choosing instead to explore the areas surrounding the farmhouse. He saw the Doctor wandering around, looking for him, but it was hardly the first time he'd ever had to hide from the Doctor. It was an art form he'd practically perfected at this point.

He got away without the Doctor spotting him.

He left Missy behind as well.

The way she clung to him had been flattering at first, but now was starting to cloy. Her perspective was shallow, unimaginative... As if she was trying too hard to ingratiate herself to him. The Master was beginning to find her a bit irritating.

He slipped away from her easily.

Too easily.

He really hoped he wasn't going to regenerate into that. Being a woman he could handle. But slow? That he couldn't tolerate.

As much as he tried to banish them, he kept thinking of the Doctor's memories, of what he'd seen. Of what he might still see if the Doctor asked him to travel through the blocked memories again...

There were days which he and the Doctor had shared which neither of them wanted to face again. Days as black as night. The Master remembered them as being filled with blood and rage. But the blood and rage had been the easy parts...

He had absolutely no desire to relive those days from the Doctor's perspective.

The Master didn't generally like to think of himself as a man confined by limits, but he knew in his hearts that even he couldn't survive that...

But he was certain the Doctor would want to try again. This was the Doctor, after all.

He'd never give up.

And he knew if the Doctor asked, he would say yes...

He wasn't ready for that.

So he wandered through the false countryside, pretending to himself that he was searching for a way out. Truthfully, he knew his path was essentially aimless.

He was sick of this stupid ship. Sick of the crowds of stinking humans.
He wanted to *act*.

He wanted to kill something, to hear someone screaming in pain, begging for their life.

He wanted to be alone...

He wanted to talk to the Doctor...

He *couldn't*.

So he just walked.

He kept hearing that child, the boy who would grow up to be the Doctor, crying quietly in the long-ago Gallifreyan night...

He hated the Doctor for doing this to him.

He hated Clara, whom he had never even met.

And now the Doctor insisted on dying, refused to regenerate? All because of some little human girl who was probably already long dead.

*No...*

*Oh, no, Doctor.*

*You don't get to leave me alone here...*

*Not now. Not like this.*

The Master started working on a Plan.
Chapter 5: Rest

The Master slipped silently back into the farmhouse just before dawn.

Missy was asleep and didn't wake when he entered. She slept every night, which the Master found odd. After reaching adulthood, Time Lords didn't need much sleep, generally speaking. Naps were usually reserved for recovering from trauma or some extreme exertion.

Missy never seemed to do much, not that the Master had observed anyway. So what was she constantly recovering from? That was something he planned to find out.

Soon.

The Doctor, in contrast, almost never slept. Never had... Not since they were kids. But now, the Master could sense him dozing in the next room, exhausted by his injuries. The Doctor was never truly still, even when he slept. The Master could feel the Doctor's mind stirring, dreaming.

He wondered what he was dreaming about...

He used to know, long ago... In the old days he could just reach out with his mind and find out what his friend was thinking. But they'd grown apart over the centuries. These days the Doctor was so closed-off, so guarded... Sometimes a mystery, even to his oldest friend.

But they weren't nightmares, anyway. The Master could tell that much.

The Master lay down on the uncomfortable mattress, satisfied with his day's work. The Plan was far from complete, but he knew what he needed in order to proceed to the next step.

That was good enough for now.

He was exhausted and knew he needed rest.

The Master routinely pushed himself to his mental limits and had to take any opportunity he could find to sleep. He seldom dreamed and he never had trouble sleeping... Well, not since the Drums. But he hadn't been able to sleep since the last time he'd traveled through the Doctor's memories. Every time he tried, he heard that little boy crying in the night...

And all he wanted to do was to fix it.

That wasn't possible, obviously.

But he was going to do the next best thing, and having a plan of action gave him peace of mind, as it always did.

He would need a few hours to recharge. He shut his mind down, content that he had made
progress.

There would be a lot of work to do when he awoke.

Today would be a good day.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 6: Network

The Master came strolling into the Doctor's room, casually, as if he hadn't just disappeared for an entire day.

"Good morning!" he smiled cheerily.

"You're in a good mood," the Doctor acknowledged, somewhat suspiciously. "Where did you go yesterday?"

The Master shrugged. "I needed a break."

"From?" the Doctor demanded.

"From that junkyard you call a brain," the Master said. "It's not all fun and games trying to sort through that mess, you know."

"Oh. Well. I hadn't realized it was such a burden for you." The sarcasm in the Doctor's voice was thick.

"It's a sacrifice I'm willing to make for you, Doctor," the Master replied in a tone of exaggerated altruism.

"So can I gather that you're ready to help me again?" the Doctor inquired.

"When have I ever refused to lend a hand to a friend in need?" The Doctor just stared at him, making a face. "What?" the Master grinned. "I'm a very helpful person!"

"Right... So, what will you be looking for?" The Doctor knew he was missing something, but he still needed the Master's help.

He wouldn't back out.

"Connections," the Master replied uninformatively.

The Doctor narrowed his eyes at his friend's evasiveness. "But you can't do anything to counteract the neural block?"

"Not unaided, no," the Master replied honestly. "I'm afraid that's beyond even my powers, Doctor."

"Ooh, and here I thought you were the expert," the Doctor goaded him.

"I am," the Master stated confidently, unphased. "How far did you get on your own again? Maybe I should just leave you to it...?"

The Doctor gave up. "Alright, no need to be like that. Yes, I would like your help. Please and thank you."

"For you, Doctor... Anything." The Master said it sarcastically to hide the seed of truth buried in
that statement.

"Your selflessness is an inspiration to us all." The Doctor's tone was equally sarcastic.

Abruptly, the Master was done with the banter. He had a lot of work to do and was eager to get started. "Ok, shut up now, I need to focus."

"Pushy," the Doctor observed.

"I said quiet." The Master's tone was anything but harsh. He knew that telling the Doctor to be quiet was a toss-up... And that was on a good day.

"Fine..." the Doctor gave in, surprisingly quickly. There was just a moment of silence, and then, "...But not because you said so."

And there it was.

"Oh?" The Master was ready to begin but couldn't resist playing along with the Doctor, wanting to see how far he would go.

"Yeah," the Doctor explained loftily. "I was done anyway."

"Course you were," the Master said condescendingly. "Now, I know this isn't your strong suit, but you're going to need to be patient. This may take a while."

The Doctor let out a heavy sigh, like a teenager who'd been told to clean his room. So much like another Doctor the Master had known well... Long ago.

"I'm sorry," the Master laughed. "Did you have somewhere else to be?"

"Well, I do have things to do," the Doctor said, clearly lying.

"Such as?" the Master asked amusedly. "We're stuck here with no way out. On a farm. You have cows to milk or something?"

"I'm just saying, I'm busy you know." He gestured vaguely at nothing in particular.

The Master's eyes wandered to a group of toys sitting off to the side of the room. Several had small motors attached to them and there was a half-finished propellor lying nearby.

The Doctor's handiwork was unmistakable.

"Yeah..." the Master said, staring pointedly at the toys. "I can see that."

This ruffled the Doctor enough to make him lose his train of thought, such as it had been. "Just don't take all day, that's all I'm saying."

The Master opted for the honest truth. "You know, the longer you keep talking, the longer this is going to take."

The Doctor did know that, of course, but wasn't sure how to back down at this point in the conversation. "Well, it's just that my time is valuable, is all."

"Of course it is," the Master said, making it clear he was humoring his friend.
"I just wanted to be sure you knew that," the Doctor said lamely.

The Master took a deep breath. "Well. Thank you for the reminder... This a very complex process, and it will take time regardless of whether you'd like it to or not."

"Yeah, I get that," the Doctor confirmed.

"Do you?" the Master asked.

"Yes!" the Doctor said exasperated.

"So are you done?" the Master asked, just to be sure. But also a little to rub in his victory.

"Uhm..." The Doctor had to think about it. "Yeah. Yep, I think so." One more moment, just to make sure. "Yeah."

"Alright then. Here we go..."

The Master focused all of his mental energies. He'd have to be quick if this was going to work.

He started scanning the Doctor's memories surrounding the neural block gaps, quickly collecting all the information he could find: names, dates, faces, locations... Things that didn't fit, things that were a part of the landscape.

Building a database of ways to find Clara.

_Madame Vastra, Jenny Flint, Strax, River Song, Missy, Ashildr, Danny Pink, Kate Stewart, Anjie and Artie Maitland... Coal Hill School, Gallifrey, Trenzalore..._

"What are you doing?" The Doctor knew something was up.

_That was quick..._

"Looking for your friend," the Master said.

It was sort of true.

He pulled back, knowing the Doctor was seconds from shutting him down. And he wasn't done yet.

"I'm going to need to see the events leading up to the neural block, Doctor," he informed his friend.

"Ah, those memories are... Spotty," the Doctor warned him.

The Master shrugged."I would assume so, but there might be something useful there."

"Well, you're free to look," the Doctor told him.

"Thanks, I will..." the Master said, already on his way.

He checked the very end of Clara's timeline. It was incredibly fragmented... Even when Clara wasn't there the Doctor's mind had been so full of her that the events themselves were blurred.

There was a hidden street, somewhere.

_Probably Earth, knowing the Doctor..._
Full of fugitives.

Ashildr, now calling herself *Me* apparently?

*Hilarious...*

*And they say I'm egotistical?*

She had shown up as well in an earlier, fully-intact memory. It seemed the Doctor had somehow made her immortal?

*Oh, Doctor... Of course you did. Will you never learn?*

The actual events surrounding Clara's fate, however, were hopelessly scrambled. But the Master got the impression that something terrible had happened. And the Doctor, being the Doctor, had tried to fix it.

He had tried... *Incredibly* hard.

The Master couldn't quite understand what had transpired from the surviving pieces but... Whatever it was had been a horrifying and mind-blowing feat.

He'd have to ask the Doctor about that one day, once the Doctor had remembered it.

Then Gallifrey. And the neural block.

"Anything useful?" the Doctor asked dubiously.

*He must have been over those days a thousand times himself.*

"Very little," the Master admitted.

"Well, I did warn you." The Doctor could seldom resist a chance to say *I told you so.*

"Congratulations on your accurate pessimism," the Master said.

"Well, it is my mind, so..." The Doctor trailed off as he realized that was actually more insulting to himself than he had intended.

The Master chose to ignore that opportunity. He broke off the connection. "You said you want this Clara back because your memories of her are integral to who you are. How so?" This was important. He needed to understand the Doctor's motivation if he hoped to alter the course of events.

The Doctor gave an honest answer to the honest question. "There are... Things that I do, things I've learned that just... Don't make sense to me anymore." He said it with an air of sadness, his eyes wandering. "Some days I can't even remember what I'm supposed to be *doing* . If I listen really hard, if I go too far one way or the other, I can *almost* hear her, this little voice, scolding me when I've strayed off the path. But the rest of the time it's just... Silence." He shook his head. "I don't know what to do with that silence."

The Master met his friend's eyes, his face sympathetic, his pain echoing his friend's pain. He could relate. He could almost always relate to the Doctor. Everyone else in the vast Universe was just a collection of moving atoms, poised to reconstitute and be forgotten in a moment...

But the Doctor...
The Doctor's pain meant something.
Sometimes the Master perversely enjoyed it.
Sometimes all he wanted was to make it stop.
But it always, always mattered.

"Hold on, let me just check one more thing..." the Master said.

The Master connected one last time to the Doctor's mind and stepped back mentally, viewing the whole, shining galaxy of the Doctor's memories. He looked for pivotal moments. He skimmed through them, briefly, curious. Most of them he was very familiar with... After all, he'd been there himself. But there were some which he'd never seen. And they weren't all recent...

_So many faces, so many adventures..._ 
_So many decisions._

The Master suddenly realized he'd missed out on far more of his best friend's life than he had ever realized...

The Plan grew a bit bigger, a bit more ambitious.

The Master overlaid the neural block map on the pivotal moments map.

"You were right, Doctor," the Master concluded. "Clara was involved in a lot of key moments in your life."

The Doctor nodded. "I can still see the gaps, so I know what I'm missing but..."

"Once you regenerate, your neural map with adjust. The gaps will close." The Master extrapolated how the map would look without any of the blocked memories. It was... Not _gone_ entirely, but much, much smaller. Less complex. A net that was more holes than threads.

Regeneration always changed who you were, to some extent. That was just part of the deal. You adjusted, you moved one. But your core, your _soul_ , that remained the same.

If the Doctor regenerated and this neural block took hold for good, the Master was pretty sure he'd be losing his friend forever. Because whoever walked away after that regeneration, he wouldn't be the Doctor.

_ Unacceptable. _

"We'll fix it," the Master said, severing the connection and looking his friend in the eyes. It was a statement. A _fact._

"And if we can't?" the Doctor asked, meeting his friend's gaze, his voice steady.

Somewhere in the back of the Master's mind a memory awoke: _Two little boys on an English street. One of them said to the other, "Don't worry, Theta. I'll take care of you."_  

"We will," the Master vowed.

The Doctor eyed him, dubious, resigned.
"I will," the Master corrected himself, seeing he was in this alone. "I'll find a way."

Chapter End Notes

And tomorrow, we talk about Missy...
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 7: Answers

That night, the Master lay in bed, pretending to be asleep.

He was thinking.

It was quiet at night. All the humans were still, more or less. A couple of sentries paced back and forth outside, their attention wandering, their steps crashing loudly on the grass and leaves. The children tossed in their beds, dreaming the wildly random dreams of the young. The adults slept too, their dreams replaying their mundane waking lives.

The Doctor was asleep again as well. The Master could sense that he was dreaming about Clara, searching for her...

The Master wished he could help his friend find her. But unfortunately it wouldn't be quite so easy as that.

It would take time. And work. And planning.

So much planning...

The Master set that aside, shutting out the distractions, focusing on his roommate. Missy was asleep, deeply. Exhausted by whatever invisible struggles she dealt with every day.

The Master had scanned her biological code with his laser screwdriver, days ago. It had taken a while to process, but after meeting the Doctor today, he'd gotten a mental ping signalling that the analysis was complete.

He had compared the results to his own biological code...

They were not a match.

So Missy was not him: not his future self nor his past. Not some alternate universe version.

No, Missy was someone else entirely.

But still, she was somehow an echo of the Master... He was sure of it. And he didn't know how that could be.

Time to find out.

The Master rose from his bed, silently, catlike. He approached Missy's sleeping form.

Mentally linking with your past or future self could be dangerous if done improperly. When he wasn't sure if Missy was in fact his future regeneration, he couldn't risk it. But now he could finally get some answers.

He didn't want to wake her, didn't want her to know what he knew. And although she wasn't him, she certainly was a Time Lady, so he was prepared for a struggle.
But when he established the psychic link Missy barely even stirred, let alone fought back. It was as if this was nothing unusual for her. As if she was expecting him... As if he'd paved the way himself.

He soon discovered why.

Missy's mind was a battlefield, a ruin. Memories, emotions, loves and hates scattered and broken all around.

And in the center of the destruction, a structure. Monolithic. Fully intact. Dominating the landscape.

The Master recognized it immediately.

It was *him*.

His thoughts, his memories.

*His life.*

But how...?

The Master moved in closer, trying to understand what he was seeing. But as he approached the conglomeration that was his life's experience, he was repelled, ejected from Missy's mind as if they were two identical poles of a powerful magnet.

The Master blinked into the dark of the farmhouse room. He wasn't quite sure what he had been expecting to find but... Certainly not this: his own life transplanted into Missy's mind.

He stood there frozen, stock still, like a statue in the night, as he tried to process this information. Tried to figure out what this meant to him. What he would do next.

After a few minutes he made a beeline for the Doctor's room.

"Who is she, Doctor?" he asked without preamble.

The Doctor woke from his dreams. "Who do you mean?"

"Missy," the Master specified, although he knew the Doctor was well aware of who they were discussing. "Who is she?" he demanded to know. "She isn't me... But she has my memories. Doctor, what are my memories doing in someone else's head?" There was a dangerous edge to his tone. They both knew how badly this conversation could go if the Master didn't like his friend's answers.

The Doctor looked at him, uncomfortable, his gaze almost pleading. "It wasn't my idea."

This was not an answer, not what the Master wanted to know. "Doctor. *Explain.*"

The Doctor sat up on his bed, ran a hand through his gray hair. "It was before they brought you back. The Time Lords."

The Master nodded, almost imperceptibly. He'd assumed as much. The Time War had been a strange time for both of them, a dark time for the Universe... A story that had ended very, very badly for everyone.

The Doctor continued, "Someone came up with the idea of... Using your memories, putting them
into someone else. They wanted you, but there was some... Concern about bringing you back." He looked away, guiltily. "You don't exactly have the best track record in terms of dependability, you know."

The Master was well aware of how that situation had ended. But now was not the time for that conversation. "So since the War... There's been another Time Lady walking around with my memories?"

The Doctor paused, still not wanting to admit the truth. But it was far too late for that now. "Yes," he said.

The Master asked the important question then, peering at his friend through the darkness. "And who is she, really?"

"I don't know."

The Doctor hesitated.

The Master noticed.

"She thinks she's me," he prodded.

"Yes, that wasn't supposed to happen," the Doctor said, shaking his head, sadly, frowning. "Memory implantation on that scale had never been tried before and it went wrong. She was overwhelmed, she lost who she was."

The Master couldn't help a self-congratulatory grin. Because he was just that good...

"You needn't look so pleased," the Doctor chided him.

"So..." The Master paced. He was still processing. He always thought better when he could use the Doctor as a sounding board. "She thinks she's me. But you..." He wagged one finger at the Doctor. "You knew she wasn't... And you haven't told her... Why haven't you told her?" He smiled as he reached a conclusion. "You're trying to fix me."

"No. No!" the Doctor contradicted him, hastily, nervously. "I'm trying to fix her."

"But they're my memories," the Master said. Memories were all you were. Memories were what made you. The Doctor knew this and was well aware of how feeble his little verbal distinction was. "And you can't remove them... You must have tried."

He saw that he was right about that too.

So predictable, Doctor.

"But you want her to be someone else in spite of that..." The Master went on. Another thought struck him, something that didn't fit. "Why would you go to all that trouble, though?"

He had learned from Bill that the Doctor had been guarding Missy, watching over her. Staying in one place for decades.

"Even for you, that's a lot for someone you don't even know..." His eyes lit up. "But maybe not for someone you used to know."

He leaned in close to the Doctor then, watching him, reading his expression. "You said you don't know who she was, before the War. But did you used to know?"
The Doctor's reaction told him everything.

The Master smiled a predatory smile. "She's Clara, isn't she?"

The Doctor frowned up at him silently.

"I'm right. Somehow, that's a Time Lady version of Clara." And then that glorious moment when it all fell into place: "Missy is all you have left of Clara and she thinks she's me!"

The Master couldn't help a triumphant chuckle at the bizarre irony of it all.

The Doctor's response was sullen. "Stop laughing, it's not funny."

"It's a little funny," the Master contradicted him offhandedly. His eyes darted around as he considered the possibilities. "Oh, this is a very interesting situation..."

"Don't..." That look came into the Doctor's eyes, that look of dread that the Master relished. That look that told him that he was a step ahead - and that the Doctor knew it. "Whatever you're going to do, just don't."

The Master looked at him steadily, so still again. Everything decided, the course immutable now. "Oh, I'm not going to do anything. She'll have an opportunity to make her choice. That's what you want, right? For her to choose." The Master smiled in the dark. "You or me, Doctor. Let's see who she picks."

Chapter End Notes

Yep! So, Missy is a Clara splinter with the Master's memories. We know there was a Clara on Gallifrey!

I know it's a pretty radical explanation but... Let me know what you think! :)

As always, thanks for reading. <3 <3
Chapter 8: Remembering

The Master dreamed...

The next day after discovering the truth about Missy had been uneventful. The Doctor and the Master tacitly pretended that nothing had happened, as they did, moving forward as if everything was the same as the day before.

But the contest for Missy's loyalty was on. And the Master was happy for a diversion in the midst of his larger concerns.

They began looking for a way out in earnest. The Master knew the plans of the ship, drew up some charts at the Doctor's request. He wasn't sure yet what the Doctor was planning and the Doctor wouldn't say...

Missy tagged along, vacillating between the Doctor and the Master. Now that he had all the information, the Master could sense how torn she was. He pulled at her mentally, trying to keep her close.

He planned to win this game. He had an advantage, after all: in a sense, he'd won already, long ago.

An uneventful day.

But now, as the Master slept, the dreams crowded in, thick and urgent, each shoving and crying out for attention.

Maybe it had been all the those trips through the Doctor's mind, maybe it had been the brush with his own life inside Missy's head, but now memories ran riot in the Master's brain, rampant and uncontrolled.

They weren't all recent.

They weren't even all his.

"I guess you don't know me so well. I refuse." He looked up into the Doctor's eyes, his friend of centuries. He saw the hurt, the despair. The last move of his revenge had hit home, squarely and splendidly. He smiled through the pain.

The Master opened his pale blue eyes, seeing the TARDIS control room from his place on the couch. Cartoons played on the Console screen. The Doctor was working on something, seated on the floor with that ridiculous robot dog. The Doctor saw him watching, smiled reassuringly. The Master pulled the covers closer and went back to sleep, knowing that he was safe, at least for now.

"One day I shall come back... Yes, I shall come back. And until then, there must be no tears, no
"I have so few worthy opponents," the Master said, smiling pleasantly as he leveled the weapon at his friend. "When they're gone, I always miss them." It was the closest he could come to saying what he actually meant... That when the Doctor had disappeared, exiled to Earth, the Master had searched until he found out where his friend had gone. That he had been worried. That he was here simply because he'd missed his best friend.

"Are you suggesting he survived?" the Master heard the Castellan ask. "No, no, I hope not," the Doctor replied. Watching from his TARDIS, the Master saw the Doctor look straight at the grandfather clock, knew that he understood the message. "And there's no one in all the galaxies I'd say that about. The quintessence of evil." Despite the meaningless words, the Doctor made no attempts to stop him. They both left, knowing their fight would continue out amongst the stars.

"No second chances. I'm that sort of a man."

"You built this system out of food and string and staples," the Doctor said in honest amazement. "Professor Yana, you're a genius." The Professor was surprised at how happy it made him to hear this... But he brushed it off. "Says the man who made it work," he pointed out wryly.

"Isn't it amazing?" Theta asked. Kossei looked around the white Console room, so ancient, so new... Pristine and begging to be operated. He nodded in awestruck agreement. His eyes settled on the controls and he smiled, a wonderful idea forming in his small, ambitious brain. "Let's see if we can fly it..."

Three Doctors stood together, ready to activate a weapon which would end everything.

"Listen," the woman said.

She was just a voice, a kind voice in the dark.

A hand in his hair...

"This is just a dream... But very clever people can hear dreams.

"So please, just listen...

"One day, you're going to come back to this barn, and on that day you're going to be very afraid indeed.

"But that's ok.

"Because if you're very wise and very strong, fear doesn't have to make you cruel or cowardly.

"Fear can make you kind.

"Fear is like... A companion. A constant companion, always there...

"I'm going to leave you something, just so you'll always remember...

"Fear makes companions of us all."

The Master woke with a start, sitting bolt upright, tears streaming down his face. He wiped them away, shaking, still in the grip of an emotion which did not belong to him.

It belonged to that little boy in the dark... But the Master had felt it.
And it had *destroyed* something in him. Some barrier, some facade, some carefully-cultivated illusion...

The Master liked to win.

Not just when it mattered but *all the time*.

In the smallest of ways, at the pettiest games, in the most unequal of contests.

And usually, he *did* win. But not always... Especially when the Doctor became involved.

The Master liked to win... But he knew what it felt like to lose.

This was different.

This was the moment when he knew that he had *failed*.

Failed so profoundly, so miserably, so irreparably, that there was no possible redemption for what he had done.

And all the times he'd worked so hard to hurt his friend, all those successes... Those were the worst failures of all.

Because he had felt what that little boy had felt, the boy who would become the Doctor.

But more than that...

Because he *knew* that toy, that little plastic, broken soldier.

*Once upon a time...*

*Long, long ago...*

*The Doctor had become the Doctor.*

That didn't mean what most people thought it meant.

He didn't just wake up one day as the one man most qualified to save the Universe from peril. No, he had become the Doctor simply by leaving Gallifrey. The rest came later, the cumulative result of many small and large choices made throughout the years.

But that day when he had become the Doctor, when he had left Gallifrey, he'd left a friend behind.

He hadn't said goodbye. No, the Doctor never said goodbye... No matter what name he went by, that had always been true.

And so the Master, or rather the man who would become the Master, had found one day that his friend was just... *Gone*.

He wasn't especially surprised. He knew how few options were left for his friend on their homeland. And they hadn't talked in a while... They'd had a disagreement: a big, irreconcilable fight which had ended with them going their separate ways for the first time since they'd met all those years ago.

The man who would soon be the Master went back to his estate, the one which he and his friend had inherited together, the one they had grown up in when they weren't at the Academy. The one
which they had fought about, the one which now belonged to him alone...

And it was empty, so empty.

He wandered through the rooms, remembering the times he'd spent here with his friend... Remembering his parents. Remembering the things that were over.

Last of all on his tour, he visited the workshop that he and his friend had shared. There were reminders everywhere of the times they had spent together here. Half-finished projects dropped abruptly for a better idea, collaborations that clearly demonstrated both their efforts...

Parts and wires and bits and pieces. None of it organized, because anyplace the Doctor spent time in would never stay organized.

In the creative chaos, in the flood of memories, it took a moment for the man who was about to be the Master to see the space cleared on the workshop bench, to see that one small object left purposefully alone.

He picked up the little toy, the small plastic soldier. A nostalgic smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he discerned the message it was communicating.

That first day at the Academy, the day he had met his best friend, they had argued about this very toy.

"He's going to win without a weapon," one of the little boys had insisted. "He doesn't need one, he's too clever for that."

"No," the other boy had said, taking the soldier and pointing out the small piece of plastic that still remained in its hand. "He has a gun, see? It's just very small. It's easier to hide that way."

They'd disagreed about ideology that very first day.

They'd become and remained the best of friends despite that.

And at the end of that conversation they had both agreed on one thing: that no matter what methods he employed, the little plastic soldier wouldn't get too far on his own... He would need allies, subordinates...

Friends.

The Master pocketed the soldier.

He took nothing else.

He left the house and all of its contents, closing the door tightly behind him.

He went straight to the time capsule landing bay and took his ship out into the Universe with no regrets.

Now, alone in the night, with Missy asleep nearby and the Doctor dreaming in the next room, the Master reached into his jacket pocket and slowly pulled out that same small, plastic soldier.

He'd kept it, somehow, all these centuries. Occasionally he would lose it, or himself, for a while... But then, inevitably, they'd find each other again.

It was so old now. So many centuries had passed in front of its sightless eyes.
The Master had never known where it had come from. The Doctor hadn't even known.

But here it was: a solid, substantial link to a past so long ago, a past already half-forgotten.

A past too precious to be erased.

The Master didn't sleep anymore that night. He lay awake working on his Plan while he waited for the foreign emotion to fade back down to a manageable level.

He held the soldier tightly.
Intermission

Chapter 9: Intermission

It took days for the Master to stop having flashbacks to that feeling of failure.

He focused on the Plan, on Missy, on winning.

Winning was always a safe goal for him.

He withdrew slightly from the Doctor. He could sense his old friend trying to figure that one out...

Good luck, Doctor.

It was possible that in his need to dispel the invading emotion, he may have overcorrected slightly? It wouldn't have been the first time. But cruel banter was sort of his safe place. The Doctor knew that. He'd understand, on some level.

Regardless, the Plan remained the same, of course. The Master didn't have to feel to get things done. Unlike some other Time Lords, apparently...

The Master was disturbed by the way the Doctor kept going in and out of the barn, fussing over his pet Cyberman. Every day he'd go sit with it, run diagnostics. One day, when the Master was bored, he followed him and leaned in the doorway, just watching and judging and laughing to himself until the Doctor finally go annoyed enough to chase him out.

The Master had spent ten years with the Doctor's companion Bill. He had enjoyed her company, sometimes, although she was almost aggressively normal...

If the Master ever felt bad about things he'd done to people who weren't the Doctor, he might have had regret about what he'd done there.

He'd tried to warn her.

She hadn't listened.

And in those last few moments before it was too late he had almost considered changing course... Even though that was something he never, ever did. Because he was the Master. Once he decided something, it was done.

So Bill became a Cyberman.

And now it was over.

A thing of the past.

The Master preferred to look to the future.

The Doctor, on the other hand, seemed unable to accept that his human friend was gone. He clung to the sentimental notion that the Cyberman was somehow "fixable".

Foolish, stubborn Doctor...

The Cyberman didn't need fixing. It was fully operational. Maybe it had a few stray thoughts and
emotions clogging up the programming but... Didn't everyone, sometimes?

The Master said as much when the Doctor asked his opinion on the Cyberman. The Doctor just shook his head, clearly disgusted with himself for even expecting anything else.

The Master was pleased by that.

He couldn't have the Doctor thinking he'd jump up to help with every windmill-tilting dream the Doctor conceived for a kinder, gentler Universe... He'd never have a spare moment for the rest of his lifetimes if he did that. Besides, the Doctor needed to be reminded of a thing called Reality once in a while.

It was for his own good, really.

Meanwhile, the Plan was coming together nicely. The only thing he couldn't figure out was how to get his TARDIS operational again... The trouble was the blown dematerialization circuit. Despite all the Master's attempts to accelerate the humans' technological advancement on Floor 1056, they'd still been nowhere near the level needed to fix his TARDIS when he'd fled up to Floor 507.

They might be now. But now the lower levels were also swarming with Cybermen... All of them ready to convert Time Lords as well as humans, thanks to the Doctor.

Useless.

He knew the Doctor had done that to ensure his and Missy's help. It was smart and effective. But it was also annoying, short-sighted and absurdly self-destructive...

It was just like the Doctor and the Master had to kick himself for not seeing it coming.

That was the Doctor for you, though.

Somehow predictable and unpredictable all at the same time.

The Master could easily just change the commands back himself, of course, but the main control hub for the Cybermen was on the lowest floor of the ship. So also not an option.

Barring a working dematerialization circuit, getting to the Doctor's TARDIS would be the next best thing, of course, but that too was currently impossible. And anyway, that became a tricky proposition very quickly... But still, he stayed close to the Doctor in case he suddenly came up with some crazy, ridiculous, brilliant solution. Because he pretty much always did.

And until the circumstances changed somehow, they were at a stalemate.

So the Master filled his days with Missy and planning and trying to figure out what the Doctor was going to do... Because he must have a plan, right? It was selfish of him not to share, but the Master could understand that, considering.

He'd wait.

He was good at waiting.

Besides, having a front seat to Missy's internal war was incredibly entertaining.

While she was with the Master, she was content to mimic everything he did. Her copied memories were drawn to his original, trying to fill in the blanks, to be complete, to be real. And then as soon as the Doctor showed up, she was drawn to him, wanting to help him, seeking his approval...
Her loyalties bounced back and forth a thousand times a day. It was like watching a mental tennis match.

The Master had had a personality crisis of his own not too long ago and had to wonder... Is this what he'd been like while he was insane? He remembered most of that time but it was impossible to look back on with any clarity.

The Master had, as one of the many gifts of the Time War, ended up with some of the Doctor's personality implanted in his brain. So he understood the temptation, the internal struggle... He'd experienced it himself, first-hand. Having the Doctor's voice in his head had been alternately annoying and bizarrely empowering.

He'd embraced the split personality eventually, using to to his own ends.

It had also been comforting to not feel so alone, not that the Master would ever have admitted that to anyone... But the Doctor's voice in his head had drowned out the fear and uncertainty left over from the Time War. A distraction from his own thoughts.

He had to assume that Missy's story was similar on some level.

He almost had to feel sorry for her...

*Almost.*

Because as only a part of Clara, she hadn't been quite real to begin with, had she?

And really, it was the Clara echoes in her which were causing all the trouble.

The Doctor had clearly worked hard to cultivate and recover that side of her identity. But the Master knew that battle had already been lost, long ago. He'd been inside her mind. He'd seen the wreckage of what she used to be. There was no way to put that back together.

And as much as he'd like to take full credit for overwhelming her mind with his own memories, she had started at a disadvantage. She was an echo, a splinter to begin with. She was a shadow which should have faded long ago.

The Doctor was trying so hard to redeem her, as if that would bring his friend back... It wouldn't. It was a half measure. A substitute.

And even if Missy's mind could have been repaired it wouldn't return the Doctor's memories.

It was a waste of effort.

*Typical Doctor...*

The Master could do better.

Missy was irrelevant to the grand Plan.

But that wouldn't stop the Master from trying to win her over to his side.

After all, it could be useful to have someone totally loyal to him. Short term loyalty was easy, of course. Long term was much, much trickier. Hypnosis didn't last and forging actual relationships took an impossible amount of maintenance.

He'd tried that, once.
Sometimes he missed Lucy...

It had been the Doctor side of him, the side that couldn't be alone, which had made him seek her out. He hadn't needed her for his Plan. He hadn't chosen her for her power or her connections. She looked good on paper, which was a bonus, but that could have been altered with ease if necessary. He'd created a whole life from scratch for Harold Saxon, after all. He could have rehabilitated her image easily if he'd needed to.

No, what he had valued in Lucy was simply her devotion, her company. He had enjoyed having someone to talk to, someone who wouldn't judge him.

Someone to take care of him.

He had understood at the time why the Doctor surrounded himself with little human friends.

He didn't totally understand it any more... Not now that the Doctor's voice was no longer chattering away in his brain.

But Missy was a resource, and that he did understand. One which he hadn't planned on or asked for, certainly. But the Time Lords had seen fit to make a copy of his mind and download it into someone else. He'd be a fool not to take advantage of all that hard work.

Also, stealing one of the Doctor's friends for himself was sort of hilarious.

Messing with the Doctor's tagalongs was becoming a more important part of the game all the time. He'd enjoyed keeping Bill close for ten years, mining her brain for updates on the Doctor, making in-jokes which only he understood. She had merely been a substitute, a way to pass the time while he waited for the Doctor to make it down to Floor 1056 himself.

But that hadn't been a contest. Bill would always have chosen the Doctor.

This was better.

With Missy, he could win.
Chapter 10: Alliances

The Master stumbled into his TARDIS, bleeding and dizzy.

The gambit had paid off: he hadn't encountered a single Cyberman in the short walk between the lift and his TARDIS.

The Master leaned against the Console, just for a moment, setting down the new dematerialization circuit carefully.

So Missy had been good for something after all...

He'd have to make sure to take care of setting up that situation later.

For now, the primary concern was not bleeding out. He went straight to the medical bay off of the control room.

It was hilarious that Missy's choice to stand by the Doctor's side as he stubbornly ended his own life had, in her mind, also required assassinating the Master. Even funnier that she had died believing she was him and had chosen to murder him regardless.

He had to applaud the commitment. That was how to make a choice. If that's something you were into.

The Master, of course, preferred to just have everything.

Choices were for other people.

He really should have seen it coming. It was so obvious in hindsight. But he had been distracted, racing against the clock to foil the Doctor's self-destruction. And he'd thought he had Missy after he had drawn her away from the Doctor...

He'd been so sure.

He'd clearly underestimated the amount of Clara she still had left in her.

Her mistake, of course, had been giving the Master any time between stabbing him and the intended regeneration. Had she truly been him, or been a better copy, she would have known that.

As if he wouldn't retaliate?

As if he wouldn't have access to emergency medical supplies in his TARDIS?

Please.

He'd had so many brushes with death over the centuries, he'd be the biggest fool in the Universe not to have backup plans upon backup plans at this point in case of potential injuries.

Because, unlike some others, he actually valued his life.
Missy didn't understand. She wanted to go "help" the Doctor, to stand by his side, stupidly supporting his decision to die pointlessly.

The Master had hoped for better from her. But since he couldn't win and she wasn't going to be of any help to the Doctor... Well, that made her officially useless.

No one would miss her.

Missy had thought going along with the Doctor's "plan" was a show of true friendship.

The Master knew better. Because he knew the Doctor.

The Doctor... Was an idiot.

He seldom had all the information and he was often wrong. He asked for things he didn't need, even things that would hurt him. The Doctor always said he knew best but he usually didn't, especially when it came to his own safety.

He didn't need friends who would do what he said, or buy into his lies, or blindly follow his lead...

No.

The Doctor needed friends who would see through his fetish for self-sacrifice. Who would force him to see reason. And failing that, if worse came to worst, friends who weren't afraid to drag the Doctor kicking and screaming to safety... Whether he liked it or not.

And that was exactly the kind of friend the Master was.

The Master slumped into a chair in the medical bay and unbuttoned his jacket. Blood had soaked through the entire left side of his shirt, the red lining of his jacket stained a deeper shade than before.

He chose a device. Quick, rough, temporary... It would hurt, but it would hold.

He barely managed to remain conscious as the machine burned his wound shut. But he gritted his teeth and willed himself to stay awake. There was no time for sweet unconsciousness, no time for rest, no time for the nonsense and adjustment that came with regeneration.

Besides, he wasn't done with this body yet. He was enjoying himself too much. Navigating the intense contradictions of his current regeneration was honestly sort of exhilarating.

Summoning all of his remaining strength, the Master stood. He almost fell... But he didn't. he made it back to the control room, just a few feet away... The journey was agonizingly slow. The wound pulled as he moved. He shut out the pain.

Taking a deep breath and bracing himself, he accessed the telepathic circuits. This would be a complicated conversation... But there was no way around it. The Plan ground to a halt if he failed here.

And if the Plan failed, the Doctor died.

And that couldn't be allowed to happen.

The Master connected to his TARDIS's telepathic circuits, using them to open a communication channel to the Doctor's TARDIS, four hundred miles above him...
She recognized him immediately, as she always did.

‘Hello, Little One.’

The Master sighed.

"Why do you keep calling me that? It's hardly appropriate at this point."

'I have always called you that. So Little, always trying to be so big... You need something."

"The Doctor," the Master said. "He's in trouble."

‘Yes. I can feel his pain. Why are you not with him? He needs you.’

The Master shook his head in disgust.

"He wants to die. I want to stop him, not help him."

‘You have a Plan, Little One, and you need my help. Is that correct?’

"Yes," the Master confirmed.

‘And if I do not help you, will you force me as you did before?’

The Master grimaced guiltily. This is the direction he had feared the conversation would take. Despite knowing this was coming, he had no words prepared... He'd tried but had come up with nothing sufficient.

That never happened.

‘Tell me, Little One, what do you think it feels like to be a Paradox Machine?’

"That was... A mistake," he tried, lamely.

‘It was not.’

"I was angry," he said.

‘You were insane.’

"That too..." he had to agree.

‘You were angry, why? That I found you, returned you to our Thief? Or perhaps you were angry that I helped you to escape the War when you came to me so desperate and so afraid, begging for me to take you away?’

He hadn't wanted to argue. He needed the TARDIS's help, desperately. But even knowing the stakes, he couldn't resist voicing his side of the story.

"You left me there," he said accusingly.

‘You were safe.’

"For years!" So many years, stuck in a human body, stranded, aging slowly to death.

‘I told you I would always find you, did I not?’
"I could have died!" he said angrily.

‘Oh, Little One, so dramatic. We both know that you and I would never have allowed that to happen.’

She did have a point there... His Time Lord consciousness had been trapped in the Watch but still had a certain amount of agency.

The TARDIS knew him well... Had it come down to it, he'd never have allowed his human self to die.

‘When you died for our Thief, did I abandon you then?’

She hadn't. The TARDIS had saved his consciousness, had kept him safe, impossibly, when his body had been destroyed... He literally owed her his life.

The reminder was enough to give his crime context, to heighten the twinge of guilt.

"Ok, fine," he said, knowing he'd lost the argument. "I'm sorry."

‘Are you? My obstinate Little One, you are never that unless someone forces you to be. Would you like to know what it feels like, what you did to me?’

Uh oh.

"No, I -" He didn't have any more time to protest before the psychic assault hit him. The pain was suffocating, searing, blinding. It was as if every cell in his body was being simultaneously pulled apart and held trapped in place. He couldn't move, he couldn't breathe. He could feel every atom of his being screaming out...

It seemed to last for an eternity.

Then, mercifully, it ended.

The Master collapsed against the Console, gasping for breath.

‘That, my Lost Boy, was but a fraction of a millisecond. You held me thus for far, far longer.’

"I'm sorry..." he managed to gasp it out aloud. And this time he did mean it.

‘And did you think, foolish Little One, that I did not know that was coming? I could see the Paradox Machine in your mind, in our future since ages long gone. I knew when I found you what you would do.’

This had honestly never occurred to the Master.

"You knew...?" He hardly knew what to say to that. "And still you came? Why would you do that?"

Why would anyone do that?

‘I told you. You are Our Boy, and I will always come for you. You think so much, but never of the important things. Always of your own plans, your own games, your own thoughts. There is such a wide world outside but you do not see it. Your mind reflects itself like a hall of mirrors. All you see is you.’
"Not this time," the Master told her. "I need to save the Doctor, and I need your help to do it."

'I will help. Show me what you need.'

The Master closed his eyes, focusing on the details of his Plan, conveying them to his ally.

He could almost feel the TARDIS smiling...

'Oh, my ingenious Little One... How can one mind imagine such cruelty and also such kindness?'

He was suddenly afraid. "You won't tell him, will you? He can't ever know."

'I do not tell our secrets.'

It was true. They'd conspired to save the Doctor before. He smiled, reassured.

"No... No, you don't, do you?"

'I will be here when you are ready. Go now, Little One. Time is short."

"Thank you."

'Always.'

He broke off the connection and replaced the burnt-out dematerialization circuit with the new one, quickly, deftly.

With great care, he dematerialized, exiting the timestream leading to the Doctor's death.

Now... Now he could rest.

Now he could heal.

And then the work could begin, the Plan could be put into motion.

It would be beautiful, watching it all come together. The Master looked forward to filling in every minute detail with delightful anticipation.

And then, one day, when everything was ready, when it was all perfect... Then he would come back.

So much to do...

He couldn't wait to get started.

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Chapter End Notes

Yes, the Master has conversations with the TARDIS. Yes, there is a story there.
Possibly a lot of stories....
But that's for another day. ;)'
Chapter Notes

This chapter is essentially an introspective summary of where the Master is at by the end of TDF as compared to where he was going into this. Definitely an odd chapter but I did feel this all needed to be said.

Chapter 11: Priorities

Regeneration was a complicated business.

Often your new self was defined by a need to fix mistakes you had made in your previous lifetime. In stressful or traumatic regenerations, things got even more complicated: you could live a whole life essentially stuck on the one day which had led up to your regeneration.

This, the Master knew, was his current problem.

He had been born in rage and madness and fear. He had burned for revenge, to see the Doctor suffer as he had suffered. To feel the bite of betrayal. To know how it felt to lose everything, as the Doctor had taken everything from him.

The Drums had fueled that fire, driving him forward, never letting him rest.

The Drums had been born out of his flight from Gallifrey. They bid him to fight, to return, to go back to a War and a planet which no longer even existed.

The Time Lords had brought him back from death to fight for them in their Time War. They sent him to do all the things they were too lazy or too cowardly to do themselves, always keeping their hands clean.

The War had been... Hell.

There was already so little left by the time the Master had been brought into the fight. He was drafted into a War which had essentially already been lost.

The Master was no stranger to genocide, horror and pain. He himself had been the cause of much of it in his lifetimes. But the Last Great Time War was a whole other level. This wasn't your common, garden-variety mass murder. No, this was something else entirely. Every day, realities bent, timelines collided and shifted and reformed. Whole races were slaughtered and born and unmade countless times over.

And the Master felt all of it, as all the Time Lords did.

It was enough to drive anyone mad... And many had indeed lost their minds. But that hadn't been what had destroyed the Master. No, he had been terrified and tormented certainly, but he hadn't broken. Not then...

No, he had held on.
And then, one day, he had seen something he couldn't unsee and his will to survive had simply taken over. He had been afraid, terrified beyond all reason. He had run for his life, fleeing to the ends of the Universe, to the outer edges of Time itself. He had hidden, stranded himself in a world with no future, with no plan but to escape. Because he had known then with an absolute certainty that he would never make it out of this War alive.

It was only as he was leaving that he discovered the truth, what the Time Lords had done to him...

What the Doctor had done to him.

The Master was the first to admit that loyalty was not his foremost trait, especially when it came to Gallifrey. He had no love of his original home planet or his fellow Time Lords. Nevertheless, he had fought for them for years, never wondering why...

The reason, it turned out, was that when they had resurrected him to fight for them, the Time Lords had tweaked his personality slightly to ensure his usefulness. They had grafted in emotions and drives which were not his own at all.

It was so subtle at first, practically imperceptible: just a willingness to defend his homeworld despite his personal dislike of everything they were and stood for.

But it grew over time, like a seed in the rich soil of the Master's mind. Because it was familiar, because it was safe.

Because the pieces they had added hadn't come from just anyone's character. No, they had been acquired from the Doctor's personality.

The Master knew that was no coincidence.

He also knew that they could not have accessed the Doctor's mind at that level without permission...

The Doctor had known. The Doctor had helped.

And the Master had never even guessed any of this.

He had been a faithful little soldier, fighting at the Doctor's side.

He had wondered sometimes why he felt empathy and regret for some of the victims of the War. He'd felt more than he was accustomed to, in general, which to him had just seemed like terrible timing for the most horrific War in all of history... But he truly hadn't questioned it.

That was how mind control worked, after all, as the Master of all people was well aware.

It had turned out that that pain, too, was the Doctor's fault, polluting his mind with a futile sense of kinship for those who could not be saved. Had he felt less, had he been himself, perhaps the pain would have been more bearable. In altering his emotional drives, they had taken away the one advantage he had to cope with the endless horror: his lack of empathy.

To be trapped, to be surrounded by constant atrocities, to cause them, and also to feel them a thousand times over with every victim... It was a nightmare within a nightmare.

During the Year That Never Was, he'd hoped that the Doctor would have admitted this at some point: how he had been complicit in destroying his best friend's sanity. How he had lied and deceived his friend even as he had pretended to protect him. How all the camaraderie of fighting...
together in the War had been a farce from the beginning.

But the Doctor had never acknowledged his sin... Either he couldn't out of shame, or wouldn't out of fear. Either way, those were the only words the Master had wanted to hear.

"I did this to you. This is my fault. I was wrong."

The Master didn't want offers of help, didn't want meaningless, vague apologies. Not until the Doctor acknowledged the truth: that what he had done was far worse than anything the Master had ever done to him.

That he had betrayed their lifelong friendship in the worst way.

And that every day the Master ruled the Earth, every life taken going forward was the Doctor's fault until he owned his choices.

The Master had lost that battle in the end and Time had been turned back to erase the whole, dark, blood-soaked Year... But it had served its purpose. It had always been a means to an end.

That end was to hurt the Doctor.

And indeed he had hurt... That was one of the perks of having a finely-tuned telepathic mind: it gave an extra relish to vengeance. And the little Doctor voice in his head had turned out to be quite useful, guiding him unerringly in the direction which would cause his friend the most pain.

It wasn't until much later that he realized the Time Lords had done far more than merely alter his character traits. As if that wasn't enough, they had also implanted permanent instructions, binding him to the Gallifreyan authority. They had programmed him to be loyal, to fight, to defend. To stay.

They had linked those commands to his heartbeats, knowing that given time he would inevitably find a way to reverse any attempts to control him.

They feared his power, as they should. So they chained him, hobbled him.

Then eventually, that one day had come when his fear had overwhelmed the programming long enough to allow him to run. But the program remained afterwards, immutable, resetting with every four-beat of his hearts. He could never escape that, not as long as he lived. Could never get enough mental traction to think or to plan or to fight back.

So the War ended out in the Universe, but it raged on inside the Master's mind.

The Drums drove him to fight, called him back to Gallifrey, punished him for his desertion.

The Doctor demanded attention, crowding out his thoughts with foreign drives and needs.

And on top of all of that, the Time War was still fresh in his mind, still needed to be dealt with...

The Master had hated it.

He just wanted to be himself again. He wanted his own mind back, pristine and organized and uncluttered by random emotion.

But he couldn't fix it, not by himself. Maybe the Doctor could... But that he could not allow, not after the Doctor had been the one to cause all of this in the first place.
No, the Master was helpless. And amidst all the noise and the confusion and the fear and the rage... It was that helplessness that he hated most of all.

The Doctor kept saying he wanted to help, but only to repair what he had broken, only to assuage his own guilt. After all, where had he been when the Master had vanished from the War? He'd never come to find his friend. And the Master had needed him then. He'd spent an entire human lifetime trying to find his way. He had even nearly died a pointless, human death.

And then, finally, the Doctor had showed up. Not looking for him, though... No. The Doctor had come to the End of the Universe not to find his lost friend, but unsuspecting, purely by chance.

As always.

Had the situation been reversed, the Master would never have stopped looking, not until he had found the Doctor and brought him home safely.

It wasn't right. It wasn't fair.

The Doctor had moved on, it seemed. He wanted to forget now, to pretend, to deny. To erase what he had done and what they had been through together during the War.

But the Master would remind him. Oh, yes, he wouldn't let him forget... Not for a single moment. He would show the Doctor what a mockery he had made of their friendship.

The Master had been betrayed, abandoned, lost and terrified.

His one friend in the Universe had taken away his freedom, had used him as a pawn in the Time Lords' game. Had thrown him to the wolves of War without even the courtesy of asking for his help.

If the Doctor had just asked, he might have helped...

But no, it was too late for all of that now. Now, a new course had to be taken.

The scales had to be righted.

The Doctor had to pay.

And this was how the Master had regenerated. All vengeance and wrath and pain.

But now all of that was in the past.

The Drums were gone.

The Master was himself again, his psychopathic character once more fully intact.

And he had his mind back, just as dazzling and powerful as ever.

He knew that the Doctor had suffered appropriately... The score had been settled, more or less.

But still that anger was there, deep in the Master's hearts. Still, he looked into the Doctor's eyes and felt compelled to make him suffer. Until he regenerated, that would probably never change.

He was stuck, in a sense. Still focused on an outdated desire for revenge.

He knew this.
But knowing didn't change it.

However, those few days on Floor 507 had reminded him that sometimes the Doctor needed him. Often, in fact... Although the Doctor would never admit that.

The Master had nearly forgotten that in recent decades.

In his need for vengeance he had somehow lost track of the root of his motivation: that the reason he was so angry with the Doctor was precisely because they were such good friends.

The Doctor had helped to destroy his mind, to control him... But the Doctor had also fought to resurrect him from the dead, had given him a new set of regenerations. Had taken care of him during the War. Had been there to save him when he was too afraid to even move.

The Doctor had altered his mind, had implanted bits of his own personality. It was an invasion, an offense... And he should have admitted it. But, if the Master was being totally honest, he knew that that certainly hadn't been the Doctor's idea. And that the Doctor could never have expected it to go quite so wrong. And really, any day of the week, given the choice, he'd rather have the Doctor's voice in his head than anyone else's... Which had really partly caused the problem in the first place.

The Doctor had drafted him into the most atrocious War of all Time... But the Master knew this was partly because the Doctor had missed his best friend. And oddly, in the midst of all the horror, fighting side by side hadn't been all bad... It had been sort of wonderful to be on the same side for a change. How much of that had been forced, the Master wasn't entirely sure... And that made him deeply, furiously angry. He'd untangle that and lay the blame where it belonged eventually. For now, all that mattered was that there were good memories even in the Time War. And those memories were because of the Doctor.

And right now, the Doctor needed a friend.

The Doctor needed him.

The Doctor had other friends, of course, but no one else who could do what the Master could do. He stood alone as the one who could help now.

In the strictest "eye for an eye" definition of justice, the Master knew that now would be the ideal time to abandon the Doctor. After all, hadn't the Doctor done the same to him?

But the Master just didn't want that.

Even with that core of rage still inside him, he could and would choose to help his best friend rather than lose him forever. Because even on his darkest, maddest day, he'd never, ever wanted that.

And not because of the things the Doctor did or the people he saved... No, for most of the Universe any motivation for saving the Doctor was tainted, selfish. Because after all, without the Doctor protecting them, people died.

In protecting the Doctor, they protected themselves.

But the Master didn't need the Doctor to save him. He would survive either way. He knew this. The Doctor knew this.

No, the Master's reasons were purer than that. He wanted the Doctor to live, to go on, simply because he was the Doctor.
Because the Doctor, despite what a nuisance he could sometimes be, was the Master's best and only friend. And when all was said and done, he'd rather have the Doctor out there sweeping in and spoiling all his well-laid plans than rule the entire Universe but lose the Doctor.

Because plans were dime-a-dozen, but there was no one else like the Doctor. There never could be. In the whole of Time and Space he was truly one-of-a-kind.

And a Universe without the Doctor was a bleak prospect indeed.

It was a conflict the Master had long since made peace with. He wasn't sure if the Doctor knew where his friend stood on that subject... They never talked about those things. But the Master had organized his priorities many, many years ago, and on that list the Doctor's survival stood above everything else.

He had done well with his revenge but the time had come to readjust. The Doctor's impending planned death was a stark reminder of what was truly important.

It wasn't that he was exactly sorry for what he had done... The Master didn't really do regret. But he had come to the realization that in his anger he had missed out on some opportunities to help the Doctor.

And that should be rectified.

He could find a way to help the Doctor without his friend knowing, without taking the stance of either forgiveness or vengeance. He could repair the Doctor’s memories, convince him to regenerate after all. More than that, he could backtrack over the regenerations he had missed, staying close by in the Doctor’s darker moments.

No one needed to know the Plan. He wouldn’t need to explain or justify himself because no one would ask any questions. They never did. They’d make their own assumptions and he’d be free to do as he pleased, his motivations remaining safely shadowed.

He had been handed an impossible situation and an obvious course of action.

Abandon the Doctor. Be angry. Take your revenge.

But if you just bowed to the obvious, were you even making a choice?

Or were you just another mindless sheep, a puppet on someone else’s string?

So this was his choice...

To be angry and still save the Doctor.

He could have it both ways.

The Master chose not to choose.

He didn't have to compromise.

He was the Master, after all.

His Plan would transcend this regeneration's post-Time War issues as was fitting: because his friendship with the Doctor was the only thing in his life that had consistently survived. Through different faces and planets and lives and schemes...
Always the Doctor was there. Always the Doctor mattered.

Part of him still hated the Doctor. He knew that would pass, in time.

But the Doctor needing him? That would never change.

Friendship... It was a complicated business.
Chapter 12: The Beginning

The Master sat in the guest chair of a University office, waiting patiently. A lot of preparation had led up to this meeting.

His appointment had been scheduled for three minutes ago. She was late.

He looked up as the door opened and the office's owner breezed in. "Sorry about the wait, always some emergency, you know... Professor Helen Clay."

The Master, of course, was well aware of her name. He had done a lot of research before he'd chosen her. She was professional, organized, detail-oriented... Respectable, ambitious but not yet very well-known...

She was perfect.

The Master smiled, shaking her outstretched hand. "Not a problem, I completely understand. You're a very busy woman... Dr. Emil Keller," he introduced himself. "I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice."

Professor Clay pulled up some notes on the appointment. "It's actually very unusual for me to have an opening... I'm generally booked for months in advance but someone cancelled at the last minute."

"Well, I guess it's just my lucky day then, isn't it?" the Master chuckled.

"So I understand, doctor, that you have a proposal you'd like us to look at," she said.

"Straight to business, good."

"Yes! I think you'll find it very interesting." He handed her his proposal. He'd worked hard on it. He knew it was flawless. And he knew she would be intrigued.

She opened the file, taking a moment to glance through the outline. "This is... A little outside our normal sphere of operations. We are primarily a research institute, you know."

"Yes, I'm aware," the Master replied coolly. "The purpose of this project would be research."

She was hesitant. "But time travel, doctor... That can be a very delicate business. And we at the University of New Earth have very little experience in that particular field. Maybe you would be
better suited taking your project someplace else?" Her eyes begged for him to convince her, as all the best marks did.

He knew it wouldn't be difficult.

"No, I don't think so," he contradicted her. "And I do have a little experience in the field of time travel myself," he smirked. "I'd be happy to contribute where I can."

She glanced down again at his proposal. "The costs involved in this will be astronomical. Time travel research projects are notoriously difficult to get approved. The licensing alone would be -"

He held up a hand, cutting her off. "I can take care of all of that. I have... Connections." He didn't yet. But he would. "And let me assure you, professor, money is no object. I'm prepared to fund this entire project myself if need be."

Professor Clay's eyebrows shot up but her voice remained calm. She folded her hands and looked directly at the Master. "I've never heard of you, Dr. Keller. Where have you come from?"

Another question he had been expecting. He gestured to the file on her desk. "You'll see I've included my professional history." She started scrolling through the file as he continued. "I have a policy of never going into a situation without knowing who I'm dealing with, if I can help it. It only seems fair to afford you the same courtesy."

Her eyes widened ever so slightly as she read through the Master's falsified CV. He had chosen every credential, every project with meticulous care. All fabricated specifically to not only communicate his qualifications but also to pique Helen Clay's interest. She would certainly verify all of his information later through another source but would find that everything matched up as it should. The Master was nothing if not thorough.

Eventually she looked up, trying to conceal how swayed she was. "This is... A very impressive resume, Dr. Keller. Tell me: you certainly have the credentials. You've said you are willing and able to provide the funding yourself. So why come to us? What could we possibly provide?"

There were multiple things they could provide, of course. A base of operations, a smoke screen of legitimacy, employees, experts, people to do the work so the Master could come and go as he pleased...

But above all, there was one thing the Master needed.

"A face," he told her. "Specifically, your face, Professor Clay. I'd like you to be the face of this project."

He saw the spark in her eyes, suppressed a triumphant smile.

Gotcha.

He'd known how this conversation would go, had run it through in his mind over and over. He knew his mark, had chosen her with care. But still, there was nothing quite as satisfying as that moment when the quarry took the bait.

"But why not you?" she queried. "This is going to be an enormous undertaking. And what we discover through this project could potentially change our understanding of history forever. Why would you want someone else to take all the credit?"

He shrugged, feigning humility. "I've never been one for the limelight, Professor. I prefer to remain
in the background as more of a... Silent partner. I'm interested purely in the research itself." It was a lot of half-truths. Easier to maintain, more convincing.

And after all, even if he had wanted her to know the whole story, it would only confuse her.

He could see that she was puzzled, that she knew there was something she was missing.

_Smart woman. I chose well._

But the offer was far too tempting.

_Very well._

"We'll have to go through the necessary steps of course, background checks and verification..." she began.

"Of course," he acquiesced.

"But..." She paused again.

"But?" the Master pushed. They both already knew her answer but he needed to hear her say it. Needed her to commit.

"Assuming the board approves..." she qualified, then looked up, decided. "You have yourself a deal, Dr. Keller."

"Wonderful!" the Master grinned, jumping up to seal the deal with another handshake. "I'm very much looking forward to our partnership, Professor."

"Please, call me Helen," she said, smiling warmly. "We will be seeing a lot of each other, after all."

Indeed they would. All the work it had taken to get here and this was merely the first step. There was so much more still to be done...

Helen was looking through the proposal again, already planning ahead, eager to begin. The Master smiled. Helen Clay was a woman after his own hearts.

"What was the name of this project?" she asked. "Had you chosen a name?"

"Ah, yes... I have." The Master leaned over the desk, scrolled down, pointed it out in the file. "It's called Testimony."

"Excellent," Helen said, nodding her approval. "A perfect choice."

She had no way of knowing how correct she was in that assessment. What, or rather whom, it would be a Testimony to.

Professor Clay moved across the room and pulled out a bottle of blue liquor and two glasses from a cabinet. "Do you drink, Dr. Keller?" she asked politely.

"When the situation merits it," he replied.

Helen nodded and poured out a small amount of alcohol into the glasses, handing one to the Master. "It may be a bit premature but I feel this new partnership calls for a toast. To the future." Helen smiled.
The Master returned her smile. "To Testimony," he said.

*To Be Continued...*

**Chapter End Notes**

[STING!]
[CLIFFHANGER!]

Stay tuned for the sequel! :D Currently a massive 22 of 24 chapters completed... But we'll be taking a few detours first. You'll all be meeting Time War Team next. Time War Team is truly my masterpiece - and I don't say that lightly. :)

In the meantime, many, many thanks to...

... My sister, IncomingAlbatross, who had to listen to me talk cryptically about the Plan for months when she hadn't even watched The Doctor Falls yet. :) Thank you, sister!!!

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... And to all my other readers... <3 <3 you all. :)