Spaceship -- or the Rules and Regulations of Doing Domestic

by thanatosx49

Summary

He's been read the riot act and has been given the rules of what and what not to do in a normal life. Now to find out if he can manage to comply without going insane, and here's hoping for a little romance and adventure along the way. Be careful what you wish for -- you might get it.
Prologue

Sometimes, in the darkest hour of the night, he can still feel it: the turn of the universe around him as he struggled up out of another nightmare, hoping he hadn't cried out and woken Rose; the timelines stretching before him at the edge of his vision as he gasped for breath, trying to tamp down the memories that woke him from his slumber. Sleeping so much now was a strange thing -- waking up is stranger still. It left him disoriented and bleary for the first five minutes or so when he woke with the fading echoes of having a second heart. It was the lone beating in his chest that brought him back to the harsh reality every time.

He was part human now. No regeneration. He was going to get old and die. Thirty to forty, maybe even fifty more years if he's lucky, and when was the universe kind? He was trapped on one planet, in one time. Until he could get his TARDIS grown, that was. But he's not alone, at least. That was a wonderful, brilliant thing.

He was here with Rose: the only part about all of it that convinces him he was the one who got the better deal. Stuck here, with her, it was not so bad. Even if he was required to eat regularly, take vitamins, and generally take care of his health now. Pete's orders.

And Pete Tyler had certainly laid down the law. That he had. With health checks, orders to adhere to the laws of the country, and restrictions on where he could go and when. He was at least allowed off the mansion's grounds now, just no more bus rides all over the city. How was he to know that his conversation with the driver and his sympathizing with the difficulties of raising a family on that income would result in the entire transit employees union going on strike for a week? Should've been paying them better, and the uniforms were all so naff.

Better yet, when Pete had given him permission to move into Rose's flat with her. Not like they would've been able to separate them, but it was nice to have Rose buy him his own jam jar. Now he could eat his marmalade any way he wished, without people making a fuss. Other than Rose, when he'd mixed them up. That's why she started labeling them. Clever girl. So brilliant. So much more than he deserved.

Why she would ever want a sorry old Time Lord... sorry, wrong me. Why she would want a sorry 56 days, 14 hours, and 17 minutes old Time Lord metacrisis like him, he wouldn't know. He'd wiped out the Daleks (again) and committed genocide (don't hold your breath waiting for the slightest pang of remorse on that, you can think again, Sunshine). Really, she could do so much better. Deserved so much more...

"Bloody hell, are you moping again?" Rose's sleepy voice startled him from his reverie. She was standing in her pajamas in the doorway, looking at him with concern.

"Um, no?" he said, trying not to sound like he'd been caught red handed.

"Liar," she said goodnaturedly. "I could practically hear the recriminations through the walls. You know Dad said any more and he's sending you to a therapist, even if he has to sit on you the whole visit."

"Sorry, bad habit," he sighed, settling back against the pillows, staring at the ceiling. So far, the accursed carpets, ceilings and other things that started with the letter 'c' that defined domestic had yet to spell out his conclusion. Though they did mark 'confinement'; another curse with the same letter.

"You're still moping," Rose singsonged from the doorway. She walked over to his bedside, studying
his face in the dim glow from the ever present lights of London. "Is it the dreams again?"

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak. It was embarrassing. 904 years old, and he couldn't even sleep through the night unless he'd drank a couple pints. And that was on the list of no-no's now.

Unless it was Friday night, or a special occasion. Well, he could also be less than two months old, depending how you looked at it. In which case they'd probably not let him near the pub, once they'd wrapped their minds around all the implications of a metacrisis. Not like he had even managed that much completely.

"Here, budge up," Rose said, pulling back the duvet and claiming the extra pillow without invitation. "You always sleep better when you're not alone."

"But--" he started to protest, scrambling away. He'd not bothered to put anything on over his pants, being too worn out from working at the garage to bother.

"I'm not going to bite. And we're just sleeping."

He nodded, not daring to mention that the other times they'd shared a bed, he'd either been a full Time Lord, able to control his body's responses, and wearing more clothes. There isn't any tactful or proper way to go telling the woman you love that you're absolutely terrified you can't control your hormones in any way, shape or form. Much less, that her form causes yours to modify its shape and you're bloody terrified you'll embarrass yourself by finding you've been doing extraordinarily inappropriate things in your sleep to said form. Such a shapely, exquisite female form, too. And bloody flipping hell, she's snuggling with me....

"You're moping again," Rose murmured sleepily from where she rested her head on his chest.

"Sorry," he managed, trying not to indicate this was probably the nicest, most torturous thing he'd ever experienced in all his lives.

It was wonderful. Being held. Affirmation that he wasn't alone. Confirmation that things were moving closer to a positive outcome, ie "a real relationship beyond the boundaries of just friends." That is, if he can find the means and the courage to go over those boundaries. Validation against all he'd lost. It was bloody brilliant. Fan-flipping-tastic, even.

As the Stygian depths of sleep claimed him again, he heard Rose mumble, "Stop thinking so loud, you're keeping me awake."

He couldn't help but smile in contentment as all thoughts, musings, and regrets faded in the dark of the night.
Rose was not a fan of mornings. Mornings would be nicer if they were situated closer to more reasonable hours, when it wouldn't be so early. Like noon. Perfect time to start morning. Except, this morning, she wasn't in her own bed, as evidenced by the unfamiliar duvet and pillowcases. Pillowcases with pinstripes. Which meant...

Two brown eyes met her own as she poked her head out from under the covers, with a large smile in response to her groan at seeing the Doctor already wide awake and obviously cheerful.

Too cheerful. In such a manner that was probably illegal on several planets, and really should have been here.

"Ah! You're awake. About bloody time. I've had your tea ready for an hour -- or would you prefer coffee now? I didn't know, so I made both," he said, sounding like he had been at the sweets again. That or he'd gotten good news. Either way, she was so not ready, despite the warm mug he handed to her after she indicated the coffee. It was that type of morning.

"I've had to sonic that every 5 minutes and 28 seconds so it would be just the way you like it," he said, ignoring her lack of response. He obviously remembered from the years on the TARDIS about her moods after being awakened. He also remembered how she liked her coffee, despite the fact that was a habit she'd only picked up from working long hours at Torchwood.

"Thanks," she managed after the first few swallows warmed her and the caffeine started to wake her again.

Woke her enough so the implications of her location could work their way into her consciousness fully. She was in his bed. In her pajamas. He was also on the same bed, but he was at least fully dressed. The memory of his usual reaction to the nightmares and why she was here was enough to make it slightly less awkward. He was sprawled out, reading a gossip rag -- his newest thing -- and commenting idly on the articles as she woke up fully. When she made her usual morning run to the loo, he followed as far as the lounge, where she could still hear him exclaiming over the tabloids through the door. She was starting to suspect he'd been at the coffee himself, with the sudden overdose of happy. Not like that was normal for him, or this him, at least. Not with a night like he'd had the night before.

In the three weeks since they had moved into her flat, he'd been the usual yo-yo of moods. He'd quit working regular hours at Torchwood, since the restrictions on what and where he could do things had 'taken all the fun out of it,' as he'd put it. Bad enough the Ministry of Health was still investigating the cafeteria, due to his one and only visit and his very loud critiquing of the offerings. Half of the dinner ladies had quit, and half of the other employees were still questioning the origins of the food. Since her dad had insisted the Doctor had to seek gainful employment, he'd gladly gone back to Edgar's garage. Rose suspected it was because Edgar would let him do whatever he liked and wouldn't tell on him if he did something against the rules. And there were a lot of rules, now.

Wear Weather Appropriate Clothing. If Need Be, Consult the Weather Forecast and Plan Accordingly: It being high summer, and since this world was still experiencing left over global warming from the tears between the worlds left by the Cybermen years before, it was extremely hot and humid. Because the Doctor was the Doctor and stubborn to boot, he'd learned the hard way that his partially human body was not immune to temperature fluctuations. One trip to A&E for
heatstroke didn't quite do the trick; it took two before he'd admit that his usual layers weren't a good idea. A third trip taught him that shorts and t-shirts were the style required, not just his usual mechanics' overalls. Pockets were a worthy sacrifice compared to him passing out on the bus and Rose having to rush there and pick him up. It wasn't that he was stupid, it was just that stupid pride of his and him refusing to acknowledge or accept the differences in biology he had to live with now.

That lead to the next rule.

Get Regular Amounts of Sleep: Sleeping regularly would prevent incidents like him falling asleep on the bus and having to call from wherever the bus driver had evicted him. The time he'd ended up in Croydon, she'd jokingly asked him, "Are you sure it's not Aberdeen?"

To which he'd replied, "Ha-bloody-ha, aren't you the comedienne, Rose Tyler. Can you please send a car, because all the cab drivers all know me and refuse to take me. I don't know what it is with this lot. Every bloody time..."

She suspected it was either because he was covered in grease at the time, or because they'd picked him up before. Really, he was the worst backseat driver she'd ever met. Worse yet when he was driving.

Observe All Traffic Laws -- and Those of Physics On the Motorway, While Observing Proper Etiquette With Fellow Travellers: Pete had confiscated his driving license after he'd caused a four car pile up. Not because of any lack of skill on his part. Mostly because of his parking habits -- or lack of them -- coupled with the fact he had a tendency to yell at the other idiots on the road. Or worse, jump out of the vehicle and berate them at the next stop light to explain why their particular method of driving would get them arrested and or executed on several planets. He did the same thing from the backseat, or the passenger seat. Along with criticising the driver, the people who constructed the roads, and the "twonks" who failed to design cars that would accommodate his long legs.

Which was why he was mostly relegated to the bus, or a motorcycle if he could get away with it. The bus was only if he had a definite destination in mind, no joy rides allowed and no more inciting strikes. As for the motorcycle, he was hell on wheels. His lack of discretion involving traffic laws, articulated lorries and zebra crossings was enough to strike fear into anyone's heart. Verges, central reservations, and the pavement were just as good as the tarmac in his book and riding with him was akin to a dodgem at Brighton beach. Just more terrifying. Which was why Pete was forcing him to take public transport until he was no longer deemed to be a danger to himself and others. Despite his protests and complaints.

Rose understood why he was doing it. He was bored and missed his old life. Badly. He missed the thrill of stepping out a pair of blue wooden doors into the unknown. He missed the joie de vie of landing on a world he'd never seen and falling into a new adventure or seeing seeing sights he'd never known existed and having new experiences. She could fully understand that. She had gone through the same thing when she'd first been trapped here. The difference was, she had known that life before, even if she was accustomed to the life fantastic. He hadn't. And his TARDIS coral was merely the size of a small bedside stand at this point.

Which lead to the next rule.

No Contacting Alien Species For ANY Purposes Without Warning Anyone, So the Proper Precautions Can Be Taken Beforehand: he'd caused a minor riot, a two block evacuation and all of Torchwood turning up when he'd made trade arrangements with the Atavarians. A case of lager and a dustbin full of second hand CDs in trade for the dimensional stabilizer and the wiring for the new TARDIS was a good bargain. But he could've thought to tell someone before he started signalling them from the roof of their building with the sonic and a modified pen torch at 2 am.
Even Pete had found it hard to be angry after seeing how happy he was, since those were necessary components that even Torchwood hadn't been able to supply. But the sonic boom that shattered half the windows in the neighborhood when the ship left the earth's atmosphere made it a little easier. The Doctor's reply of, "Oops, forgot about that part, concussion waves and all that," was probably why the next rule came in to play: No Gadding About After Midnight Unless It's An Emergency. No Creating Emergencies For The Purposes of Gadding About, Either.

Rose was in the shower when she remembered today was one of the days he was supposed to observe one of the other rules: Try New, NORMAL Human Experiences Regularly And Observe the Necessary Ones On Schedule. She couldn't help but groan.

Today they were going grocery shopping. Or he was. No more picking up odds and ends on the way back from work, or a quick trip when they were out of bananas and jam. He was going with a list and orders to adhere to said list, with nothing added.

It went along with: Variety Is The Spice of Life. You Cannot Live On Fruit And Fruit Products Alone -- And Toast Does NOT Count. They'd found he was slightly anemic after he'd been injured blowing up a neighborhood in Shoreditch. Considering he was probably the pickiest eater they'd ever seen -- and that included her 4 year old brother -- it wasn't really surprising. For a man that would lick anything, or eat anything on a different planet, including Cronk burgers, there was a long list of things he wouldn't eat. Carrots, pears, swedes (the vegetable, not the people. Though, he most certainly wouldn't eat them, either) meatloaf, and shepherd's pie.

Normally, he liked new experiences. Provided they weren't boring and utterly mundane. Then he'd try to make them fun and exciting for all. Which usually resulted in some fun, too much excitement, and a touch of chaos. Like going to the shop for groceries, as a prime example. Rose had gone with him just the last week, and it had gone well enough. He had only attempted trolley racing down the aisles once, and at least he'd charmed the store manager while he apologized for the mess he caused when he collided with a display of soup tins. Of course, they'd bought all the dented ones to smooth things over. Which was why soup was definitely not on the list.

He'd grinned and joked, "Well, that was smashing." Which reduced them both in helpless giggles as they both pushed the newly purchased, wobbly shopping trolley up the pavement to their flat two hours later.

Pete would've put Behave Like Rose Does In Public on the list, but she'd been riding in the shopping trolley at the time. It was juvenile, she knew, but it had been fun at the time. A reminder of how things were before when they'd both had the universe at their fingertips. It had also been an indication of the way things could be in future, since he'd kissed her. It had stunned her. The Doctor, snogging her in the middle of Tesco's, surrounded by fallen soup tins while they were still laughing and lying there beneath the dented wreckage of a shopping trolley. They'd had to pay for that, too. But it came in handy, getting 48 tins of assorted chicken noodle and alphabet soup. And alphabet soup was the Doctor's new favorite, since making words with your lunch was "Brilliant!"

She had hopes that her mother would get over the photos in the tabloids from that adventure. At least it hadn't ended up on YouTube, and Pete had grumbled but had conceded it would help people forget the events of the month before. Donna had at least thought it was funny, after she'd declared them both to literally "off their trolley."

And they had the trolley to prove it.

It was some of the signs that the part human Doctor was slowly coming around. That he was starting to come out of his funk and adjust. And maybe, just maybe, she was too. She would have days where she'd actually almost forget there was another Him out there, wandering the stars alone. Days where
she didn't stop and compare his behavior to the other, and didn't even blink at the new quirks she'd come to recognize as something from the other Donna. Or maybe, just the new quirks from the added human testosterone he tried to hide most of the time.

Even if he was slowly getting more courage on the romance bit, she'd definitely noticed his moment of panic the night before when she'd crawled into bed to calm his nerves. Rose was starting to suspect he had more hangups than a call centre trying to sell used tyres, but she figured 900 odd years of repressed emotions and a sudden change in biology had a role in that.

*Not like I'm not confused and conflicted enough myself,* she thought as she turned off the shower and reached for her towel to dry herself. There aren't any manuals on how to Pursue A Relationship When The Love of Your Life Replicates Himself With Slightly Different DNA or How to Read Part Time Lord Males. He's just as hot and cold as ever. Just a lot more warm now with a tendency to ogle like a normal bloke and put on confusing displays of embarrassment when I catch him at it. If I didn't know any better, I'd think he learned his manners from the Puritans. Then again, what's to say he didn't, other than he curses worse than a sailor now.

Rose sighed as she put on her makeup and got ready for her day. She really wasn't sure she wanted to go into work today. Some boring negotiations on retrieving a sunken boat off the coast of Brittany that was suspected of having unregistered off-world tech, judging from the signals it had been sending before it collided with a ferry. The Doctor had already dismissed the readings as harmless, and the cause for the collision being the result of an inexperienced boat captain and too much champagne. (He'd come in when they'd interviewed the captain after the Navy had rescued him, then promptly left on the excuse of having an Aston Martin in the shop needing an alignment.)

He'd still come in if they'd call, but he didn't want the day to day, since field missions were a no go until Pete declared him fit for duty. Even if the physical damage from the run in with the Great Old Ones had healed up, the fact that "Safety, Who Needs Safety? That's Boring" seemed to be his motto was still a concern.

When Pete had handed him the National Life Insurance Statistics report to show him the things that caused most accidental deaths and injuries. The Doctor decided to take it literally to prove a point. He bathed in a bucket for a week and pissed out the window, saying since an estimated 237,084 nonfatal injuries occurred in the loo in 2008 alone, he was only following the rules and being careful. Pete had quickly amended the rules to: When You Stop Thinking You Are Clark Bloody Kent, You May Go On Field Missions Outside of Absolute Emergencies.

With the goal being the self preservation by proxy of the Doctor, it was probably for the best her Dad had assigned himself that duty. He at least had the willpower to resist the Doctor's cajoling when he had an idea that might not be the best plan.

Now, she was wondering if she should call in sick and surreptitiously follow him to get the groceries. That way she could either try dissuading him from trying something that looked fun, or at least join in if it wouldn't be too calamitous. A lot better than listening to the French ambassador droning on all day.

He had no clue why the universe found it fit to be so cruel. Him, buying groceries. Easy-peasy. And that was the problem. A list, a budget, everything categorically organized and set around planned meals. Meals that were supposed to be healthy.

No more living on takeaway, since he couldn't afford that on his current wages and he was trying to be self-supportive. He was even paying half the rent -- along with restitution on paying for the
windows in their building. He had millions of other things to remember from all those centuries on
top of this domestic shite. Surely someone could have some sympathy when it slipped his mind about
the effects of interstellar craft over urban areas. Maybe, if they'd listened and coated their windows
with that protective polymer he'd invented at Edgar's garage, they'd still have windows. And he
wouldn't be coating people's cars in the stuff for the next three years to pay for the damages, now
would he?

Ok, maybe that one hadn't been thought out thoroughly, but he'd acquired the parts he needed and
the earth had a potential trading partner. Who knew there was anyone in the universe gaga over cut-
rate ale and Celine Deon albums? Weird. But it takes all kinds, doesn't it?

And so far, Siobhán from the HR department at Torchwood hadn't discovered her missing music
collection. If she wanted them back, she could always pop up on the roof, contact the Atavarians,
and negotiate for their return. But good luck on that, it was either Celine, or the entire world's supply
of bauxite. He thought it was probably better that mankind continue to possess tin than a few dozen
CDs that would hardly be missed.

And there it was, Tesco's. The very symbol of modern capitalism, consumerism, and all things
domestic. Complete with a sale on washing powder. A place that defied all logic.

Pots and pans that would likely kill you with the contaminates leaching out into your food whilst you
cooked it to a certain temperature to avoid dying from e. coli or salmonella poisoning. Or you could
just spend a small fortune for safer pots and pans. Then after forty years, you could promptly keel
over from the contaminates in the food itself. And they had the nerve to call his lifestyle dangerous.

Ha! Humans. So brilliant, and so bloody stupid with it. Though, whoever thought to sell anoraks and
mittens while it was just a slight bit cooler outside than the devil's armpit made even him pause to
consider the permutations of minds like that. They probably broke out the swimming cozzies when it
was cold enough to make an Ood feel at home, the blooming loonies. All those lovely idiosyncrasies.
Just wizard.

He'd promised not to lick anything in public, but that was what the sonic was for. Not that he was
willing to admit that he wasn't able to detect the contents of things by taste much beyond the point
that any regular human would've noticed. He was not going to go parading anymore of the
deficiencies he'd found he'd been cursed with since the metacrisis. He had to keep some secrets. And
it was far easier to ignore them and pretend they didn't exist than to admit or accept them. Denial, a
lovely river in Egypt, and his new best friend. Then again, who wasn't in denial over something?
Even other Him might possibly, eventually subconsciously admit to that one. While totally under
duress.

He secretly scanned all the products he grabbed for dangerous particles, background radiation and
molecular content before depositing them in his trolley. Tesco's had decreed he had to bring his own,
or leave a cash deposit before using their ones in the shop. Plus, he'd made some modifications. He'd
have tried for dimensionally transcendent, but Pete said, "That totally defeats the purpose of learning
to do normal, human activities when you make your shopping trolley bigger on the inside. And hell
to try explaining to the clerk on the till when you're cashing out, when you've got half the bloody
fruit section in there along with a camp bed and it still looks half empty." Pete was really too set in
his ways. No imagination. No sense of adventure. And he had staff and a wife to do it for him. He
didn't have to stand there waiting for 21 minutes and 37 seconds because there were 58 people in the
queue and one sodding till open. With a clerk whose rate of scanning things through would've made
an Zigonian sloth mother proud if her young could've achieved such a lack of speed. And they took
4 days to go 2 metres.
At this rate, he was lucky if he got home before Rose. It was a very good thing he'd had the day off, or he'd have been late over 3 hours, 46 minutes and 12 seconds ago. Shopping for groceries on earth is not, in any sense of the term -- on any planet, moon, space colony, or time period, even -- fantastic.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I ran out of fluff. Onto our reregularly scheduled programme...

2

The Doctor let his mind drift as he pushed the wobbly trolley back to the flat, taking the opportunity
to think without anyone fussing over whether he was moping again or not. It was a freedom of sorts,
being an unknown in the crowds of people getting on with their lives. They barely noticed one tall
man with a cap pulled down over his ears with a pile of groceries, just calmly stepped around him
and went on. Didn't even notice he was the recently the most notorious in the gossip rags. Amazing
what dressing down did to people's perceptions. They only saw what was in front of them, and then
only when it was what they expected.

He understood it all, he did. All the bloody rules he had to live by, the reasoning behind them,
everything. He could even appreciate why Pete had given him a list of rules and restrictions. It was
just friendly advice, even if it was couched in orders. And that was why he loved defying them --
when he actually thought about it or even remembered that they existed. It was just sometimes, he
had the uncontrollable urge to cut loose, run wild, act like a lunatic -- all in the hope of seeing Rose
smile, to get her to laugh and forget her new persona of the serious, responsible Torchwood agent. It
was half the reason he couldn't work there.

Bad enough he could feel that damn lever room all those floors up from the basement Archives,
lingering on the edge of his consciousness like an itch he couldn't scratch. It constantly reminded him
of the parallel Torchwood that had cost him so much. But that was a minor irritant compared to
watching Rose be so serious, so professional. The way she was unflappable in the face of danger,
how she took charge on field missions, that was something else. He could be proud of her for that,
seeing her as confident and capable as he always knew she could be. It was seeing the echo of his
own world-weary hardness around her eyes, and how hard it was to convince her to just let loose
and live a little. She'd come so far from the naïve shop girl who thought the best she'd ever
accomplish was getting off the Estate and getting her A levels some day. Here she was now,
defending the earth, helped save all of reality. And here she was now, stuck babysitting the likes of
him.

He wasn't even allowed to go out in the field because he'd forget he wasn't as resilient as he once
was, that regeneration was no longer a way of cheating death for him. Could he help it that he'd
forget in the thick of things? That he'd get so caught up that forgetting about sleeping, eating, or even
the lack of an immunity to temperature differences was likely? He'd all those centuries of memories
and experiences, of being used to being him and it wasn't going to disappear in just shy of two
months. Limitations were all very well and good when they applied to others. It was exhausting
trying to live up to expectations, when they applied to someone he wasn't sure he could be anymore.
Very tiresome and frustrating when he had to remind himself of the differences. Frustrating when
they couldn't trust him to not do something daft and get himself killed. More so, when he knew they
were right and he just didn't want to admit it outside of those dark, lonely hours when sleep was
tantalisingly close, yet so far.
That secret admission was why he'd retreated to Edgar's garage. There, he didn't have to face the constant reminders of what he'd once been, or what he was now. They were simpler folk there, easy to impress with his brilliance -- clearing all of the day's scheduled repair jobs in under two hours was easy-peasy. Harder to impress people who dealt with extraterrestrials and misused technology on a day to day basis when you weren't even allowed to go pick it up in situ, or deal with even things like weevils.

The lengthy scar on his right side haunted him every time he got dressed or took a shower. The fact it didn't disappear like it had never happened was a constant reminder of his new, fragile, part human existence; reminded mockingly him that yes, you are mortal and you've already cheated death once. As if the fact that he couldn't move without agony for almost a week after hadn't done the job properly. Or that everyone seemed to think he was going to get himself killed accidentally or he was suddenly frailer than even they were. He was not, even if he forgot he was not quite as invincible anymore.

But it was not all bad. Things were moving along between Rose and him, working towards something more than just friends and flatmates. A little slow, but better than all those years apart. She was the center of his world, though he was trying to be more independent, to be less of a burden on her. Even if finding an equilibrium was a bit difficult with all the adjustments and the lower pay grade at the garage that meant he still wasn't quite self-supportive yet. All that would change once his TARDIS was ready to go.

But he liked the garage. There he could be himself, without worrying if people were keeping tally of the differences between him and Him. No having to wear a suit when he suddenly seemed to have developed some kind of magnetic attraction to dirt and grime. Getting dirty, that was new. And the dry cleaning bill would've left him skint. He still had the use of the flat upstairs where Rose and him had lived for three weeks. He had his TARDIS coral growing in a complicated set up, a makeshift lab and workspace and a place to sit and think. Time to reminisce on those three weeks that he missed so much, when it was almost like old times. They were the best days so far, even with the inefficient plumbing and heating. There was a kind of freedom then, too. The hiding out, not having to face up to certain realities. They were the Doctor and Rose then, now it was the Metacrisis and the Vitex heiress/Torchwood field agent.

Things were so much simpler when they hadn't had to worry about what people thought, or had them all adding their two pence worth of opinions and ideas on everything. Simpler when it was the middle of a crisis, because the day to day minutia of a human life terrified him. It wasn't the mechanics of it; that was the simple part. It was the fact that all of it -- the routine, normal things -- seemed like they were just ways to count down the days until you went tits up. It was why linear living bothered him so much, with his hyper awareness of the passing seconds, minutes, and hours. And the constant reminder that human DNA added or not, he wasn't built for the slow path. If it wasn't for Rose, his wonderful, amazing, brilliant yellow and pink human, he'd have been in the asylum by now.

He was almost to their building when his mobile rang. Knowing how few people had the number, he was surprised and really hoped it wasn't Torchwood. He'd worn himself out reining in his temper and trying to blend in in Tesco's, he didn't have it in him to try to act how people there would expect.

"Yes?" he said cautiously, breathing out in relief when he recognized Percy's voice. Sounded like a chance for a little forbidden adventure.

"Could do, why?" he replied jovially, once Percy outlined the problem. "But that's impossible!" he sputtered a moment later. "I installed it myself. How the hell -- no, no, you're right. Probably an error. Shoddy technology in this century. What I wouldn't give for- Well, I'll be strung from the
nearest street lamp if I'm caught, but when did that ever stop me? I'll be along in a jiff, just let me
drop off the bloody groceries. No, no, they're trying to domesticate me still. No, don't worry. I'll
leave a note. She'll think I'm fixing Jimmy's delivery van. Just leave a message on the answer phone
with a bogus message about a smash up, and him needing to get the packages delivered or he'll get
the sack. Should work."

A moment of listening while he levered the door open awkwardly, being careful not to drop his
mobile as he manoeuvred the trolley toward the lift before he replied. "Got it. I'll make sure I bring
the gear and yes, I'll remember to bring home flowers so she won't be so miffed at me. I'm not a
blooming idiot, you know. Not completely. Yes, yes, I know. I'm breaking more rules than I care to
think about. What are you, my mother? Lay off. You're the one that bloody well rang me, ya
numpty. If you're gonna worry so much, you can call someone else to sort things out," he replied
testily, as he pushed the button for their floor with an elbow. Really, as if he didn't know that his
goolies would be forfeit if he was caught. He was over 900 years old, he could handle himself. Not
like this was going to be anything but simple. Like child's play, really.

"Look, I'll be right along, just got to get these groceries put away first, or I'll be in trouble. Promised
I'd take care of it, and I don't want to disappoint her. Just don't leave without me."

When Rose got home from work, she found the groceries all neatly put away, a pile of rumpled
clothes in the lounge, and an empty flat. He wasn't in his room, or anywhere and his coat and the
heavy boots he seemed to favor when things were likely to get messy were gone. Checking the
answer phone, she quickly deduced where the Doctor had disappeared to, though the message
sounded to be a bit off. If it was just a call for emergency auto repairs, why did Percy sound so tense
and anxious? And why was there no answer when she tried ringing them back? Something was up,
but she decided to wait it out. Wait for him to come back and hope he wasn't getting himself into
trouble. Or worse.

She sighed heavily, having looked forward to a nice relaxing bath, and maybe a quiet evening in
where they could watch some telly curled up on the sofa together. She would just have to watch telly
by herself and wait for him to get back. Maybe the message was for real. Stranger things had
happened. The more things change, the more they stay the same, she thought, annoyed. Annoyed,
but almost relieved for the chance to have some alone time without some new drama or angst. That
was something rare, now.

She had been surprised to not find him waiting for her outside of Torchwood Tower earlier, like he
often did when he didn't just pop up in her office, or in the hub, joking around with Jake, Sally, and
the others. Even if he didn't actually work there, other than coming in to some consulting
occasionally, he was a regular presence in the building. Not seeing him there was kind of worrisome.

She spent an hour bathing, enjoying the chance to unwind with nothing to bother her, all the day's
obligations met, since he'd left a note saying not to worry about making him dinner, he'd get
something along the way. She was going to disregard that, since she figured he'd probably get caught
up in whatever he was doing and forget to eat and he'd come home famished. That would be typical.

By the time it was starting to get dark, he was knee deep in mud along the river bank, chasing down
the creature that had been stealing from Bryn Holburn's warehouse. Whatever it was, it was fast, and
it had already used some kind of vaporous substance that had left Jasper unconscious back in the car.
park three blocks back. And here he was, trying not to get himself killed or crippled, running through

The fact that this was probably a job for Torchwood with their teams of trained agents had occurred
to him. Just before he dismissed the idea. He’d a half dozen gas masks they’d liberated from
Torchwood's supply stores back when there was a possessed MI5 agent out for his blood that he’d
sent Percy back after, as well as calling in the rest of the crew. They could finish the detailing job
after.

It had all started a week before when Bryn Holburn had contacted Edgar about finding someone
who could install a security system against theft on one of his warehouses. Instead of going through
normal channels, he was trying keep it under the radar, since some of the goods in his warehouse
would've raised too many questions. Questions, like why there was a "weather balloon" and several
pallets of smuggled liquor from Glibni 3. Since the craft was never going to fly again, and he’d
already gotten the engine components in return for keeping schtum, this wasn’t any concern for the
Doctor. He could care less that Bryn was selling hypervodka to select customers, and he didn't see it
as his business. No one was getting hurt, and if people were having fun, what was the harm in that?
He wasn't going to rain on someone's parade and call in Torchwood just because it was technically
illegal. He'd just put a back door into the security system so he could monitor things in case they
started dealing in dangerous stuff like weapons. All simple, really. Until the alarms went off, that is.
Then Edgar had gotten a panicked phone call, since Bryn couldn't exactly go to the police and end
up answering some sticky questions, now could he?

They’d called him, since he’d set up the remote control center for the system in the flat upstairs over
the garage, where he could keep an ear out while he was working on preparing the wiring for the
console. It would be a while yet before it was ready to go in, but he wanted to be prepared and it
gave him something to do to get his mind off things.

As impossible as he'd thought it could be, with the system hardened against all electromagnetic and
radio interference, while remaining undetectable to anyone looking for it, the modules along an entire
wall had been disabled and four pallets of printing supplies were gone.

Bryn's legal business dealings involved supplying several printing houses and hobby presses that
mostly did custom print jobs and pamphlets. Having 4000 quid worth of paper stolen, was not only
an expensive loss, it was left them in a quandary. One giant hole in a formerly intact brick wall, that
looked like it had been melted, not smashed, and no evidence for any of the methods he knew of to
cause that kind of damage, either. No signs of a lorry or any equipment left in the dirt outside the
warehouse, and with the CCTV cameras shorted out, no visuals. Whatever it was, it was something
he'd never seen before.

"What the bloody hell--" Edgar had breathed in disbelief. "Please tell me this isn't another one of
your type problems, or at least that you know what did this? Holburn's already asking for his money
back if he don't get his stuff back. Said he paid top rate for something he could've got for paying a
layabout to do just sitting here watching it."

"As if," the Doctor had snorted, bending over to prod at the remaining brickwork. He’d crouched
down, leaning over to smell an area that looked scorched. "Smell that?"

"What? Probably had 50 years worth of drunken idiots pissing on it," Edgar had said uncharitably,
crossing his arms over his broad chest and glaring slightly. He’d been in the middle of a custom paint
job when Bryn had called.

"Smells like it does right during a thunderstorm," Jasper had said, hazarding a guess. "You know,
when the lightning's been going off like mad."
"Ha!" the Doctor had said, jumping to his feet and pointing at Jasper. "Correctamundo! Ooh, definitely not saying that one again. A bit naff, that expression. Now, ignoring lame idioms of the English language, you sir, are absolutely, 100 percent right. That smell in the air, besides the pong of stale wee, is ozone. Which means--"

"We've had a thunderstorm and no one told us about it?" Percy said, trying to be helpful.

The Doctor had just cocked his head to the side, looking at him quizzically, just barely managing to not say what he was thinking for once. "Noo," he had drawled out patiently. "There's been a high discharge of either electrical energy, or another form of energy that can break down the molecular bonds between the atmospheric oxygen and caused the free floating ions to re-form into trioxide, also known as 'ozone'."

Unfortunately, for all his patient explanation, none of his companions had looked overly impressed, or more enlightened. Percy looked more confused.

"An what's that to us, other than some posh sounding shite?" Edgar had asked, sounding more bored than more informed about the world he inhabited.

The Doctor had sighed. Maybe it was fact he was wearing mechanic's overalls, having come prepared for crawling around checking sensors and wiring in a grubby warehouse. Or even, his formerly posh sounding accent that tended to slide toward something rougher when he forgot to modulate his tone, making him sound like he was from Chiswick. Or just maybe there was some invisible sign that read: Warning, Individual Is Not Half As Impressive As He Thinks, Feel Free To Question His Judgement Constantly. Jeeze Louise, one incident with a severed hand in a jar, a trusted companion, and a slight change in accent, and all of creation thinks you're a daft poltroon suddenly, he had silently snarked to himself. If it didn't feel like he was trying to put on a disguise or aiming for the poorhouse, he'd be back in suits and hopefully rendering people properly awed and impressed at how clever he was.

"It means someone or something was here, with something that is probably dangerous and is probably up to no good, nefarious deeds. In other words, possibly something bad," he'd said succinctly.

"Bad, he says," Edgar had barked, laughing in disbelief. "No shit, Sherlock. So what's to do? How're we going to explain this to our unhappy customer who's wanting his thousand quid back?"

"We don't," the Doctor had said simply, looking around for any other signs. Spotting some scorch marks on the pavement a few meters away, he had leaned down to sniff at it, while Edgar eyed him like he'd lost it. "We follow whatever this is, and track it down. Give it a stern talking to, a bit of whatfor, and get it to return Bryn's whatnot. Or we could just call Torchwood, since this is their turf, innit? But... where's the fun in that? Allons-y!"

Since then, there'd been plenty of running, and a brief sighting of an amorphous blob ahead of them. Now, he, Percy and Nigel were herding the whatever it was towards the area where Terry and a hopefully recovered Jasper were waiting with a roll of copper screening.

Normally, building a makeshift Faraday cage to contain a creature that used electrical energy was something he'd have done, but the chance for a bit of running was something he'd not been able to pass up and Terry was a dab hand with the electrical. Not as good as him, but passing fair. They couldn't all be so clever. World would get very boring that way. So far, no he had no idea what they were chasing, but they'd found the wet remains of the paper in some bushes, mostly reduced to pulp, along with other wet spots. That gave him something to go on, and a vague idea of why the creature had done what it had.
Jumping over a pile of rubbish left by vagrants, he climbed up the slight grade to see the creature just ahead, halfway between him and where he could see Edgar and the others waiting with the roll of screening. Staying back a safe distance and motioning for everyone else to do the same, he cautiously raised the gas mask enough so he could see clearly.

"Hello there, beautiful," he said softly, watching the creature with a bit of wonder. It was reminiscent of a giant glob of jelly, with faintly glowing, iridescent colors and a flowing form that reminded him of water in a way. That is, if living water made noise like a bunged up cistern after leading them on a merry chase. This was something I really wish Rose could've been here to see. Something so beautiful, and so harmless. Unless you count the damage to brick walls and the tendency to destroy lots of fancy, expensive paper all in one go. But still, quite lovely to look at. Provided it's not your paper or you wall and you're probably better off watching from from a safe distance, he thought.

"I'm the Doctor. I'm just trying to help," he said, hoping it would try communicating, tamping down the memories of something his other self had run into. Nothing, no confirmation or denial. No signs of sentience, or identification when he scanned it with the sonic. Unfortunately, the copper screening wasn't going to work. Time for a new plan.

"Anyone got a spare barrel handy?" he called out hopefully in a moment of inspiration.

After some careful wrangling and promising they'd have his kit back exactly how they got it, they procured some protective gear from Nigel's cousin, Bobby. He worked for the electric company installing and maintaining high voltage lines. They got a pickle barrel from Jimmy of the "broken" delivery van, all in hopes of getting the blob into the barrel. So far, no go.

"We can throw some phone directories in there- lure it in if it likes paper," Terry said, as Nigel was sidling toward the creature with a reach pole. "There's some wraps from the chippy in the van."

"Try it, if you think it'll work," the Doctor said distractedly, currently buried under the layers of rubber coated material. He was holding the barrel, trying to get the blob there. "Just don't let it touch you."

"Why on earth -- don't tell me these things can turn us into zombies," Edgar said, exasperated. "What's with you lot and turning people into zombies?"

"Oi! I resent that. I've never possessed anyone. Don't go lumping all aliens together. That's very small minded and prejudiced. For shame," the Doctor grumbled back. "But better safe than sorry, innit?"

So far, the creature they'd taken to calling a "S'not" -- since 'it s'not anything I've seen the likes of was too long, and it did have a passing fair resemblance -- was mostly creeping away from where they were intending for it to go.

"Looks like we wore it out," Percy said, watching its suddenly slow, fluctuating motions.

"Mmm," the Doctor hummed, not convinced but finding nothing to prove it to the contrary. He just had a gut feeling things were going to go a bit pear-shaped. If not just a right cock up.

4 minutes and 37 seconds later, as they watched the last vestiges of the S'not disappear into the storm drain, he knew he'd been right. They were all gathered around the storm drain, the borrowed delivery van parked off to the side.

"Well, isn't that wizard," he groused softly as he peered through the grate, seeing a hint of a glow disappearing into the depths of the sewer system. "Oi, Nigel! Got any cousins who work for the
"council who can get us down there?"

"Na, mate. Can't your sonic thingy do it?" Nigel asked.

"No," the Doctor snapped, adjusting the settings and trying again. "Wouldn't be asking if it did, now would I? Bloody hell! I don't believe it. Who the bloody flipping hell deadlock seals the damn sewer grates? I'm blaming Torchwood on this one."

"I've got a cutting torch," Jasper called out from where he'd been rummaging through the depths of Jimmy's van. The interior resembled a rubbish skip on wheels more than anything, but so far they'd found some useful stuff.

"That'll attract a crowd," Edgar said, shaking his head in negation. He'd been watching the whole operation with a bit of horrified wonder. Hard to imagine now that a month before he'd not thought there was much out there stranger than those Cybermen and the people around Piccadilly Circus on the weekend.

"Who the hell will be seeing anything? I can barely see me own hand in front of my face," Terry complained.

"Well, if we're lucky, the water and all that down there will dilute it, and that'll be the last of it we see," the Doctor said hopefully.

There were mumbled agreements from the others, as they were all slightly worn out with all the running. It was more hope than anything. Hope that quickly faded when the street lamps started to go out, followed by shop windows and the other lights in the area in a spreading electrical outage.

"Must've found the junction box," he muttered, watching the spreading darkness with a sinking feeling. They could already hear sirens in the distance, getting closer by the second.

"Should we run, or just wait here?" Edgar asked sardonically.

"Meh, they know where I live," the Doctor sighed in resignation. "You might scarper, though, or you'll never hear the end of it from Maisie."

"Na, mate. We'll stay -- won't we lads?" Edgar said giving a meaningful look at the others. "We can handle the rozzers. Barely a bother."

The Doctor couldn't help but groan. He was going to be in trouble when he got home. "That's not the half of it, for me. I was supposed to have been back hours ago. Rose isn't gonna be particularly chuffed over this one. And I didn't even get any flowers to butter her up with."
As the sirens grew ever closer, the Doctor made his decision. Better to get caught red-handed trying to fix this palava than sitting about like useless twats, he thought. It would be easier to explain, in a way. Plus, I'm pretty much out on a limb now, so might as well get hanged for the whole loaf, instead of just the slice. "Right then, Percy, you go check the back of the van. Find me anything that'll thicken in water," he said shortly, turning to face his companions and motioning to Jasper. "Grab that cutting torch, I'm gonna need it."

The other two ran off to search the delivery van while Terry and Nigel stood with Edgar looking uncertain. From the sounds of things, it wouldn't be long before they had company. "You're completely barmy! Tell me you're not planning to go down after that thing," Edgar asked, nodding toward the storm drain. "You don't even know what it is."

"Nope!" the Doctor said, popping the 'p'. "That's the best part about it. Always love a good mystery, I do. And it's not like we can just leave it where it is."

Edgar crossed his arms over his chest and glared. "And why not? That Torchwood's on it's way, innit? I do believe that's their job description."

"Well, yes, but why risk missing out on the adventure, the chance to solve a mystery?" the Doctor asked, grinning. He was already getting into the back of the van, grabbing things at random and stuffing them in his rucksack. "They'll just send us home in disgrace, after the inevitable lecture, and they'll end up having all the fun."

"I've got a box of starch," Percy yelled from further ahead in the van, voice slightly muffled. "And some instant custard mix -- that's about it."

The Doctor was hurriedly checking the gas mask, adjusting the straps on the rucksack he was glad he'd found behind the driver's seat in Jimmy's van. It was going to come in handy, and very soon. He shucked off his leather coat and tossed it aside. No sense in getting that all grotty, too. He'd already ruined one of those since he had gotten to Pete's World. Wouldn't do to ruin another. A quick check of the pockets of his overalls for the sonic and a pen torch was next. He'd barely noticed what Percy had said. "Oh bother," he said, finally realizing and sighing again as he thought of something that would be far more effective than corn flour. "Nigel -- got any access to some cement mix?"

"Not at this hour, it's going on half ten now. Charlie'd have my ears if I rang him up at this hour -- he's got to be up for 3 in the morning to pick up the supplies for tomorrow's job," Nigel protested.

"Not even if you said it was a world ending disaster?" the Doctor asked hopefully, looking around the edge of the van door where Nigel was standing with Edgar.

"Is it?" Edgar interrupted, suddenly looking very concerned.

"Not hardly, but we wouldn't have to tell him that, now would we?" the Doctor retorted. Seeing Nigel's continued wavering, he relented. "Fine, the starch will have to do. How much have you got there?"

"An entire shipping carton -- Jimmy was hauling the supplies for Argo's shop this week," Percy called back.
"Brilliant! Sounds like we might just be in luck, for once. Nick that for me, will you?" the Doctor said, feeling a little more confident in his plan, even if no one else was. Percy handed the box over and he tucked it under one arm, ignoring the varying looks of bafflement and confusion.

"And who's gonna pick up the tab on this?" Edgar complained. "This ain't gonna be on my shout."

"Just tell the coppers it's a Torchwood op -- they can pick up the cost. They've got far deeper pockets then we've got. Including mine, which are bigger on the inside," the Doctor replied flippantly. "Act like you belong, and they won't even ask too many questions."

Jasper was just finishing up cutting through the grate, levering it aside with Terry's help. They managed to do it without too much noise and just in time, too. The first panda cars were pulling in just as the Doctor was getting ready to jump down in the hole. He gave a final look around, gave a mocking salute in the direction of the approaching police and grabbed the cutting torch, putting it in his rucksack awkwardly.

"You're really going to do this? You're serious, then," Edgar questioned, incredulously. "You've done this kinda thing before?"

"Don't worry. Old hat, all this. You lot stay up here and cover for me. Keep these bozos from following behind and getting in the way while I go save the world with corn flour. Saved it once with a satsuma, I did. Not this world, but... that doesn't matter," he said hurriedly, recognising one of the police. With a quick "bye!" he disappeared. As he landed with a squelching noise, he was really glad he'd left his converse at the flat. Waterproof boots were a lovely invention. He’d have to remember to go back to shake the inventor's hand once the new TARDIS was vortex-worthy.

Jasper looked at Edgar as the two police officers approached, looking peeved with warrant cards in hand. "Do any of you think this is gonna work?" he mouthed at them silently.

Edgar glowered a bit while the others shrugged, none of them having any better ideas on what to do, and it was already too late to pull a runner. Edgar made a face, plainly refusing to speak, or get himself in any deeper. Understandable that, he'd a wife and they had recently found out she was expecting.

Taking the initiative, Jasper decided to go with the Doctor's only suggestion. "Move along, nothing to see here. Secret Torchwood mission," he said, trying to sound reasonably authoritative and act like he wasn't lying through his teeth.

Jason Lang was manning the communications bank when the call came in. He hit the button on the vid link to answer, surprised at the sight of a harried looking police woman. "Torchwood," he said automatically. "May I help you?"

"Yes, we we've got four men who claim to be your operatives here, with an open storm drain and a power outage south of Cable Street," DS Gale Evans said, turning her video unit slightly. "They said there's a fifth member of the team underground."

Seeing the four Hell's Angels, including a smiling Percy who gave a friendly wave, Jason put Evans on hold and stood up to wave at Jake over the wall of his cubicle. Jake had been lounging around reading a magazine, waiting for the end of his duty shift and had been enjoying the quiet evening.

"We've got a 'code mauve' situation," he called.
"You've got to be kidding me, mate," Jake sighed, getting up and coming over to look. "Anything burning?"

Jason couldn't help his amused smile. "Nope, but the copper said there's a power outage involved."

"Of course there would be," Jake complained, checking the location as Jason reconnected the call.

"Sorry about that, ma'am. I had to summon our on-duty agent. This was an undercover mission, as you might guess. We'll be contacting the utilities people straight off," Jason said, lying smoothly. "We've mapped your location and will be sending a team to take over immediately."

Jake looked at the map readout, shaking his head. "I'll call Rose. Any way we can keep this off the logs?"

"Unfortunately, no. Not without someone who's really good at hacking. Times like these, I really miss Mickey," Jason said after he disconnected the call.

"You ain't kidding, mate," Jake agreed. "What're we gonna do then?"

Jason leaned back in his chair, thinking. "I might be able to shuffle it down further in the lists, so it's not so obvious. If we keep the bumf to a minimum and keep this from turning into a crisis, and Director Tyler will be less likely to find out and raise holy hell over this."

Jake laughed softly as he grabbed his gear and said goodbye to his chances of going home on time or the likely chances of stopping at the pub for a pint or two. "You think I'm gonna actually be filing a report on this one? No, mate. There'll be trouble enough, even if this comes out all simple like. The Doctor's involved. That says enough."

"I can't believe this," Jason mused. "That he'd get civilians involved like this."

"I just can't believe you're surprised," Jake said in amusement. "He's probably the ones who told them to say they're one of us."

They both shook their heads at the thought. They'd designated anything involving the Doctor and a situation they'd rather not have Pete find out about as 'code mauve' jokingly, after hearing about the designation for a crisis in the rest of the galaxy from Rose.

"I'll call Battersea Power station, tell them to get a crew out to get the lights back on," Jason called as Jake disappeared. "Have fun, and tell Rose I said hi!"

It was this that reminded him. The darkness. The ever present, consuming darkness. No up, no down. No time even. Not since his time sense had failed after he'd slipped on the slick floor of the tunnel and banged his head, waking to find he was covered in sticky corn flour residue and filth. His torch was lost, and his sonic was only lighting things up enough so he could see the congealed remnants of the S'not creature off the his right. He'd been doing fine, everything going according to his rough idea of a plan until he'd slipped while repairing the damage to the electric wiring and got himself thrown by the current. He was lucky to have only been knocked unconscious and a burn on his arm that he couldn't even see. He didn't think he wanted to, with the way it felt. Probably would earn him another flipping trip to A&E. Other than that, darkness, and no idea of the way out. He'd lost his bearings, and with his admittedly poor sense of direction, he was well and truly lost.
He'd once had plenty of time to almost accept being the last of the Time Lords, being like that Wandering Jew of those Sol 3 legends. You know, the bloke that had mocked the son of one of the humans' gods and ended up cursed to wander the earth for eternity. He'd been like that, just it was the entire universe he'd had to wander. The curse of the Time Lords, he'd called it. He'd used it to justify why he ran from committing his heart to anyone, to never settling down. It was why, even after the metacrisis, he hated the darkness. It reminded him of himself. Both of him. That little part that made him push everyone away when they got too close, for fear they'd see he wasn't worth it. Like now, lost in the sewers like a complete muppet.

The darkness was reminding him of past and present fears alike, stirring up memories he'd rather forget. At least the usual nightmare that plagued him nightly hadn't been lingering in the edges of his vision when he regained consciousness. For once, Gallifrey burning with the sound of billions of his people screaming wasn't still echoing as he came to awareness, gasping like a drowning man. No, more like the memory of being trapped in his own mind, an outsider looking in, on a Crusader 50 tour bus. When he'd just barely managed to shift enough to snag a chair with his trainer to avoid being tossed out an airlock on Midnight. Out in the dark, and the cold, where nothing lived but that still unknown creature. Like now, with another unknown creature, somewhere behind him.

It was getting on his nerves, pushing him along as he stumbled through the darkness, trying to avoid thoughts of Vashta Nerada, libraries and darkness that could consume. Trying even harder to ignore the panic as he realized he had no idea where he was going, or which direction he'd come from.

"Isn't this just cute. I'm absolutely filthy, and I am sooo glad I don't have my formerly acute sense of smell because, my word. Its bad enough as it is now. If this was other me, I'd have regenerated from the pong alone. Good thing that sense was diluted by these shoddy human genetics. I'd probably just die, otherwise. And wouldn't that just be a tragedy. Me, a complicated event in space and time -- even more unique than being the last of the Time Lords -- dying in a London sewer. Keep calm, and carry on. Keep moving, I'll come to a sodding exit eventually. Somewhere, he mused as he walked, his thoughts his only companions.

It was too dark to even see his hand in front of his face, not that he even wanted to. He didn't even want to contemplate what he was covered in. Or how long it had been since he'd sighted the blob ahead of him in the tunnel. He'd come around a corner, cautiously shining the torch about, to see it less than 4 meters ahead. It was oozing it's way up a wall, sparks coming out of a junction box from where one of the street lamps above hooked in. He'd set the case of corn flour down in the driest spot he could find, opening a package while keeping his eyes on the creature ahead.

"There you are! A right inconvenience you are. Even if you're lovely to behold. A pity, too. I'd have loved to find out what you are, where you came from and try to get you back where you belong."

It had showed no sign of registering his presence, it's form glowing stronger as it fed off the electric energy it was siphoning off the power to refuel itself. No other way about it, since it was too dangerous and too difficult to contain.

"Not that I can judge you for not knowing where you belong. I've got a fair amount of experience at being billy-no-mates, always the gooseberry. Well, not quite. I've got Rose. She's a good mate, even if this is not what either of us expected, and awkward as hell. But you, you're causing all kinds of problems, you know. Probably people falling over themselves, starting to panic. Someone could get hurt. There could be worse trouble."

The amorphous blob had just continued its feeding. Its formerly weak pulsing had been getting stronger, small bolts of energy coming off its mass and the smell of ozone getting stronger. It had obviously no sense of hearing, that or it had been ignoring his words. Either way, he had still
apologized when he started dumping the corn flour over it to inhibit its ability to slither away.

"I'm sorry, so sorry," he had murmured, grateful it didn't have a mouth to scream. Not that it wouldn't be likely to haunt his dreams in future.

An indeterminate length of time had passed since, the sound of runoff and the slight slope to the tunnel his only indication of direction. Sometimes he could hear the sound of tyres rumbling over the tarmac above, but it was faint and there had been no manhole covers with convenient ladders for him to use. He was well beyond tired, with a growing sense of peace that faintly worried him. He'd been chilled when he first regained consciousness, but that sensation had faded in the dark, as well.

It had all been so strange, since he'd come here. He could have said it was like a regeneration, but it wasn't, not really. If it had been, the outside parts would've changed, instead of the inside. That would've been simple, familiar. Instead, he doesn't have to adjust to new teeth, it's more the missing or weakened senses and having parts of his personality and genetics rewritten that's thrown him. And his whole situation.

Got to keep moving, he urged himself. I promised Rose, and I'm sure it's been more than five and a half hours. I didn't plan for this -- I never do. It just happened. I couldn't just wait for everyone else to show up to take care of this mess. Didn't want to sit there like a bump on a log and add another failure to the list. I just wanted to do it right, for once. And atleast I didn't blow anything up. No one's dead, other than that S'not creature thingy. Wished you could've seen that. It was so beautiful, even if it was disgusting. You'd have thought this was a grand adventure, after you stopped being uptight and responsible and just went with the flow. You'd have laughed at me, called me a silly fool and held my hand. And I wouldn't be so lonely, right now in the dark. Not with her. With Rose, I could never be lonely.

Rose was more concerned for the Doctor's safety than what rules he was likely to have broken when she jumped out of the SUV, after Jake pulled into the car park. She was on autopilot when she distractedly accepted a mangled bouquet of wilted flowers from Percy.

"They're from the Doc," he murmured shyly. (He'd found them in a bin behind a nearby newsagent's and fished them out, hoping to help get his friend out of one jam.)

"Thanks," she managed, turning to look at Edgar and Jasper quizzically. Both looked slightly embarrassed while Edgar looked ready to burst. Nigel and Terry stood off to the side, looking like they'd rather disappear. Apparently, the police had had some tough questions. The issue of them impersonating Torchwood agents would have to wait.

"Where is he and what happened?" she asked without preamble. Jake was already looking down the open storm drain and talking to the two police officers. The lights had already come back on, without the need to call a utilities crew.

"Down there," Percy said, pointing.

Ignoring the obvious, Jasper spoke up. "We was sorting out a problem with another job--"

"No aliens involved on that one, we thought," Edgar interrupted, scowling darkly. "Just a security system we'd installed and a burgled warehouse. He was tracking the thing that had done it, and it was this blobby looking thing."
"He called it a 'S'not, since it's not anything he'd seen before," Nigel added from the side, shuffling his feet slightly. "We hadn't, either."

"We tried catching it, but it kinda just oozed down there," Jasper said, shrugging helplessly. "Sorry."

Rose ran through the possibilities for identification, but she'd not seen anything like it before. "And him? The Doctor? Where's he?"

"Oh, he went after it with some corn flour we lifted off Jimmy's van," Percy said, pointing at the parked vehicle and sounding slightly relieved. "That was after we'd sorted Jasper out. He got gassed by the blob thing, but he's fine now."

Rose was incredulous, and getting more worried after hearing the creature could be dangerous. "And you let him go down there alone?"

"He'd a gas mask," Edgar protested. "And he told us to stay here and wait. Not like anything we said could stop him."

Rose pinched the bridge of her nose, shaking her head in frustration. They were right. Not like anyone could talk the Doctor out of anything, no matter how harebrained of an idea it was. Then again, he'd gotten the lights on, which would go a long way toward smoothing things over when her dad found out. If he and her mum hadn't been at some glitzy charity event tonight, Pete would've already heard about this and been here, having a fit.

Jake came over, greeting the Doctor's friends with a curt nod before turning to Rose. "From the sounds of it, he's still down there. Evans said she was just driving through when she heard the outage report on the radio and saw this lot. Said there was a bright flash down there about twenty minutes ago before the lights came back on. No signs of him since."

Rose walked over to the hole. "We got to go in after him--"

"There's no telling where he is. I'm calling for back up, get some people to help us search. We've not even got the proper gear."

"He could be hurt," Rose protested.

"You can probably bet on that. Which is why we'll need more people. At least call in Sally and Lane. Lane goes potholing on the weekends. He's got the helmets with the little lamps on them," Jake cajoled. "And the experience."

It wasn't long before they were all gearing up and going down, a ladder in place and floodlights set up. Rose was the first one in, Jake and the others behind her. They'd not called anyone else, not wanting it to turn into a bigger situation than it already was. Even as quickly as they were going, it had already been an hour since the lights came back on, and almost two since the Doctor had gone down after the creature. It was a quarter to midnight by the time they splashed down in the bottom of the storm drain, torches and headlamps lighting the way in the gloom.

"Doctor? Where are you? Doctor?" Rose called, with no answer. She shined her light around, finding faint footprints in the dirt and detritus on the bottom of the tunnel. Luckily, it hadn't rained in several days or there would have been more water to slog through.

They found the remains of the creature, now a congealed mass that looked not unlike overdone custard. The corn flour had obviously worked. The open junction box, hastily spliced wiring, discarded empty corn flour packages and an abandoned rucksack were the only signs of the Doctor.
"Here's a scorch mark," Sally pointed out while Rose looked around, hoping to see a wild mop of brown hair nearby.

"Must've got himself zapped," Lane deduced, aiming his torch down at the floor, looking for a body or tracks.

"Lucky it didn't kill him," Jake murmured. "Must've scrambled his wits. Probably got turned about down here. No blood, atleast."

Rose swallowed nervously as she picked her way around the creature. She didn't want to think about what could've happened, the possible outcomes. Not down in this cheerless place. She could panic about the possibilities after he was home, and safe. The dank tunnel walls seemed to be pressing in around her and she suppressed a shudder. It was cold, damp and utterly miserable down here and she didn't want to waste any time finding the Doctor. He'd probably be wet, chilled to the bone, and ready for a warm bath and a good kip by now.

"Any sign of any more of those things?" she called back to the others, who were still clustered around the S'not, collecting samples and examining the area for tracks.

"No, thank God. Can you imagine trying to explain that one to the public?" Lane said, chuckling uneasily. "Attack of the custards, they'd call it in the papers. As if there could be such things."

"You've never had my mother's cooking then, have you," Sally joked. "We'll still need to get a crew down here to repair the wiring, though it looks like he did one hell of a job fixing it with what he had."

"Yeah, but who the hell carries spare resistors and fuses in their pockets?" Lane asked in bemusement. He shook his head. "Regular little boy scout, he is."

"Looks like he went this way," Rose called back, seeing some scuffed footprints ahead.

"How far do you imagine he'd have got?" Jake asked softly, coming up behind her and startling her slightly.

"Who knows," she replied just as softly. "We better follow and start calling for him again. Hopefully he'll hear us and turn around."
Chapter 4

Home
4

Pete was almost home when the call came in. Jackie was starting to nod off from imbibing a bit too much wine at the function -- an event to raise money for the families of the victims of Cernunnos. He himself was enjoying the blissful fog that came after a long day, a long evening dealing with pretentious arses, and finally knowing it was over; then his mobile rang, soon shattering the notion that it was anything near over.

"What? An extraction team and a recovery team has been sent out? Where?" he hissed, keeping his voice low to avoid disturbing his wife. Leaning back in his seat, he listened to the report. "Are you kidding me? How? I thought I ordered all of those grates and manhole covers deadlock sealed!"

A glance to see if Jackie was still dozing before he knocked on the partition. A quick change in plans, it was looking to be. Definitely not over, not by a long shot. Pete shook his head, thinking of that Chinese curse. Interesting times, indeed. He should have known things would only get more 'interesting' with the Doctor around.

"Yes, yes. I'll be there in a bit. Having the driver drop me off. Just... tell them not to let him go swanning off if they find him before I get there," he said, hanging up and looking out the smoked glass windows of the limo. He was basking in this brief moment of peace, where things were simple, trying his damnedest to avoid thinking about the walking complication he would soon be dealing with, again. But hoping to avoid thoughts, and actually managing were two vastly different things.

Pete sighed again. Here it was, almost 1 AM, and he could probably say where his children were, if someone asked. Of course, in one case, the answer would horrify the inquirer. And considering he was starting to think of the Doctor as family, a possible wayward, half mad foster child, enough to make any inquiring minds promptly throw up their hands in frustration. Just like he felt like doing sometimes. Like now, for instance.

Should have known, he thought in frustrated amusement. Just because he said Torchwood wasn't his cup of tea doesn't mean he was actually planning on going for the whole normal living, normal job thing. After all, there was only so many hours he could spend tinkering before he ran out of things to do and went off hunting up trouble for entertainment instead. And of course, he would find the one thing not forbidden that no one would consider him daft enough to do in the first place. Should've realized that if it's insane, improbable, or atleast halfway mad, he'd get himself tangled in it. Sewers included. How is it, that I still manage to underestimate that bloke? What next, low altitude sky diving? Better ban him from the bloody zeppelin before that wonderful thought occurs to him.

Lane, the experienced potholer, had downloaded the schematics for the sewer system and sent the same information to everyone else's palm top computers. They all had studied the maps while they waited for a recovery team to come in. (The creature had started to twitch slightly, indicating it was still alive, even if it was rather immobilized for the time being.) Now they'd started going ahead, all of them activating their GPS trackers so they'd be easier to find if something happened to any of them.
They'd been walking for at least an hour, calling out off and on when they came to a different corridor. With cracked brickwork instead of concrete, the difference in materials alone marked it as an older tunnel. Sloping upward gently, damp footprints were the only indication of any recent traffic.

"Looks like he went this way," Jake said, shining his torch down the tunnel.

Rose nodded, checking her Bio scanner. "Nothing else has been through here, so no surprises awaiting us, at least."

No Doctor waiting for us, either, she thought, but didn't say out loud. She suppressed a shudder as she picked her way around a sodden pile of rubbish on the edge of the slow moving stream of water under their feet. She was half expecting to see rats or other vermin, but so far nothing had pinged on the scanner. Somehow, that set her on edge more.

"I'm really glad of that. I hate surprises, now," Sally said meaningfully, as they started up the tunnel. "And at least this one's drier. I don't even want to contemplate what I've been walking through down here."

"Considering you're the one that pulled your side arm when your sister decided to throw you a surprise party, we'd sorta figured that one out," Jake said, smirking.

He, like the others seemed to be either oblivious to the unease Rose was feeling, or ignoring it. It was nothing overt, but it was far beyond the blob thing behind them being scooped into the barrel that Jasper and Percy had had. Even further beyond the fact that the Doctor was down here, alone and possibly injured. Something was off. Something was not right. But as for what it was, she didn't know yet. And she had a sinking feeling they'd be finding out soon. She just hoped they got there before the Doctor did, or at least before he got himself into too much trouble.

That's when Lane spoke up. "Um, people? Sorry to intrude on anyone's socializing or brooding, but we've got a problem here." He held up a hand to block the light shining in his eyes as the others turned around to look at him.

Lowering her torch, Rose apologized, feeling embarrassed at a rookie mistake. "Sorry. Bit distracted is all." Come on, straighten up. You've jumped dimensions, travelled the universe before that, she berated herself. Don't go losing it now, just because it's the Doctor.

Lane nodded in understanding before he indicated the map displayed on his view screen. "Yeah, it's just... this last section, it's not in the blueprints for the system. It's nowhere on this schematic."

Jake scoffed, dismissing the hint of concern in Lane's words. "So? Look how bloody old this brickwork is. D'you think maybe the Council Sanitation Ministry forgot this section?"

"There's been a system down here of sorts going back to the 1600's," Sally added, also not worried. "Probably hundreds of tunnels and sluice ways not on there."

Rose scrunched up her nose, thinking. She wasn't going to dismiss Lane's concerns so readily when she herself was feeling a certain anxiety.

Lane was quick to make his point. "But that's the thing, you see. As well maintained as this tunnel is, it's weird that it wouldn't be on the damn map."

That settled it. Rose pulled out her scanner and started looking for anomalies while Lane and Jake were still arguing over whether Lane was just panicking like a little girl. Sally came over to look at her readings.
"Do you think there's something going on down here?" Sally asked in an undertone, glancing over to the two blokes arguing. When Rose nodded without looking up, she continued. "What? Cybermen in hiding? Weevil nest? Intergalactic smugglers?"

As the flickering readouts steadied and the little computer dinged, signalling its scan was complete, Rose shook her head. "No, it's far beyond that," she said, showing Sally the display.

Sally couldn't help but gasp. "Bloody hell. We're not in Kansas anymore, are we?"

Jake and Lane ran over, hearing her exclamation. "Shit, forget Kansas. We're not even in the same century now."

"I'm not gonna be painted as the Cowardly Lion," Lane put in. "Told you something was wrong about this tunnel."

"Should we go back?" Jake asked. "Get another team in for backup?"

"Jake, we could risk losing this tunnel. What if it's some kind of moving portal or something?" Sally said.

Jake raised an eyebrow, giving a derisive chuckle. "Been reading sci-fi again?" he asked teasingly.

Rose spoke up, agreeing with Sally. "She's right. Something like this, this would've been like a magnet for the Doctor, pulling him in. Part Time Lord, remember? He'd have sensed it." She pointed her torch some distance ahead of them. "Look, there's tracks. He's still ahead of us somewhere."

Blimey, the Doctor thought as he woke up again. That was one hell of a bash, for the headache he'd just woke up with. He really hoped wherever the party had been it had been fun, because he couldn't remember a thing. Still was having a moment of disorientation as he sat up. Hmm, dark, dank, and certainly not the flat he shared with Rose. Hadn't passed out in Edgar's garage, or the alley behind it, considering the brickwork under him. No torch, but he had a gas mask clutched in one hand, and the faint remembrance of a weird dream involving some blobby thing and wandering in the dark....

"Great. Just great. Not a dream," he muttered, fumbling around his pockets for his sonic. Finding it was a relief, something to steady his moment of panic. It grounded him, enough so he could stop and stretch his awareness. "Ooh, that's not good. That's so not good. How'd that happen? Time anomaly down here? I'll have to get Pete to block this off before anyone else wanders into it." He walked along, kicking at a dusty pile of rubbish and marveling at the dryness of the floor. "Could be worse, though. It's not like anyone else comes down here that often."

Seeing something ahead, he crouched down to inspect it. He couldn't help the surge of excitement he felt as he picked it up, or the smile of happiness. Almost like old times, the thrill of adventure, the tangy draw of a mystery. "Now how'd a 5th century Anglo-Saxon leather helm get here? Complete with ring mail sewn on, too."

Remembering the promises he had made to Pete regarding not running blindly into danger (he'd ignore the fact he'd done that jumping into the storm drain in the first place) and not going off too far without telling anyone, he sighed. Somehow, he was sure that going back over 1500 years would probably count under the parameters of "far" in Pete's definition. Bad enough he was probably going
to end up with an escort and constant monitoring after this escapade, even if he did resist the siren's call to go further down the tunnel. And oh, did he want to. Just turn around and run into whatever was waiting in the dark. That little voice telling him to go on, go on, do it...

But it wasn't half as strong as it would've been. An adventure isn't half so fun or exciting without anyone to share it with. Though, the chances of him convincing Rose to come back down here and investigate it with him are slim indeed. The perils of having your companions grow up and embrace things like responsibility and accountability.... just wizard. Anyone but Rose, it would almost be unforgivable.

He sighed and started walking back in the direction he'd come from originally, even if he had little memory of it. Intriguing mystery behind him or not, he had to get out of here and let someone less burdened by rules go have all the fun. The cost of being part human and so much more fragile, it was. Plus, he'd promised Rose he'd try to be back at a reasonable hour. And he'd forgotten to grab anything to eat, with all the running and climbing into dreary holes under the city. Now he was getting a tad lightheaded. Shoddy human metabolic system. Requiring all that food to maintain energy levels. How primitive and just.... awful. Disturbing really, if you thought about it. How inefficient these human digestive systems were at extracting nutrients and converting them to usable fuel. Still, a second heart and completely superior biology wasn't such a bad price since he got to stay here. Stuck with Rose, it wasn't so bad. Even if her family is dead certain he's a loony with a death wish. At least his other self's accusation of him being a genocidal maniac hadn't stuck. He didn't want to imagine what they'd make him put up with then.

And there. Ahead. Voices. Familiar voices, even. What a relief. He was not alone.

"Look, there's no way in hell we can tell. The last of the tracks disappeared back there."

"So let's try these doors, it can't hurt," Sally retorted. "Really, Jake, I would say you're just chickening out."

"I'm not -- but look at the readings!" Jake insisted. "We should stick to this corridor alone. Rose? What do you think?"

Rose watched the scanner. It couldn't even get a fix on what year it was, much less where they were and their communication units were down. She wished her old super phone still worked. But if they can find the Doctor, he'd be able to fix that. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to look in, see if he's gone through there. I don't think we should divert off this route, though."

Lane spoke up from where he was inspecting the gently curving walls. "From the construction style, this dates to around the beginning of the last century."


The Doctor stood there, casually leaning against the wall ahead of them. He looked exhausted and was absolutely filthy. He had that slightly haunted look Rose had come to dread, but he relaxed in her arms as she hugged him with relief.

"Are you alright?" she asked, pulling back to look him over, noticing the torn left sleeve and what looked like a nasty burn on his arm.

"I'm always alright," he said automatically, giving her another hug.
Rose gave him a look, trying to suss out the truth of that statement. "Your arm..."

"Meh, just a flesh wound," he said, walking over to scan the first of the three doors that Jake and Sally had been arguing about. After a moment he made a face and backed away, looking at the readings on the sonic. "Ooooh, that's really really not good. Almost bad. It would likely to be very, very foolish, even irresponsible to open those doors," he murmured, looking over the hinges and touching a hand to the wood of the middle one. His hand was almost to the pull ring.

Jake and Lane looked at each other in alarm, all arguments forgotten as they came to a consensus.

"Right," Jake said firmly, as he grabbed one arm while Lane grabbed the other. "With that lovely, reassuring assessment, we're gonna have to tell you... Step away from the door, Doctor."

He gave them a bewildered look. "But... you don't think I'd....?"

Rose rolled her eyes at him. "You forget, we all know you."

"I wasn't going to go do something stupid... who do you think I am?" he protested.

"Says the man who went into the sewers after an unknown creature armed with naught but corn flour," Jake scoffed. "It's going on half three in the morning, mate. Some of us planned to be in bed, sleeping or otherwise at this hour."

"Come on, we'll notify Director Tyler, tell him what's the do. I'm sure there'll be a full investigation, with all kinds of specialized equipment and contingency plans in place beforehand," Sally said as an apology.

The Doctor seemed to deflate slightly, and it almost broke Rose's heart, seeing him look so disappointed and defeated. She was almost tempted to go open the door herself, just so his endless curiosity would be slaked. Even if he said it was bad. And why did that automatically make him want to open the door with something bad on the other side? Did he not understand how worried they were about him, or how much she wanted some kind of guarantee he'd still be alive to keep his promise of spending the rest of his life with her?

He sighed, pulling away, but stepping back like he'd been told. He gave the door one last look before turning. No one missed the expression of longing he wore in that moment. Longing for finding out what was on the other side of that door. "You're right. I forgot. All these bloody rules, since no one can remember I survived over 900 years of shite like this. Things you couldn't even begin to imagine."

Rose relaxed at that, not realizing until then how tense she was, waiting for him to pitch a fight. She knew he was far stronger than his wiry frame appeared and that he could have manipulated time to move faster than anyone could've reacted to it. "We should get back then," she said simply, to a chorus of whole hearted agreements from everyone but the Doctor. She walked beside him on the way back to the original tunnel they'd diverted from. Jake and Lane were back arguing, albeit all friendly like -- over football, this time -- while Sally was trying to keep the peace.

"I'm sorry," she said in a low voice so the others wouldn't hear. They were following them behind, the Doctor having pushed ahead brusquely. He'd been quiet since. Sulking, she figured.

He gave her a sad, regretful look before shrugging. "Meh, they were right. Don't tell them that. Got to maintain my image, you know. Shouldn't be wandering in to cross temporal anomalies unprepared. At least, not at this hour. Not prudent, I suppose. And it's stable. For the moment, that is. Though, blocking off the entrance until it can be fully investigated might be a good idea."
Rose nodded, remembering something else he'd said earlier. "How'd you know the exact date the tunnel was built? Please tell me you didn't lick the wall or something."

He stopped and gave her a horrified look that she knew had to be from Donna's influence. "Rose Tyler! That's... that's... abso-flipping-lutely disgusting! I'm not...I would not, under any circumstance, be going about licking anything down here."

Rose gave him a sidelong glance as they started walking again. "Why not? Didn't stop you on the Sycorax ship with the blood or in Torchwood manor with the werewolf."

He gave an offended sniff, giving her a haughty look she knew so well. "And neither of those had been down here. Hell, do you even know what is down here?" He gave a dramatic shudder to illustrate his disgust at their surroundings.

Rose was really curious now. She gave him a teasing look. "Ok, then. Tell me, was it some fancy Time Lordly magic?"

He gave an exasperated snort. "No, there was a plate with the date embossed on it on the wall above the middle door, if you lot were half as observant as you should be. I tell you what, not noticing things like that is going to get somebody killed one of these days. The bloody cheek, saying I'm reckless. Ha!"

Rose watched him walk away, shaking her head in disbelief and frustration. After all this, he just didn't understand and she could really understand, even commiserate with her dad wanting to throttle him half the time. They'd all risked life and limb to come down here and find him, all because he'd insisted on jumping into an unknown situation alone, he'd almost done the same right in front of them, and he still didn't get it. Maybe they were smothering him a bit, but it wasn't because of the metacrisis exactly. Or even the part human bit. It was because for her, she knew what his going back to jeans, jumpers and leather coats signified. And even Pete, who didn't know the Doctor half as well as she did, recognized that quirk in mentality. He was back thinking he could be a lone wolf, a law unto himself. And anyone could see the Doctor was rubbish on his own. She wasn't even sure if she shouldn't be checking to see if Tesco's was still standing, since he'd been shopping on his own.
Pete was waiting for them when they finally surfaced at half four. He was looking frazzled, worried and disturbingly angry, the Doctor thought.

"Hiya, Pete!" he said, with an attempt at a jaunty wave as he turned to gather in the numerous emergency lights, vehicles and the three medics that came at him at a dead run. "Blimey, all this for me? You shouldn't have! I feel so important and special now."

"I'll give you special," Pete sputtered. "Do you have any idea what bloody time it is?"

"Of course I do. 4:39 ante meridian and 23 seconds," the Doctor beamed. "Why? Don't you have that fancy Cartier watch Jackie's always going on about?" The Doctor grinned, crossing his arms behind his back carefully, hoping to hide the fact he'd ruined a second leather coat. He was also trying to avoid the grabby medics.

"Some of us have families that would appreciate our being home at reasonable hours, instead of being up half the night worrying about you--" Pete bit off, stopping suddenly with a glare that showed more concern than anger as the medics managed to expose his arm. "Bloody hell, what did you do to yourself this time?"

The Doctor was about to reply when Rose came back from getting checked out herself.

"Dad, don't give him hell over this one. He'll be fine and there's something important down there," she said, blanching slightly when the medic got the arm fully exposed.

"Blimey, that looks a lot worse than I'd thought," the Doctor murmured before looking back at Pete.

"Temporal anomaly," they started, almost in unison, then turned to give each other a grin. The Doctor waved at Rose to continue.

"Scanners went haywire, the perceived date kept flickering all over the place, our comm units were down," Rose said, ticking off the points on the fingers of one hand.

Pete looked at them sharply, attention fully diverted for the moment. "Any signs of what caused this?"

"No, only an old tunnel that Lane pointed out wasn't on any of the maps or blueprints we have. No signs of overt interference or alien tech," Rose said. "I'd recommend a full check of the City Archives to see if it's just been forgotten somehow."

Pete nodded thoughtfully at her assessment. "Any chance it's nothing serous, just something to be avoided? Barricaded off, perhaps?"

Rose looked at the Doctor who was glaring at the medic slathering burn cream on his arm and trying to get a bandage on it while he was insisting it wasn't neccessary.

"What? Oh, right. Dangerous. Dunno, probably not. Kinda sets my teeth on edge, it does. Probably nothing to bother your little heads about. I'd monitor it, keep random school children away. Tourists, too. Wouldn't exactly be my first bet for the whole guided tour thing. Well, not for you humans, at least," he said, not mentioning the helm he'd found. "Though I'd look out for Time Agents trying to
nose their way in."

Pete gave them an assessing look before dismissing them. "Head home, get some rest, get cleaned up. I'm glad you're both safe and sound, you gave us a right scare."

The Doctor and Rose gave each other a look, relieved but tired smiles on their faces. The Doctor gave Pete a semi-serious salute as he turned and walked toward Jake's SUV. Just as he was getting in, he heard Pete call out to him.

"And don't think you're getting off this easy. We'll be having a talk, at a more reasonable hour."

The next morning, he was already awake and pacing in the kitchen when Rose got up. He had that faraway look that she knew meant he was thinking on the things he'd lost and what had changed. It had been two months since that damned beach and he was still adjusting. She hesitated a moment before speaking. "Doctor?"

He turned quickly, seemingly startled, but the slow smile he reserved for her spread across his face, nonetheless. Even if it didn't quite reach his eyes. He was quick to try distracting her with a flurry of words. "Rose Tyler, what's on the agenda for today? Racquet ball? Ballet? Edifying etudes in C minor?"

Rose gave him a frustrated look, pushing her hair away from her face as she looked at him. "You hate this, don't you?" she said without preamble, deciding to meet the issue head on. "You can't do this life."

"What?" He gave her a disarming smile and put on a look of confusion that didn't fool her. It might've done when she was a naïve shop girl, but a lot of things had passed since then and she wasn't going to be taken in by a bunch of rambling words and fake smiles. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

Right, he was going to try denying it all. Typical. No hope for it, then. "Because you've been running riot since three days after you got back from the police station, even though Dad got that monitoring anklet removed."

His eyebrows rose, and there was the unmistakable flash of temper in his eyes as he crossed his arms over his chest and drew himself up to his full height. It was like he was trying to be more impressive or make himself look larger than he was. Like he was trying to hide his vulnerability. God, he really is more like my first Doctor, she mused. All prickly. Push him too far now, and he'll run. Run and run and never stop. Just like he always did. Just like he wants to now and obviously misses. He must've read her feelings from her expression because he dropped his arms and sighed heavily, turning away. "I'm sorry, it's just..." He made a frustrated gesture to indicate their surroundings. "It was so much easier when it was just us. Accepting the changes. Accepting I'm not that high and mighty Time Lord, lording it over all you little humans; leaving before the cleanup and everything got sticky. It's not so easy to try to carry on when you've got people around you judging your every move, or waiting for the fatal mistake when I prove I'm just some second-rate copy, or the shoddy consolation prize."

Rose couldn't help feeling angry at his complaints when he was in one of these moods where he was too shortsighted to see past his own misery. She stepped up to him, close enough so she could smell
the scent of the soap he used. "Yeah? How do you think I felt when I first came here? Everyone doing the same and having to prove I deserved my position for my own abilities, not because I was Pete Tyler's long lost daughter? Or Mickey, even? Do you know Ricky's Gran never knew the difference and he never dared to try telling her the truth because she'd have thought he was mental? Or my Mum, stepping into a dead woman's shoes? What about them, Doctor?"

He blinked at her, uncomprehending still, making her wonder if he could possibly be that thick, or if he was just permanently stuck being an arse.

"What about them," she repeated forcefully.

"There's no comparison, Rose. There just isn't. Don't even try." He had that superior look of disdain again that made her want to give him a good slapping in hopes of knocking some sense into him.

"There is to them," she said simply.

He gave her a bewildered look, clearly aghast. "How the hell...?" He gave a bitter laugh. "I used to be a Time Lord, Rose. In charge of maintaining the laws of time and space. Now I'm hardly allowed to cross the street by myself, thanks to your overbearing, overprotective not-quite father."

"You almost got hit by two delivery vans, three lorries and a Yugo, Doctor. In the same day!" she retorted. "A Yugo, of all things. All because you just dash out without looking first."

"I'm still alive, aren't I?" he countered. He gave an offended sniff. "They should be keeping better watch for pedestrians. I could've been one of the neighborhood kids dead, if not for my superior reflexes."

Rose rolled her eyes. "More like the modern advances in automotive braking technology."

He shook his head, rocking back on his heels. "Time and space, Rose. I'm a Time Lord, not the Sheik of shopping, not the Lord of laundry, not the Burgher of babysitting. Time. Lord," he said emphatically, pointing at himself.

Rose prodded him in the chest. "What, so you don't like spending time with my little brother? What's the matter with Tony?"

This time, his look of confusion was authentic, atleast. "What? I never said..."

She wasn't going to let that one go. "You were just complaining about babysitting? What, is it too domestic for you?"

He visibly flinched from the obvious scorn dripping from the word "domestic".

"No! I love Tony! Brilliant lad," he said quickly, anger quickly fading as was typical with him. It shifted to something closer to unhappy discomfort.

"Then what is it, then?" Rose pressed.

"Your Mum won't let me do anything fun with him. It's all regimented, with tea at 6, bath at 7, bedtime right after," he complained.

"That's only because we found you both sound asleep in the back garden after midnight," Rose said pointedly.

"I was teaching him the names of the stars!" he said in his own defense. "How else is he supposed to
learn? I can't even tell him stories, unless they're from those silly little picture books you buy him. How educational is a big red dog? They don't even exist anywhere other than on Zeglu 3, and your mother already said there was no way in hell I was taking him to see them once the TARDIS is ready. How's he ever going to learn what's really out there? And they're green, not red!

Rose sighed. She should have realized that getting him to adjust to a normal life would be nigh on impossible. But she'd come to see the impossible as merely a challenge. "Look, bad enough you told him about the Slitheen--"

"He's no longer screaming at Mabel now," the Doctor said with a hint of satisfaction and pride in his voice. "I taught him to look for the zips before panicking and when in doubt, offer them a pickled egg."

Rose sighed. "Mum's loving that, I'll tell you that much. He's dumped four jars in the last fortnight." She shook her head, her own anger starting to fade some. "That still doesn't help with his new fear of the dark, thanks to you."

"I only told him about the Vashta Nerada so he'd stay out of your dad's office. Pete was telling me about Tony using his crayons on all his important paperwork," the Doctor said, trying to explain.

"Dad was planning to start locking the door, not asking you to give him a complex!" Rose protested. "Now he's terrified of books as well. What about when it comes time for school and the library there? What then?"

She immediately recognized that slightly shifty look he'd get when he'd done something and was feeling guilty. She forced herself speak calmly, telling herself she would not overreact when he inevitably answered. "Doctor?"

He gave her an overly innocent look, like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth and he was God's own gift to mankind in the very flesh. Complete with that smile guaranteed to make every female in sight of it melt. "Yes, Rose?"

She modulated her breathing, mentally counting down from ten in learned relaxation technique from her extensive training before asking the question. "You didn't tell him about the Krillitanes, did you?" Why was she not surprised when he replied with, "Sorry. I'm so sorry"?

DI Gail Evans was drinking her coffee and waiting for the morning staff meeting to discuss the current cases on the docket when Constable Traci McAndrews came into the squad room, gesturing to catch her attention. She waved the young women over, motioning for her to speak up.

"Sorry, ma'am, it's just we've got a Uni professor here reporting something that makes absolutely no sense. I'm wondering if I should call to have him sectioned or notify Torchwood instead," McAndrews asked hesitantly, fidgeting like she normally did. She had only just passed her first year with the police the week before and seemed to posses an almost terminal case of shyness. Joining the Met hadn't improved her confidence much and everyone had wagered on how long she'd last, given her seeming unsuitability. She'd outlasted the original wagers, beating the odds by determination alone.

Evans' interest was already piqued. She carefully set her cup down, ignoring her initial flurry of excitement. It had been relatively quiet since Shoreditch, other than the power outage the previous
night and that had already been set to rights. "That strange that you'd think of Torchwood first thing?"

McAndrews nodded. "It's either their territory, or he's a nutter or a crank. Or all of the above."

Evans made a moue of surprise, deciding to chance it. "Well then, let's go have a word with this professor of yours, shall we?" she said, standing up. What could it hurt? At worst, she'd write him up for making a false report and wasting valuable police resources and ring the men with the butterfly nets after.

The professor, one Gerald Estes, was a small balding man wearing the stereotypical tweed jacket, complete with leather patches on the elbows. Judging from the way he was using the one-way glass in the interrogation room as a mirror in the attempt to pat the remaining strands of hair he possessed into a semblance of order, his current disheveled appearance wasn't the norm. He positively jumped in surprise, clearly startled, when she entered the room with McAndrews trailing behind. He doesn't look like the average loony missing their bin, but you could never tell with these academic types, she thought. Give me ten minutes, and I'll know if he's off his onion or not.

She took a seat, on one side of the table, Estes hurriedly fumbling with the chair on his side before sitting down. Opening her note pad, she looked at him expectantly. "So you've got a problem you'd like us to take a look into?"

The man nodded, lips quivering slightly as he spoke, his voice clearly distressed. He'd obviously had some sort of upset.

"Yes, ma'am. I'd like to report an attempted murder," he said, surprisingly clear.

"Yes? Your location at the time of the attack? Or alleged attempted attack?"

"Holywell Lane, Shoreditch," he said, giving an emphatic nod, adding, "Never seen the likes of it, I've not."

Gail marked that down. She'd already added the date and time after a glance at the clock on the wall. She'd need all this for filling in the formal report form, if this proved to be more than a prank or a wild delusion on Gerald Estes part. "And your attacker? Can you describe him or her?"

He nodded excitedly, eyes suddenly distant, as if he was suddenly marvelling over what he'd seen. Or imagined, however it turned out.

"Oh yes. That I can. Without mistake. Blue body paint -- probably woad, hair spiked with lime, almost naked other than a loincloth and definitely male," he said, not noticing the expression on Evans face, or the look of disturbed curiosity on McAndrews'.

He nodded excitedly, eyes suddenly distant, as if he was suddenly marvelling over what he'd seen. Or imagined, however it turned out.

"Oh yes. That I can. Without mistake. Blue body paint -- probably woad, hair spiked with lime, almost naked other than a loincloth and definitely male," he said, not noticing the expression on Evans face, or the look of disturbed curiosity on McAndrews'.

"Sounds like kids. This generation, I believe punk rockers are still somewhat popular with some of the crowd -- or at least it was in my day," Gail said with a sigh. Last week it had been tourists in to complain about a mugging in Spittalfields.

The professor shook his head. "No, that's what I would have thought, if that man on the horse hadn't rode to my rescue. Just in time, if I might add. Plus, my attacker dropped this," he said, pulling out a circular piece of yellow metal. "I'm inclined to think the BBC must be doing some sort of documentary on the ancient Celts, since this is definitely historically accurate. It's definitely copper covered in gold. Strange they'd put so much detail into a mere prop for a telly programme." He gave them a small, pleased smile. "I'm a professor of literature, but my passion is history. Spent quite a bit of time doing tours on the weekend, telling people about the history of London."
Gail blinked rapidly, reminding herself that it wasn't professional to gape or do the impression of a carp at members of the public in to file reports of crimes. No matter how insane it sounded. She nudged McAndrews to remind her of the same as she found her voice and latched onto the point that struck her first. "A man on a horse?"

The professor nodded, describing the impossible and going into full lecture mode. "Indeed. 44th Legion insignia on the breastplate, the horsehair plume denoting a fully ranking centurion, 200 AD style helmet, and his horse was obviously some extraction of Andalusian- that's a breed thought to have it's earliest origins in the leftover stock bred in Spain, dating back to the Romans themselves." He carried on for another fifteen minutes before she managed to wave him off. After Gail had politely finished up the report, promising a full investigation and notifying the BBC of their wayward extras, she shuffled the professor back out of the station. The man was completely satisfied, believing the matter to be well in hand with the incident duly reported to the proper authorities.

"Is this another one for the random nutter file?" McAndrews asked, hazarding a shy smile.

Gail stared off after the departing professor, watching his tweed jacket disappearing into the normal crowd of passersby. She shook her head, not certain of how to assess this one. They'd taken the item that Estes had called a "torc" into evidence to be analyzed on the off chance he hadn't just had a really fascinating series of hallucinations. "I have no idea. Not a damn clue."

McAndrews seemed to sense her indecision, speaking up with a bit more confidence than usual. "Should we pass this one on to Torchwood, ma'am?"

Gail Evans thought of the last two encounters with Torchwood she'd had and shook her head in negation. With the incident reportedly occurring in Shoreditch, of all places, she didn't want to hazard a guess as to whether the mysterious John Smith would be involved. It seemed like half the weird calls in the last two months involved that man somehow. "No. We'll just file it and see if anything comes of it, for now."

McAndrews nodded, completely confident Evans knew exactly how to handle such situations. This is what I bloody get for coming in an hour before my shift. Should've come in at the usual time, she thought with amusement as she went to her computer to run a quick search of the database before she logged Gerald Estes' report in. Wouldn't hurt finding out the current location of John Smith's residence, just for future reference. Hopefully, it wasn't on the Authorized Access Only list.
"I don't hate all of this," he said, hoping he didn't sound too desperate. According to the magazines Rose had scattered around the flat, desperation and neediness aren't looked for attributes in a man. Not that he could honestly deny that, but he'd been trying. He really had. He'd even gone as far as to memorize the list of things Modern Women Found Attractive In a Prospective Mate -- even if technically, these were primitive times, from his point of view.

Really, he thought. So much simpler when I was a full blooded Time Lord. Rush in, save the day, cultivate that air of mystique and leave before anything came of it. All those happy little victims of unrequited love strung out behind... Bit hard to maintain the whole man of mystery thing when people see you every day, the woman of your dreams has had you ruin her favorite shirt with you bleeding all over it and worse, knows you've a tendency to forget to put the toilet seat down. How was I to know she'd fall in? You'd think she'd have thought to turn the lights on and look first. And she didn't have to tell her mum. Now even little Tony reminds me every time I go to use the loo. As if I could forget the embarrassment?

"Are you sulking again?" Rose asked with a hint of exasperation, glancing over from behind the steering wheel.

"I'm not! Time Lords don't sulk. I'm just... contemplating unhappily," he said, trying not to sound like he was trying the words on for size as he spoke them. "That's it, contemplating unhappily in a woebegone demeanor."

"Right," Rose sighed. "Still sulking, if you ask me."

They were on their way back in to Torchwood- the Doctor coming only under duress and with much complaining. It being almost noon, it was likely to be the 'more reasonable hour' that Pete had threatened him with 9 hours and 49 minutes previously.

Rose would've accompanied him into Pete's office, but one of her coworkers had waved her over, with the intent of showing her something. She was reluctant to leave him, but he insisted. "Don't worry about me," he said with false bravado. He'd handled worse in the past, he told her, but honestly, he couldn't remember when outside of Gallifrey he'd been treated more like a recalcitrant child. Truthfully, he'd rather not have anyone else listening in to make his humiliation worse than it likely would be.

"You are a trouble magnet," were the first words Pete said to him.

"Got it in one," he replied cheerfully. Not that he actually believed that. Worst luck in the universe, that's me. Any of the universes, for that matter.

Pete sighed and waved him to a chair in front of his desk, eyeing him thoughtfully. "Any ideas on what that anomaly might be?"

The Doctor was idly spinning his chair, idly perusing the ceiling in a decent attempt at feigning boredom. He glanced down at Pete, grinning in that carefree way of his. "Nope. Hell if I know, because I haven't the foggiest."

Pete sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that." He stood up and walked over to the window, looking out over Tower Hill and the rest of the City. "I've had people set up a remote monitoring station and
completely cordoned off the area. All access is completely prohibited until the danger has been fully assessed." Pete finally turned to look at the Doctor again. "Which is why I'll have to ask you to hand your psychic paper and the sonic screwdriver over."

The Doctor gave him a horrified look, his feelings of anger and betrayal clear. "But--"

"Doctor, there's no such thing as a 'Cinematic Safety and Quality Control Inspector for the Ministry of Public Safety,' nor would the government send someone in to sample the nibbles and fountain drinks or have them watching Toy Story 3, and certainly not at half one in the morning," Pete said, shaking his head. He hadn't been surprised when the complaint had been forwarded to his office from the Government Authority Misuse Complaints Department. Not really. He'd already had the cinema owner compensated for the three large pops, a bag of popcorn and the package of jelly babies the Doctor had consumed. Atleast he'd not been sonicing the cash points again.

The Doctor gave him a look of surprise, looking embarrassed as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Um, sorry? I was a little low on funds that day..." He sighed when he didn't see Pete backing down and shrugged, reaching into his pocket. He tossed the psychic paper onto the desk and gave Pete a rueful smile. He had a spare wallet, hidden at the flat over Edgar's garage. No worries. "Well, you caught me fair and square. I'll give you that much. How about I promise to never ever do that again, look extremely chastised, and you send me on my way, hmm?"

No way to explain with all the hours in a day, and work taking up so little of it, he inevitably ran out of things to do. Especially with all the hours he was left to himself, since Rose slept far more than he did and Pete would probably be as creeped out as Rose had been when she'd caught him watching her sleep. And really, with him having read all the books in the flat, the public library not open after midnight and him not allowed on the internet anymore, what else was he to do? And as for the internet, he was only curious whether Roswell had happened in this universe. How was he to know the Americans would get so snippy over him nosing about their secret databases? If they wanted those databases to be so secret, they shouldn't have been so easy to hack. The cinema seemed the perfect solution for his boredom -- at the time, that is.

Pete looked at him in amusement. "The sonic," he reminded the Doctor, eyebrows raised.

"What? Why?" A look of pained innocence crossed his face.

"Because all access to the sewers is restricted and no one is allowed down there until the robotic sensors have gone down and taken readings to tell us precisely how much trouble we're in." Pete decided to explain things patiently.

The Doctor gave him a dismissive wave. "Easy peasy. I could do that in my sleep, if you'd let me down there. No need for one of those expensive, primitive little automated do-das to get sent in. Think of all the taxpayer funds you could save sending me. You need me," he said pointedly, turning on the charm and persuasion. Apparently, that didn't work on Pete.

Pete smiled triumphantly. "Precisely. Which is why you're handing over the sonic screwdriver immediately, before you go sneaking off to go nosing around and getting yourself hurt by jumping in without looking first. At some point, we're going to need you and all the knowledge you've got stored in that head of yours."

The Doctor stood, backing away slowly, shaking his head in disbelief. "But, Pete, you can't--" This was going wrong. So wrong. He'd just been curious. Loved a little mystery, he did. What's the harm in that?

Pete sighed. He knew this was going to be difficult, parting the Doctor from the two items that made
getting into trouble so much easier for him. "Yes, I can, and I insist. I know you, and I'm doing this for your own good, before you go getting yourself into mischief."

"I promise not to go alone," the Doctor said resolutely, putting up a hand. "Scouts' oath."

Pete chuckled. "That doesn't fool me. You'd be down there before the night was over, having talked Rose or one of your biker friends into tagging along, fooling the guards with your psychic paper so they'd think you have proper authorization or just jiggery pokerying your way in with the sonic and then where'd we be?"

The Doctor stood his ground, crossing his arms over his chest. There was no way he was going to give in on this, but unfortunately it didn't look like Pete was going to budge either. "I'm not handing my sonic over. No way, no how. It's a very complicated piece of technology that's not safe to leave in the hands of humans. Certain to mess up the timelines."

Pete had expected this, too. "Doctor, you can stop giving me the pompous superior life form look, because it's not going to work. You can also stop the Oncoming Storm look, because I'm not going to run in terror and let you have your way so you can go risking your life or the lives of others."

The Doctor glared even harder. This was just unbelievable. Nine hundred years, and now he was being treated like a complete incompetent imbecile. Just totally unacceptable. He was learning temporal physics and recreational maths when they were still 'discovering' gravity. And now one of this lot was going to tell him...

Pete walked closer, giving him a sympathetic look. "It's that or you're back on the monitoring anklet until we've assessed the danger. I'd love to be able to trust you to not do something completely daft, but your picture is probably right next to the definition of 'daft' in the Intergalactic Lexicon."

The Doctor gave him a look that signified that this was high on his list of ultimate betrayals before he reluctantly handed over the sonic. "Don't think I'll forget this," he warned in a low voice. So what if his picture was on that particular entry? Didn't mean anything, did it? He was also referred to on the entry for 'clever' too. He didn't see anyone making such a big fuss over that, did he now?

Pete looked him in the eye and nodded. "If it'll keep you safe, I'll be able to live with the guilt you'll most certainly shower on me for the next fortnight, Doctor."

The Doctor walked out, slamming the office door and ignoring the words called after him. "Someday you'll thank me for this!"

Right. As if. Who did they think they were, trying to coddle him. Like he was a complete idiot. He blamed his other self for calling him a genocidal maniac in need of babysitting. And apparently Pete had appointed himself his nanny, like he was Madam bloody Cofelia, or such like. The utter cheek of it all.

He stormed out of Torchwood Tower, shouldering past the other people, ignoring their questioning looks and concerned questions. He was tempted to go find Rose, but knew she'd go running back to Pete. As nice as it was to know she'd be on his side, he didn't want to cause any splits between her and her family. Or cause anymore drama, for that matter. And right now, he just wanted to be alone. Alone where no one would be thinking he was a disappointment or comparing what he was now to what he was before.

It was why he'd left Torchwood to begin with. Everyone was always judging him. Comparing their memories or the stories they'd heard with the reality that was him. Noticing all the changes. Never
meet your heros, they said, and he was the reason why. He was still the Doctor, as he'd said. He just wasn't the same man he'd been then. So what if he tended to forget the minor details of his new existence? Just because he was only a hair more than half Gallifreyan didn't mean he wasn't a Time Lord anymore. Thank the stars for TNA's dominance, or he'd have ended up being something like 86.3% human and that would've been so much worse. Then he might've had to worry about things like male pattern baldness or the loss of his superior metabolism. Imagine, him losing his hair and having to run... for exercise. Living in fear of getting fat, ha! Perish the thought.

Rose was starting to be concerned come lunch time. They'd gone over the initial readouts from the remote monitoring station in the sewers and she'd wanted to show them to the Doctor, sure he'd have an idea what it all meant. Unfortunately, no Doctor in sight. She had checked with Owen, since the Doctor had been told to go have his burns looked at again and the dressings changed, but no joy there. That left going up to her dad's office to see if he was still in there, getting read the riot act again. She hoped not, because every time those two argued, the Doctor would spend the rest of the day moping or sulking, at the very least. Sometimes longer.

When she saw the sonic screwdriver and the psychic paper on the desk, her heart froze for a moment. She couldn't help the twinge of pity she felt seeing those things there, obviously confiscated and knew how upset the Doctor likely was right now.

"Dad, how could you?" she demanded. "That's almost all he has from before. Are you trying to push him into running away? The more you push, the more he'll rebel. That's just him."

Pete sighed, not even bothering to point out she'd not even greeted him, even as a formality. "What else am I to do, Rose? I've tried making him see sense, but nothing works."

"Why do you have to be so hard on him? He's only been here two months and there's a lot of adjusting he's had to do. Cut him some slack."

Rose was ready to storm off to go find her upset half alien and try to calm him down, when Pete called her back. She rolled her eyes, but gave him the benefit of the doubt and listened.

"Look, there's things that have been going on here, dating back from the Cybermen. Things I've not told you about and have tried to protect you from, since it wasn't really important in the scope of things then. That's all changed with our six foot friend with the penchant for finding trouble showed up."

Rose nodded, indicating he should continue. That she was still listening carefully.

Pete leaned forward, pushing some paperwork aside. He'd hoped never to have to get into this, but inevitably, things had changed and trying to explain this to the Doctor had been useless. Maybe Rose could get through to him. "Since Lumic, people are wary about unfamiliar things showing up. With the price of bread on the rise because of the Tzargas, that ship crashing into the football pitch in Luxembourg, the Darkness and then that explosion in Shoreditch--"

Rose was starting to understand now. The original gas leak cover story had been undone with the help of bystanders with cameras on their mobiles, so everyone knew there was otherworldly involvement in the Shoreditch incident.

"Rose, there's a segment of the population that hates anything alien, and blames all the troubles on
extraterrestrials." Totally forgetting that Lumic was just an ordinary human afraid of his looming
death, that had had the power and money to attempt cheating death and had created the Cybermen
out of that fear. Those same people probably didn't care that the ship over Luxembourg had had
engine problems and it was completely accidental, not an act of war or an invasion attempt. "I was
going to keep his identity and origins secret, you know that," Pete reminded her. He shook his head.

"Ferguson put paid to that one, didn't he?" Rose said dryly. "Everyone knows who and what he is
now."

Pete agreed. "With that particular cat out of the bag, I was hoping that if everything stayed quiet,
people would forget in time. Instead, he's in the tabloids every week, with another stunt."

Rose still wondered what had Pete so concerned. "But what's that to us? We can protect him from
the publicity, can't we?"

"That's not the half of it, sweetheart."

Pete felt a little overwhelmed, with everything. How to explain
how difficult things were getting, the political pressures building with each new incident, the
agencies waiting like vultures to take over Torchwood if they ever dropped the ball. "There's people
like that in power. Even within our own government. People that only got into power because the
old regime got wiped out by Lumic. They've been fooled into thinking I've got the Doctor firmly in
hand and under control, but the more he acts out -- well, they're going to figure it out, sooner rather
than later."

Right. This was bad. Worse than she'd thought, even. Especially since they couldn't go swanning off
to leave the aftermath and cleanup to someone else. They actually had to live here, at least until the
TARDIS was ready.

"How much danger are we in?" Rose asked, already thinking up contingency plans, escape plans
and survival tactics.

"Not much, if we can get him to blend in some, avoid the paparazzi, and keep him from doing
anything dangerous. Because his knack for finding trouble and his lack of a self preservation instinct
is going to do him in, even if some black ops group doesn't snatch him off the street for dissection in
some secret bunker."

Rose winced.

"Was he always this wild and carefree with no thought for his own safety?" Pete queried. "I mean,
I've seen him in a crisis and he shines, but he can't have always been that reckless, can he?"

Rose smiled ruefully. "Yeah, Dad, that's him. The Doctor. Manic glee or fiery rage, that's him."

"Forget blood, anger, and revenge. More like babbling, attitude, and reckless disregard for safety and
sanity," Pete said in dry amusement, thinking about what Rose had told him about Dårlig Ulv
Stranden. "I can't imagine the universe surviving with two of them."

There was once many, many more of his kind, Rose thought. A whole planet of them. And maybe
losing them had taken the damper off his internal controls. Maybe getting turned part human had
done the rest. He's still the Doctor, but the metacrisis changed him as much as a full regeneration
would have. If not more.

Rose stood up to go, assuring Pete that she understood his motivations and that she would try
explaining the problems they were facing with the Doctor. She knew where he was likely to go,
since he'd decide he didn't want to burden her with his sorrows and complaints or was probably too
embarrassed to talk to her yet. For all the changes, he still hadn't let go of his damnable pride.

He wandered around Oxford Street until just before tea time, finally jumping on a bus headed for Chiswick. Luckily, it was one of the drivers that liked him and wouldn't report him for violating the agreement with the Transit Authority. Clive was a wonderful man, thoroughly grateful for the pay rise the little rebellion he had helped foment and his assistance in explaining the rights of the common worker and just competition for labor. When he showed up on that oh so familiar doorstep, Sylvia dragged him in and promptly started berating him with snide comments, even as she shoved a plate of food under his nose and forced him to sit at the kitchen table.

"Look at you! Haven't been feeding you properly, have they?"

He was quick to defend the Tylers, remembering Sylvia's dislike of the wealthy toffs that thought they were better than everyone else. "Oi! I've got a high metabolism and they're not like that, you know. They've been good to me, they have. Better than I deserve, thank you very much."

Sylvia looked him up and down, giving a displeased sniff. "And dressed you like you've raided an Oxfam donation bin, too. Thought you had a decent job at that Torchwood place?"

Really, it was like being home again, in a strange way, with all his memories from Donna. Even if it was a different Donna and a different Sylvia, apparently the Sylvia Nobles of any universe weren't much different. And now he had his own insight into her behavior, one that Donna hadn't had. "Nah, I quit. Two weeks ago." He grinned and winked at her, scooping up another forkful of mash. He didn't mind her sniping and criticisms, when they had little or no consequences on his future. No major calamities to befall him if he failed her expectations. He could resist talking back, for once. "Plus, why dress to impress, if they aren't going to be impressed with the real me?"

"You what?" Sylvia turned around from where she'd been wiping down the countertops with a tea towel to look at him in disbelief. "You didn't! How- but that pay rate! Are you stupid? Why didn't you say sooner, you were just here visiting four days ago. Have you completely lost it?"

It didn't bother him, since he knew Sylvia was only upset because she thought he was failing to live up to his potential and deserved so much more. All the snarking meant she cared. It was brilliant. Almost like having a family again. And in a way, they were. Or their counterparts in the main universe were, since he'd gotten some of Donna's genetics from the metacrisis. He'd gotten one heart, more gob, and apparently a family out of that deal. Could've been far worse, though he'd have preferred to have gotten the ginger from Donna, instead of the self esteem issues.

"Oh probably. Just wasn't happy there. Took me awhile to know how to say it," he said glibly, not surprised when Sylvia made an incoherent growl of disgust.

"If I didn't believe it then, I do now. Meta-whatsits and parallel worlds, indeed. You are too much like my Donna. Atleast she's found a decent job, and has started dating again, now. Speaking of where's Rose? Has she given up hope on you, then, and left you now that she's figured out you're hopeless and have no sense at all?"

He was glad he'd already swallowed, or he would've probably choked when he heard those words and the possibility chilled him to the bone. She wouldn't, would she? Not that he had much to recommend him. Since really, she could do so much better than him....

Sylvia sighed grumpily and took his now emptied plate to wash, putting a thermos of tea down
beside. "Go on, you nutter. Might as well go stare at the stars with my father. Maybe he'll be able to figure out what goes on in that head of yours, if anything. Far be it from me to fathom what nonsense you'll come up with next. Stark raving mad, you are. And foolish, to boot!"

Wilf was glad to see him, at least, greeting him with a jolly wave and a smile when he'd climbed up the hill. It was almost surprising how peaceful it was, this close to London and all. Wilf waved him to the other camp chair next to him and he sat, pulling the thermos out of his pocket.

"Ah, that's my girl! Always remembers my tea." Wilf poured them each a cup and they toasted each other with a smile. "Cheers, then. It's nice having company. Haven't had any other than you, with Donna finally finding a life of her own. It's mostly just been just me, the old telescope and the stars up here."

The Doctor nodded, borrowed memories making this a familiar ritual. "Well, you've got me, when I can. I'm sure Donna misses this."

Wilf waved dismissively, smiling. "Nah, what does she need hanging about with an old man like me? She's young. And I'm glad, she's out there, living her life and finding her own way in the world. Its not like I rarely see her. She was here for Sunday dinner. Plus, you're here every few days, now."

The Doctor was relieved the old man seemed to appreciate his company. He took a sip of his tea, eying the stars that he missed and hoped to see again someday. They seemed so far, and he couldn't see them from the flat he shared with Rose with the light pollution from the city reducing the sky to a dark brownish orange at best.

Wilf noticed where he was staring. "What's it like? Up there? You've been there, you've said."

The Doctor closed his eyes as the fond recollections flowed through him. "Worlds upon worlds, there are, Wilfred Mott. Anything you could possibly imagine. Things your human mind, with it's small frame of reference couldn't even begin to imagine. And it's all out there, waiting to be seen. A whole new universe to explore. It's more beautiful and wonderful and terrible than you can dream of."

Wilf looked up, watching the sky as if he thought the impossible would suddenly appear before him. Though, the impossible would hardly shock him or be unacceptable. Not for long, that is. Considering he had hardly batted an eye over me, the Doctor thought. And I'm very impossible. A complicated event in time and space, me.

"I've always wanted to go up there. Wanted to be an astronaut, but couldn't pass the physical," Wilf said wistfully, with a sad sigh. "Then there were responsibilities and a family. Now I'm too old."

The Doctor bumped his arm fondly. "Nah, you're never too old. Look at me, over 900 and I'll be up there again soon. I'll take you on a trip if you like, Rose won't mind if we've got an extra passenger or two." He paused then, embarrassed thinking he might've been too familiar, too soon. Despite having told them about parallel worlds and the metacrisis, he couldn't expect them to wrap their minds around it that easily.

Wilf chuckled, not upset in the least. "You know, it's nice to have you about, always interesting, to say the least. Life always turns out different than you'd planned, my lad."

The Doctor relaxed, really relieved he hadn't been too familiar, pushed too far. That was the strangest part of all the changes. He'd been lonely before, horribly so, but he could accept that as part of the curse of the Time Lords. Now he found he actually needed people. Not just to impress, or share adventures with. No, he just couldn't stand being alone, not belonging, somehow; the outsider
looking in. He wanted to belong, even if he didn't know how. Funny how humans always seemed to
define themselves through the people around them; where they worked; who they hung out with at
the local pub. How then would they define me? Why do I sometimes have this urge to define myself
as they would, when really, I'm not? Genetics aside, there really hasn't been anyone else quite like
me. Closest would be the other me, and well, we've both changed, haven't we. "Tell me about it," he
said glumly, thinking about all the unexpected things that had happened in the last two months.

Wilf gave him an appraising look. "Still having a hard time adjusting, then?"

The Doctor gave him a sunny smile. "No, no. No, it's great, really."

Wilf laughed. "You're not fooling me, my boy. Tell your old friend Wilf about it."

The Doctor shook his head, in bemusement. Apparently his face was an open book, and he could
only hope that perhaps his other self would be able to cultivate that inscrutable look that he so
obviously failed at. "It's just... I used to be able to see and know it all. What is, was, will be and can't
be. What should, could, would and mustn't be. Now I can only tell you that you must absolutely
never ever put the whites in with the colors when you do laundry unless you want to be the object of
amusement and derision."

Wilf laughed wholeheartedly at that and the Doctor couldn't help a regretful chuckle. Or the fond
smile as he thought back to the event three days before, when Rose had collapsed in gales of
laughter. She'd finally sobered up enough to point out that now they had matching pink knickers,
hoping that would soothe his hurt feelings over being laughed at. She'd been kind enough to buy him
new ones in a more utilitarian and color-fast black after -- much more manly color, that.

Wilf patted his shoulder. "Don't feel bad, others have done that before, as well. Did it once myself."

The Doctor wasn't very comforted at that admission. "Plus, I left Torchwood."

Wilf was clearly shocked at that confession. "What? I thought you were gonna stay, keep an eye on
them? Make sure they weren't gonna cause any world-ending snafus!"

The Doctor looked away, picking at the patch he'd glued on the sleeve of his leather jacket. He'd
meant to do a more permanent, less noticeable one with the assistance of the sonic, but no luck on
that one now, was there? Not until Pete calmed down again. "Nah, they're good. Rose and Pete will
keep them in line. They hardly need me, since I'm naught but a menace and useless, besides."

Wilf was quick to correct him on that, waving a finger under his nose as he scolded him. "Don't be
talking about yourself that way! You're not useless, you're just having a rough time of it, that's all.
Give it time and you'll be back on your game and raring to go."

He sighed, looking at the old man and able to admit to him what he'd barely been able to admit to
himself. "I certainly feel useless. And I don't think I want to be that man anymore. The suit, that was
just another way to keep people from getting too close. Intimidation by looking like I was an
authority figure. The adventure, yeah that I miss. Being the one who was left sorting out everyone's
problems and messes, meh. I want to be free, to just be me. I like being a mechanic. Always did like
the tinkering, and if that means I'm not having to be responsible for everything or stuck playing God,
all the better, I say. Maybe I just want to travel just to see it all, not to go fixing what's gone wrong,
since I'm not sure I'd not end up making things worse. Or wrecking the timelines and causing
paradoxes galore. Maybe I just want to be free, like I never was. This is my one chance, to be with
Rose and finally have a life with her, if she wants. No obligations to the universe coming first for
once."
Wilf nodded sagely. "I see. Then why'd you leave her there?"

The Doctor's laugh was slightly bitter. "Wouldn't want to go making choices for her, now would I? Promised not to. I'm still on call for emergencies, so if they need me, I'll come. That's her place, more than mine and I'm proud. Rose Tyler, Defender of the Earth. Me, I'll just get in the way at Torchwood. Too stuck in my ways to change enough for that to work for very long. I can change enough for her, but I'm not going to for that lot. Not unless she asks, that it. If she does, well.... I'll do anything for her."
Chapter 7

Sylvia pushed a catalogue and some order sheets into his hands as he was leaving, asking him to drop them off at Donna's if he could. "Shirley's selling housewares and there's some things in here that are totally fool-proof. Might help even Donna turn that flat of hers into a proper home. They've got a cooker that even she could manage to turn out something right for once."

Sylvia gave him a look, knowing as he did that Donna could burn water in the attempt at making a cuppa, and so could he. Thank you, Donna, for that little contribution. I used to be a passable cook, now I've turned disastrous cuisine into an art form."Sure thing," he said breezily, waving goodbye to Wilf and walking out.

"Pop round in a couple days -- we're having steak and kidney pie!" Sylvia called just as his feet hit the pavement. "And bring Rose!"

"Will do!" he called, already calculating the bus transfers he'd have to make. He'd not planned it, but he wasn't going to turn down the request, not where they'd kindly fed him and all. Jackie would have done the same, but some times it was easier dealing with people who'd not known him before. That didn't have a history with him or know his past. Rose's family all knew him, knew him well -- better than he knew himself, sometimes.

He got on the first bus, the one that took him to Trafalgar Square before getting off under the shadow of the Tower of London to wait for the one that would take him to Whitechapel. It was a short wait, people passing him on the street, and hardly noticing him. He'd slipped the papers and catalogue into his pocket, glad for his bigger on the inside pockets and even more grateful that Pete hadn't the temerity to search him. Sonic or not, he'd still be able to get into Torchwood wherever and whenever he liked. He'd lifted one of the full access key cards on his way out. It wouldn't get him into their little operation in the sewers, but give him time and he'd snatch his sonic screwdriver back and maybe go see what other little gadgets they had lying about that they shouldn't.

The second bus came along, the driver Ellie giving him a hard, considering look before she sighed and looked more sympathetic. "Fine, I'll let you on. But back of the bus and no bothering anyone. Can't have you stirring folks up and causing another brouhaha. I'll lose my job if you start anything."

He gave her a relieved and grateful smile. "Thanks. Just got to run an errand."

Ellie snorted dismissively, pressing on the accelerator and ignoring the fact she'd almost caused him to fall into the lap of a pensioner sitting in the first seat. "I don't care. Just go on and don't cause any trouble, yeah? I've got a steady pay here and my husband's been made redundant, so I really would thank you not to mess this up."

Blushing slightly, he made his way to the rear, apologizing and nodding in acknowledgement to the other passengers that eyed him with various expressions. Some seemed to recognize him from the publicity garnered from the previous month's escapades and met him with hostile or distrustful stares, but they were mercifully few. Most didn't look too hard, since these silly little humans didn't expect to see anyone who'd been on telly riding a bus like common folk. They didn't imagine that someone connected to the rich and famous Tylers would be doing the whole beans on toast and watching telly and living a life like theirs. Granted, he'd not expected it either and was still debating whether to try to avoid that whole thing in future.
Yeah, he'd once been wired to do all that, when he'd been John Smith, history teacher at a boys school in 1913, with all his memories chucked out and rewritten. Now, he was John Donald Smith and his memories were intact, thank you very much. Well, intact with thirty-eight years of a forthright ginger thrown in on top of everything else. The memories from the whole chameleon arch inflicted adventure in Farringham was why he'd firmly refused the option of a teaching job when Rose had suggested it. That was something else he wasn't going to be explaining to her any time soon. He wasn't sure if she'd understand about Joan and he was ashamed over how he'd treated Martha. He'd not understood then, but he did now, since he'd been the victim of prejudice here with his hybrid status.

Run by decent, understanding people or not, even the Torchwood of this world had its share of xenophobic people who weren't pleasant to be around. Even if they hadn't exactly hated him for being (part) alien, that was enough to make him different enough so they didn't trust him. That or it was the ones who had been insensitive or ignorant enough to ask rude questions about why he'd abandoned the pinstripes or pointed out the differences between what they'd heard or remembered. All in all, constantly questioned, watched, or just plain disliked for being himself, he'd not been comfortable staying. He'd not brought it to Pete or Rose's attention since he didn't want to cause them any more hassle. They'd done enough, without having to go about lecturing the staff on tolerance on his behalf. Especially since it probably would've just caused more resentment in the end.

He quietly disembarked at the nearest stop to Donna's flat, giving Ellie a cheerful wave that she ignored as she drove off. He shrugged and started walking, looking around at the scattered shops along the street. Most were closed at this hour, except the pub ahead and the chemist's, which the proprietor was in the process of closing down for the night. He noted the curious, distrustful look the man gave him before he was dismissed as not likely to pull out a gun and demand drugs or the contents of the till. Sighing, he wondered if his other self had actually checked the timelines before dumping him here. If not, he'd probably just naively imagined it to be all sunshine and roses. That or he'd thought it fit punishment.

There weren't many people on the street at this hour, barring a few patrons leaving the pub up ahead. Most of them barely noticed when he stepped aside politely to let them pass unimpeded. Some gave him mocking and amused looks for his old-fashioned manners as well, reminding him sharply that that was not the normal behavior for this time in Earth's history.

There goes the hope of fitting in, much less belonging, he thought as he drew even with the pub. Everyone knows who and what I am, and if I happen to actually forget, they'll certainly point out that I'm not like them. And there's the pub, another place I'm not allowed, since Pete's afraid I'll fall into the bottle and never climb back out. As much as that appeals at times, no. Can't do that to Rose again. She didn't like me when I was enjoying my pints before.

He was lost in his musings and oblivious to the three rough looking men who had all been enjoying their pints until one of them yelled, "Oi! I know you."

The Doctor turned, giving them a friendly smile as he peered at them in the dim light from the street lamps. "Hello! Can't say I know you," he said cheerfully, pushing down his inner feelings. Try to be sociable, Theta. Don't go pushing people off so you can keep wallowing in how lonely.... "I'm sorry, but I'm terrible with names.... and faces. And you've got a face that I reckon no one would forget." And only something a mother would love -- and she's probably still in therapy for the nightmares it's inspired, mate.

The man pushed forward, giving him a drunken perusal and prodding him in the chest with a beefy finger. His friends (just as drunk and just as heavyset and belligerent looking) approached as well, starting to surround the Doctor even as he was starting to feel the first twinges of unease rising in his
gut. He was assessing his chances at escape even as the confrontation got more serious and personal when the drunk spoke again.

"I do!" the man reiterated, looking to the one who was looming to the right of the Doctor, leaning in until the Doctor found himself backing away slowly with his hands up in a non threatening manner. "It's that half alien freak from the news. The one what blew up Polly's home!"

"I don't want any trouble, I'm just trying to get home. Not looking for any aggro, yeah?" the Doctor said, using a tone meant for calming and soothing unreasonable creatures and hoping it worked on punters like this lot. He winced at being called a freak, but ignored it. He'd handled far worse. Couldn't blame them for their distaste at his existence, considering his own initial distaste at finding he had one heart and was part human. "I'm sorry if I've caused any problems for you and yours."

The man before him laughed. It was not a good, heartwarming laugh. It was the "brace yourselves, because all hell's about to let loose" laugh that put the hair on the back of his neck up. The Master had used that sort of laugh. He'd perfected the whole sinister laugh. Raised the standards, even. Far better at it than this little sod. Even if it wasn't a harbinger of worldwide disaster and a sociopathic loony bent on conquering and nefarious deeds, it still sent a chill down his spine.

"My sister's homeless because of you. Lost her Darryl, too. He was one of those things that was staggering about in the street," the man growled, punctuating each word with another rough jab.

The Doctor winced in sympathy. "I'm sorry. I am so sorry. I can't even begin to imagine how terrible..." He'd never had to deal with the survivors and victims outside of the ones on scene at the various disasters and thwarted attempts at planetary destruction, government overthrows or immoral science experiments. Not like this. Suddenly, he was finding himself forced to face the reality of the aftermath along with everything else. And he really was sorry.

"Look at him," the one on his left sneered. "He says he's sorry. I'll bet he is."

"I am! Really! I had no choice! It was Cernunnos! I had to stop him before he converted the whole planet into those things," the Doctor protested, backing more until he felt his back hit the bricks of the wall behind him. He'd been distracted enough so he'd not noticed where they were herding him and now he was pretty much penned in. Completely surrounded by three belligerent drunks and it was starting to look doubtful that he could talk himself out of this one.

"Sorry, I'll give him sorry," his main antagonist replied, puffing himself up. "I reckon that Torchwood's done sold us out, letting his type muck about, ruining lives and not paying for the troubles they cause."

The man on the right, even larger, doughy about the middle but with arms of a disturbing girth gave the Doctor a shove that he quickly realized was probably gentler than what was to come. "We could always take the cost out of his hide, Jerry."

"Really, gentlemen, there's no need to resort to violence. It's never the answer," the Doctor protested, hoping he'd not started to sound a bit squeaky. He hated how his voice jumped up an octave when he was upset or excited or nervous. And he was really starting to get nervous. Not a copper on patrol or a panda car in sight, and the few other people who'd been on the street or had exited the pub since the confrontation began had either gone on their way or stood off to the side to watch the anticipated spectacle. "Why don't we all go sit down, have a drink, and discuss our problems like civilized people?"

"We could always get those Tylers to pay to get him back. They've got plenty of lolly. Enough to pay for keeping this one's face pretty," the one on the left said, obviously less inclined to immediate
violence but apparently with a thing for kidnapping for ransom, threw in. The Doctor gave him a grateful look that turned to complete outrage as the man went on. "Especially since that pretty little daughter of theirs is boffing him. She might pay good money to keep his bits in working order."

Boffing him? He wished, if either one of them could figure out how to take their relationship that far. And currently, that looked thoroughly dependent on whether these brutes managed to maim him, emasculate him, or just put him in hospital. Really, was that all people thought he was? Just some exotic sex toy, or weird, talking pet? The Doctor managed to hold in a slightly hysterical laugh, thought he didn't quite manage to hide it from showing in his voice. "No, no, it's not like that. Really, it's not. We're just friends. And not the type they would pay very much to get back," he said, hoping to remove the idea of kidnapping. With the experiences of the last few years, he wasn't sure he'd keep his sanity through any more captivity. Bad enough he had been pretty much feeling like the bird in the gilded cage, flapping ineffectively in hope of freedom. Right now, he really, really missed his gilded cage.

When the one that was apparently named Jerry said something about the kind of woman who'd even consider letting an alien touch her, how desperate she'd have to be or promiscuous and then quite pointedly applied such terms to his Rose, something inside him snapped. And with that, he discarded centuries of self restraint and abhorrence for violence. Because sometimes, venting one's frustrations, pain, and confusion by hitting something felt good. Or someone, as the case may be.

Donna wasn't surprised when Rose showed up looking for the Doctor. She was just surprised he hadn't showed up yet. Looking at the clock, they'd both decided to jump in Donna's car and go looking for him.

"He's probably been hanging out with my mum and Gramps again and then got distracted by something shiny on the way here," Donna said jokingly.

She still hadn't figured out how these two had worked their way into her life so easily, just fitting in like they belonged. But they had and they did, somehow. Not that she was sure she believed the whole story, as fantastical and unbelievable as it was, but it was almost like having the brother she'd never had. Even if he rarely acted his age, much less his shoe size. But she honestly liked Rose, who was down to earth and didn't put on airs, despite her family's wealth. A decent girl, she was, though she had no clue where she'd managed to find her other half. Tonight they'd made small talk, both of them just enjoying the chance to unwind. Donna had the impression that Rose didn't get much chance to pal around with other women, much less girl time.

"Tell you what, after we fetch your wayward little boyfriend, we'll go make a date to do something nice. No men, no bloody aliens, nothing blowing up. Just us getting our hair done, or our nails. A day spa, even. A day to just unwind and relax," Donna said as they walked down the stairway to the front entrance.

"I'd like that," Rose said gratefully. "That is, if I can get him calmed down enough to not have to worry about him causing a disaster."

Donna sighed. "If I didn't know better, I'd just buy you two some economy size boxes of condoms and plasters for the inevitable paper cuts you'd end up with from someone that skinny, and tell you to have at him, because that would probably settle him for a bit."

"Yeah, as if." Rose laughed, knowing it was a indirect attempt at assessing the relationship between
her and the Doctor.

Those types of questions were getting common, mostly from her own mother. She couldn't help but feel slightly annoyed every time. Not like she'd even managed to suss out what it was, or even if she was even ready to take it that far with him yet. Or if he even wanted that. Other than some obvious flirting and innuendo, he'd not made any moves to further things in that direction. Instead, when she got to close or flirted back, he'd react in one of those flights of panic that even Donna knew about.

They had just made it out the front door, Donna fumbling in her bag for her keys and cursing about the need to clean it out and organize it once and for all when she heard the sounds of a fight or an argument of sorts.

"Donna, listen."

Donna paused then gave a dismissive shrug. "It's just that pub down the block. I keep telling them they've got to clear the rubbish out, considering the sorts that hang out down there at this time of night, but who listens to me? I'm no one, apparently. Now where's those damn keys? Don't tell me I've left them--"

Rose listened carefully, the sounds of yelling reaching her ears and a scuffle down the way just barely visible at this distance. No telltale flashing lights from a police vehicle and no sirens approaching, so whatever was going on, no one had interceded yet. Knowing the Doctor was still probably blathering at one of the bus drivers or watching the stars with Wilf, she decided it was going to be up to her to step in and sort things out before someone got hurt.

She quickly checked her gun, thinking it was fortune she'd not remembered to leave her regulation sidearm at the flat. "Donna, call the police and tell them it's Torchwood."

Donna blinked at her. "Are you serious? It's probably nothing. Just some chavs mixing it up down there."

Rose gave her a stern look. "I'm obligated as a Torchwood agent to step in if I witness or know of a crime in progress, even if it's not involving aliens."

Donna sighed, squinting off at distant sight of the scuffle as she reached for her mobile. She called 999 as they started walking towards all the excitement, even as she was thinking it wasn't a good idea.

As they got closer, a small crowd of onlookers gathered around watching and cheering on the combatants was easily discernible, even if the people in the fight weren't. Just that there were less than five involved and from the comments from the rubberneckers, one side was vastly outnumbered but holding their own. Even as Rose aimed her pistol at the sky (after checking for any passing zeppelins) and fired a warning shot, she saw a heavyset man in a torn jersey fall heavily. That one was out of the fight already, one more pulling out at the gunshot as the crowd also backed away to a more sensible distance.

"Oi! Break it up, you two," she yelled, stepping closer.

One of the crowd, wearing an apron and obviously the landlord from the pub grabbed one of the pair, saying, "Come on, Jerry, you'll have the coppers around again. Steady on, or you'll be having me lose my license and the pub with be shut for good."

The aforementioned Jerry struggled a bit. Finally he started to pull away even as the first sounds of sirens could be heard. The panda car and its emergency lights were just visible when Rose and
Donna got a glimpse of the other party involved.

"Oh shit."

"So much for it not involving aliens," Donna remarked dryly.
Is anyone still out there?

Rose had just stared at him for several long moments in shock and disbelief. She was thinking that this had to be some strange dream, or nightmare. It couldn't possibly be true. This was way too outside of any behavior she'd ever expected from him. Too common, too human by half.

"What the hell were you thinking?" she had finally managed, surprising herself with how calm she sounded. Especially since she was torn between grabbing him and shaking some sense into him and crying at the surrealism of it all. "What the hell are you turning into, Doctor?"

He had visibly flinched even as he continued to stare at the pavement between his knees. He had sat there with his back against the wall, panting slightly. He was seemingly oblivious to the small trickle of blood coming from his split lip, or the mashed wreckage of knuckles on his normally delicate looking hands. He hadn't even looked up when he finally mumbled, "I'm sorry, Rose. I just..."

He'd paused when the ambulance showed up, the police already there and questioning the witnesses and the other combatants. So far they hadn't made a move to arrest anyone yet, but they'd both known it wouldn't be too far off. Donna had dropped back some, equally shocked as she was. Rose had had to lean down to catch his next words.

"I just... he called you an effing slag, Rose," he'd started, volume rising slightly with each word. "I couldn't take it. I couldn't just let him get away with it, yeah?"

Rose had been incredulous, not in the least bit concerned about the apparent insult when she was more angry and upset by this unexpected turn in his behavior. "So you thought you'd defend my honor by beating the ever-living shit out of them? What the hell is wrong with you Doctor? What are you turning into?"

He'd not spoken then, not even when the constable came over and informed him of his rights even as they were slapping the handcuffs on him. She could have spoken up then, knowing that technically he was under Torchwood's jurisdiction. But knowing that ending up in one of the cells beneath Canary Wharf would leave more resentments and distrust than a regular human gaol would, she'd stayed silent. She didn't speak even when her mobile rang while the police were loading him and the other three blokes into the van and the constable was giving unnecessary instructions on picking him up at the station later. She had merely handed the phone off to Donna to answer, so it hadn't even been her that spoke to Pete.

She hadn't been surprised when her dad showed up shortly after, while the police were still questioning witnesses and telling the pub's landlord that this was his final warning and any more incidents this week and he was going to be closed down. She was still feeling numb while Pete was talking to the officer and Donna gave her a reassuring hug and told her everything would be fine. She nodded mutely when Donna said, "Call me. If you need anything, even if it's just to rant about that idiot, call. Don't worry about being a bother, just call me." She didn't manage to find her voice.
until they were in the car, heading back to her flat, where Pete insisted she return to to catch some sleep.

"We'll talk more about this in the morning. I'll have had a chance to talk to Hartley by then," Pete said, referring to the head of the Metropolitan police. "He'll be able to coordinate something."

"You're not going to go get him out," Rose said flatly, still reeling too much to notice her question had come out sounding more like a statement. She noticed Pete's distracted nod and quickly drew her own conclusion. "You knew this would happen. You pushed him toward this, didn't you?"

Pete gave her a pleading look. "Rose... yes. I didn't expect this exactly, but I knew something was bound to happen." A frustrated sigh came from him as he tried to explain, already seeing Rose's temper beginning to spark. "You know as well as I do that him being as tightly wound as he is, something was gonna give. Better get it over with now before he totally snaps and takes someone with him or goes too far to get him back. This way, he can sit in a cell for a couple of days and think about what he's done."

"He's in gaol," Rose reminded him pointedly, like Pete was likely to forget that part already. "Yes, he is," Pete said patiently. "Sometimes when someone's in a mess that they don't know how to get out of, they need to go to a certain point before they will ask for help. They call it hitting rock bottom. Where they can't get any lower. Give him a few days to realize, and maybe he'll be asking for our help like he should've done."

Rose gave him a horrified look. "How well do you think you know him? This is the Doctor -- he's not going to be asking for help. He won't be arsed to do that after this. We'll be lucky if we can even get the chance to apologize before he goes storming off and disappears."

Pete held up a hand to calm her, disagreeing. "I think not. Whatever he says differently, he's not the same man you traveled with before, or the one that was here the night of the Cybermen. Not anymore. He's still inside all that mess of anger and confusion, and we've got the job of finding him again." Pete's voice softened as he continued gently, "Remember how bad it was for you when you first got here, after you'd said goodbye that first time on that wretched beach?"

Rose nodded stiffly, starting to see the connection. The whole thing was a bit convoluted, but she was beginning to see this as Pete's attempt at an intervention of sorts.

"You were a mess. Your mother was terrified you'd do something stupid. I don't even want to think about the possible outcome if I'd not had Torchwood to offer you something to focus on while you got your head on straight."

"We've tried that with him and it obviously didn't work. I tried giving him rules and guidelines to help him adjust and you tried explaining the danger he's in-"

Rose interrupted, "No, I didn't. Didn't get the chance. He'd gone swanning off, avoiding everyone but Donna's family since he'd left your office. Hadn't seen him since and he'd not been answering his mobile." She looked out the window. It was another late night. The second in as many days and she was exhausted; emotionally and physically exhausted. At least they were almost to her flat where she could be alone and get the chance to think this out in private.

Pete cursed softly. "Anyhow, he'll be safe in gaol for a couple days and maybe he'll be more willing to listen after. I'll be able to get the charges dismissed, most likely. Give him a chance to calm down some, at least."
And there he was. Stuck in a cell with the same plonkers he'd gotten into that brawl with. It was unbelievable, the idiocy of the police in this day and age, but with the watchful eye of the CCTV cameras on them they had an unspoken truce. Jerry and his mates on the bench on one side, he on the opposite, and both parties with caution. All waiting for the other side to break the stalemate and the violence to start up again.

Truthfully, he'd no inclination to do that again and now in the cold, harsh, grey light of reality, he was regretting his actions already. Well, not the satisfaction of working out some of his tensions. Not really. Before, when he'd still had a working TARDIS, he'd have tinkered around using what he called "percussive maintenance". The only thing he regretted now was causing Rose to give him that look again. The same look he'd always associated with a bunker in Utah and people dying underground and her challenging him outright. Her confronting him head on about his actions and pointing out that two rights didn't make a wrong. He knew that, he did. But it didn't make it sting any less or leave him any less confused when the lady from the front desk who'd processed them into police custody came around.

"Jerry Adams, Robert Wright, and Joseph Cambers, someone's been in and made arrangements on your behalf, and you'll be released in morning when you've sobered up," the woman said, pointedly not looking at the Doctor.

He sat up and considered protesting, but realizing he wasn't was more likely doing a veritably fine impression of an outraged guppy, he gave up. Subsiding enough to slump back against the wall behind, the hard bench reminding him with a chill of his surroundings as he tried to ignore the walls that seemed to press in. Something about gaols in this particular century- didn't matter what planet, much less the country- they all had the same color scheme going. Something he'd jokingly referred to as 'Modern Penitentiary Hideous Number Three' before and now he missed the humor entirely.

"Heh, looks like they're not coming to fetch you out of here, then," a voice grated with smug satisfaction. "They're not going to come save you from your lot, then. No special treatment for you, at least."

He looked up, setting down the leg he'd bent up against himself as he saw Jerry looking at him. Putting both feet firmly on the floor, he shrugged, not bothering to sit up but keeping a steady eye on his antagonist. "They're bound to come along at some point."

Jerry laughed, but not cruelly. There was a hint of grudging admiration as he said, "You're keeping the stiff upper lip, I see." He gave the Doctor an openly appraising look. "You've got one hell of a right hook, for someone as weedy as you are."

The Doctor raised an eyebrow but said, "Venusian Aikido." He merely gave a slight dip of the head in acknowledgement of the hint of a compliment.

If it was one. Not that losing his temper was anything to be proud of. He'd be living through the guilt and consequences from this one for awhile, having just proved the whole blood, anger and revenge assessment right. Even if it had applied both ways, he'd been the one that went way too far. Jerry's pals all shifted uneasily, watching him like he was a tiger about to spring. If they'd only known that at this point he was more likely to let them beat him to a pulp before he could summon the wherewithal to fight back. He'd hardly feel worse. As it was he was sure he'd felt something give in his side with one of the last punches that had landed. He wasn't even going to venture near a mirror for atleast a fortnight. Maybe longer. Appearance aside, he wasn't sure he could look himself in the eye.
"You're not so bad yourself -- for a human," he returned with a half smile after a moment, the tension evaporating almost instantly.

After a bit, one of the others spoke up. Joe, he thought it was. "So why're you in here -- I thought they had prisons and things for you lot."

Jerry and Bob gave him glares and elbows in the sides, thinking the question would provoke him. But it didn't. He was able to reply without rancor.

"Dunno. Suppose they've written me off. Torchwood and all that. I think this might've been the final straw." He kept his tone lighter than his words or their meaning warranted, earning him bewildered looks from his new, non-consentual companions. "Suppose I'll have to find me own flat, if I can find anyone who'll rent to the likes of me after this. Hopefully my boss won't fire me for missing too many days at work."

Jerry gave him a confused look. "But -- don't you work for Torchwood?"

The Doctor chuckled at that. "Not hardly. Not anymore, at least. Work at a garage, twisting spanners."

Joe spoke up again. Another point had obviously tickled his curiosity. Apparently seeing he was currently working in a job as blue collar as theirs eased the differences between them, somewhat. "Are there any more like you out there?"

The Doctor paused, dozens if not hundreds of different replies running through his mind. Everything from the bare-naked truth to a fairy tale to warm their hearts and make them all feel warm and fuzzy inside. Not feeling much for Cinderella, he went for something in the middle: "Nope, just me faffing about the world."

A couple hours passed of staring at the ceiling after conversation topics had run out and no one else felt like talking. Around them the muffled sounds of the night shift at the station house reached their ears but faintly. They'd have all been likely to doze off if it wasn't for the discomfort of their surroundings. Jerry and his mates had long since sobered up, and were quiet now. They'd mercifully left him to his own thoughts and conversed quietly amongst themselves.

He couldn't help but hear, but he'd tuned himself out to hear little more than the sound of their voices droning on. Sometimes he caught faint impressions, but most he ignored as he shifted his focus internally. He drifted in the soothing feeling of time slipping past, the warp and weft of hazy timelines weaving by in a way reminiscent of the Vortex. There wasn't much left of his time sense, just enough to lull him to a near trance-like state. Enough so he didn't notice the concerned or panicked voice of the police woman who was shaking him at first.

"Sir, sir -- someone call a medic."

"He's been like that for hours," said a voice he recognized as Jerry. "Just sitting there like that with his eyes half closed, all weird-like."

Forcing himself back to full awareness he blearily blinked at DI Gail Evans.

"Oh, hello," he mumbled, moving his tongue around to see if someone had sneaked in with cotton wool when he'd been otherwise occupied. Despite the deceptive sensation, a few experimental passes along the inside of his mouth with his tongue and a failed attempt to see if he could actually see it, he reckoned it was not actually so. Weird feeling, that was, but he couldn't see anyone getting that bored they'd be slipping about stuffing people when they weren't looking. If there had been,
they'd done quite the job, since his whole head felt full of the stuff. And that Evans woman was talking at him again. Apparently the old methods of meditation were going to scramble his equilibrium from now on. Wasn't that wizard. "Pardon? You'll have to repeat that."

DI Evans gave him an impatient look, but one that said she was concerned for his health. "I said, are you alright, sir?"

"I'm alright." A startling realization hit him. "D'you know the time?"

"It's half six," Evans said pointing at the clock on the wall outside the cell, then motioning to another in a uniform.

"Hmm, weird. Stayed under a bit longer than I had intended. Got a bit distracted watching all the threads of possibility. Not like it did any good, since I can't even tell you what's for lunch -- or if there'll be lunch. To dine or not to dine, that's the question. A real bugger, too."

Now the staid policewoman Evans was giving him a look that signified she was questioning his sanity more than his physical health. He gave her a cheery smile as they hustled him out of the cell. He did not forget to give Jerry and his pals a wave of farewell.

Gail Evans found a room to put the man in, setting him up at first with a cup of coffee. Then a cup of tea, since he'd refused the coffee rather rudely. Then made some daft comment about being rude and not ginger, or some such rot.

With a feeling of consternation and bemusement she spent a moment watching him through the one way glass. She couldn't help the twinge of pity when she looked at his bedraggled appearance and almost jumped when he'd suddenly looked up. She knew it was impossible for him to be able to see her through what appeared as a mirror from his side, but that didn't change the spark of excitement and curiosity. For a moment his eyes had looked impossibly ancient and totally alien. Then his eyes shifted and he once again looked more like a bewildered delinquent brought in on assault and battery charges.

Gail remembered him well from the month before in Shoreditch, and thought in some ways he'd looked in better condition then. Atleast his shirt hadn't been torn with spots and smears of blood but he'd already appeared to have healed most of the damage that was shown in the pictures when he'd been processed in a mere 7 hours before.

She had hardly believed it when McAndrews had approached her shyly, obviously summoning up her courage to speak as she nervously hovered over her desk. That was something she personally hated, but she stamped down her irritation, knowing it had to be something big, to stir McAndrews from her comfort zone.

"Ma'am, you'd mentioned wanting to contact that John Smith from Torchwood?" came the timorous voice.

Gail had nodded absently, going through the latest reports from the strange case she'd picked up. Nothing to explain anything, but the CCTV cameras in the area had backed up Estes impossible story, as unlikely as that was. "Yes, what about that?"

McAndrews had shifted uneasily, but spoke up with a nervous tension that spoke of unbridled excitement as well. "He's here, ma'am. In the lockup downstairs. Came in last night just after
Gail had looked up at her, disbelief plain on her face. "You've got to be kidding me. Here? What for?"

"Drunken brawl in Whitechapel, with three others. That's all that's in the report. It was Gifford that brought them in. Him and Russell. The others are all set to be released on their own recognizance in another hour, ma'am."

Gail had thanked her then checked the computer for the full report. Stag and Lion -- no surprises there. There was a dust up there every two days it seemed. Three of the parties involved set to be released at 9, no charges likely. And no release set for one John D. Smith, alias "the Doctor". Strange, that. Why were they holding him for? No special parameters, so Gail had thanked McAndrews again before hurrying downstairs to go see the enigma sitting in a cell below.

Now she was wondering how to approach him, not knowing if he'd be inclined to give any insight on the sudden appearance and disappearance of two people obviously displaced in time. It's not like she had any power to coerce him, since she was half amazed Pete Tyler hadn't forced his way in and taken him off their hands. Or sent Hartley down to do it for him.

Here she was, with the most confusing case she'd seen yet, her first solo effort, hoping to get assistance from the puzzle at the heart of her previous one. He'd not moved since he'd flopped into the chair like he was made of lighter stuff than mere humans and propped his chin on one hand with his elbow resting next to the still-untouched but vehemently requested cup of tea. Honestly, she hoped she'd not stumbled into another nightmare of death and destruction with this man in the middle of it all.
Chapter 9

Rose stumbled from bed, heading for the loo, the events of the previous night still burned in her memory. In the grim light of day, it would have been easier to discount them. Think it was just a dream and that a burgeoning truth wasn't staring her in the face, just waiting to be acknowledged. She was only half surprised to see her mother sitting at her kitchen table, drinking a cuppa. Another cup sat on the sideboard, obviously meant for her. She tried to ignore the pang she felt from seeing the mug, with its cartoon alien on it and haphazard script—"Greetings From Roswell!"—across the side. Jake had brought it back from an assignment in America.

"Hello, love. How is it? Everything alright?" Jackie's eyes were wide with obvious concern written on her face.

Rose shrugged noncommittally, unsure if she was ready for this at this hour. She grabbed the mug and sat down in the remaining chair at the small table. "Didn't expect to see you this early, Mum. You usually call before you pop round to visit. Where's Tony?"

"He's at play group. Thought we could spend some time together, just you and me. Just thought I'd see how you were, since I didn't have to worry about interrupting anything." Jackie gave her a bright smile that quickly turned to a speculative look. "You don't think... he's not been himself lately, has he? Getting up to all this, it's not his usual daft behavior."

Apparently, her mum did think it the proper time to go charging in headfirst. Rose buried her face in one hand, carefully setting the mug aside. "I don't know what to think, Mum. I thought he was better than this, that everything wouldn't be so bloody hard. But it is. Should've known better. How stupid is that? Nothing was ever simple with him."

"You know the time I had adjusting to this Pete, when we first got here," Jackie reminded her. "He wasn't the same as my Pete, but he was a Pete. Now he is my Pete, too. Think of it like that."

"Mum, you were pregnant within six months!" Rose shook her head. "This is nothing like that. It's different. He's different."

"Is it because the other one's still out in the other universe?"

Rose sighed, giving her mum a frustrated look. "I was angry at first, the other Doctor leaving me here like this. I'd promised Him forever, and He'd said He'd never leave me behind like he did Sarah Jane and the rest, but He did, leaving me with this one! I don't even want to talk about Him."

Jackie gave her a sharp disapproving look."That's not his fault. I thought you two were working things out. You two were nearly inseparable that week at the mansion, and before," Jackie pointed out, referring to the weeks they'd been hiding out in Hackney.

"Yeah, Mum, we were. And then everything changed. In Hackney he was fine, other than a few rough patches when he'd gotten to fond of the pub. Then a few days after we'd got back, once he was on the mend somewhat, he just started to fall apart. Like it had finally occurred to him that this wasn't a dream, or something. Like it was setting in, finally." Sarah Jane had said he was worth the monsters. Unfortunately, he'd seemed to just shut down without them.
Jackie sighed. "Oh love, I'm sorry. Pete showed me the video footage, said it was obvious he'd have been in that dust up no matter what. Those men were itching for a fight, and otherwise he'd have been beat to a bloody pulp, you know. He had to defend himself -- just got a bit of a head start, is all."

Rose put her mug down, putting a hand up to rub her forehead. "Mum, it's not just that. D'you have any idea what it's is to wake up every night just about to someone having nightmares, who nearly panics worse when I try to calm him and won't let me help? God, I can't believe how stupid I was. I'd thought everything would be different, that he actually wanted this. That he could change, do domestic. That he'd be better able to open up, but he's not. He just bloody can't make up his mind and he won't talk, so how am I to know how to fix this? To help him?"

Jackie nodded sagely, starting to understand. "Is it because he's not like he was before, the changes and all? He changed before, that Christmas with the Sycorax things."

Rose could barely think of how to express it, all the things that made her want to throttle the Time Lord that was currently gallivanting in across space and time in another universe. "The things that have changed are what made me think this would be easier, possible even. That I could do the impossible, like the other seemed to believe I could. But there's a totally different side to him, one that's a constant reminder that he's still the man that left me and Mickey trapped on a strange spaceship without knowing if he could even get back. And that he'd still have left me here if it was him that had been in charge. That inside he's still running."

"I thought you loved him, sweetheart." Jackie gave her a sad look, leaning forward in her chair. Running a hand through her hair, Rose was quick to respond. "I do, Mum. But it's like there's a war inside him and he can't figure out if he wants to stay or go. He was fine when everything was all chaos and the future uncertain. Now he's all uncertain since everything has gone back to normal. Like, after living one way for all those centuries, he can't figure out how to live normally. It's like he's fighting himself and it's pulling him apart."

"He was fine those first few days back, other than being sore. Though he couldn't wait to get out of the mansion and move in here with you," Jackie said soothingly.

"Yeah, and once he was feeling better and back here, he left Torchwood and went back to the garage and wouldn't talk. And Pete's always pushing him to try fitting in, doing the normal stuff that makes up a life on this planet, and its not working. He's fine one day, then out to cause trouble and railing against the utter rubbish of it."

Jackie knew things had been difficult, that Rose had been trying to rein in the worst of his manic tendencies. "Pete's just trying to help, you know. There's always the therapy route. Maybe someone who's not so close could see things a bit clearer, help him with the adjusting. A counsellor, or something. It seems to work for the people on telly," she suggested.

"That's the thing, Mum. The more we push, the more he's going to push back and I can't just hand him off to a stranger. That would be failing both of him. Plus, they'd lock him up as a nutter. How'd they even begin to understand when he doesn't, for all he's said he's got that great Time Lord brain and is all sorts of clever?" Rose pushed her cup of tea aside. It was getting cold and it wasn't any comfort. Nothing seemed to be at the moment. Not when she was doubting she was up for this, that the Time Lord who'd entrusted his duplicate to her care, saying he needed her and she could make him better had overestimated her capabilities. "This is not how I imagined things to be. He won't let me help him, and I'm beginning to think it's beyond me."

Jackie patted her arm comfortingly. "Now, don't go doubting yourself," she said, giving her a look of
confidence. "You went back and got your A-levels and went on to do classes at Uni while you were getting that cannon built. You crossed worlds to get back to him, when he'd said it was impossible. Don't go letting that prat get you down."

"That was a different man I went looking for, not him. That one could keep going nonstop, so he didn't have to deal. Didn't sleep hardly, so Gallifrey burning didn't haunt his dreams every bloody night. Had an impossible ship that was larger on the inside so he didn't have to deal with claustrophobia. That man had complete control of his biological functions and doesn't freak out when something we'd think of as normal, like having allergies, or actually needing those bloody glasses that he refuses to wear, or getting turned on by the woman you love because he's reminded of being possessed on a planet called Midnight or a sentient sun. Forget the other Doctor thinking destroying the Daleks would put him back into reliving just the Time War, he's dealing with all the shite that went on after I got trapped here." Rose was nearly panting from the depth of her emotions, feeling slightly relieved to finally getting it off her chest. She noted the look of horror on her mother's face at hearing how bad things had been for him lately.

Jackie looked down, clearly shaken. "I never thought... that's terrible. Why didn't he say anything? We'd not have been so hard on him. We could've offered to help more. You should have said something, instead of taking it all on by yourself."

Rose sighed, feeling worn out already, despite having just gotten up. Retreating to bed after this would be tempting, if she didn't have so much to do today. Getting permission to spring him from gaol before he flipped out there was only the start. "He doesn't even know I know all this. Doesn't even realize he talks almost constantly in his sleep, thinks I can't hear him pleading for this bloke called the Master to take it out on him and leave the others and the world alone. Or hear him crying out about having no choice and begging for forgiveness," she murmured, half to herself. She looked up, meeting her mother's eyes. Or even the whispered names, the thought. The ones she instinctively knew was a list of the dead. "So how would I get him to talk to me, much less a stranger, when he won't even acknowledge it when he's awake? Davros said back on the Crucible he was always running away because he daren't look back. This one can't run and it's tearing him apart."

Jackie finished her own cup of tea and set aside the mug, thinking for a moment. She'd always wondered what her daughter and him had seen in that life they'd led, now she wondered how he'd live without it. "Maybe a nice getaway, a holiday somewhere? That could work. Get away from all the familiarity that's bogging him down. Distract him from all that," she suggested reasonably. "That day to day's got to be driving him half barmy, the way he is. That ship of his, I thought he was rebuilding it."

Rose nodded. "Yeah, and he can't hear it. I can, he can't. The bond's not working right. And I don't think travelling, by our standards, would help him. I've asked him, tried to get him to come away with me of a weekend, but no. Says he's got to keep close in case something happens with the TARDIS coral."

"Maybe his ears aren't what they used to be. You said he didn't sleep at all hardly before, and the other Him don't either still. Maybe it's like that," Jackie said, hoping to be helpful. She wasn't sure of things like that, aliens and such like. All beyond her experience. "We could get him hearing aids."

"It's not like that. The TARDIS, it was part of him. It was like losing a limb or something for him. With the one growing now not accepting him... it's like he's lost. I'm trying to help, trying to keep him happy, but I'm scared I'm not enough. He's not like us, Mum, and the added DNA didn't change that part. I know I'm the only thing keeping him here, and I just think sometimes, maybe if I let him run off, wander free like part of him longs for, that he'd be happy again. That he could forget he's not a law unto himself anymore, that somewhere else he'd be able to blend in because he's not being
followed by the paparazzi just because he's with me. That if he wasn't the focus of so much attention and living with all these bloody rules, he could be free to find his own way," she said, working through the thoughts that had popped into her head every time she'd seen his crestfallen look when he was reminded of the restrictions. The guilt ridden thoughts she tried to stamp down when he'd been shaken at the changes his new existence had brought. Or the confusion and hurt when he pushed her away in embarrassment. Looking across the room, she noticed the potted plant he'd bought her in a fit of inspiration was dying. Shows how good I am at caring for things, doesn't it, she thought bitterly, fighting back tears. Can't cope with a bloody plant, much less keep a metacrisis Time Lord from going off his onion. Much less the trolley we ended up buying. Take away the box, and all that's left is the madman.

Jackie was dumbfounded. She gasped in shock as she stared at her daughter. "But... that would kill you. It'd break his heart. You know how he adores you, following you around like a lost puppy. Always sitting outside Canary Wharf waiting for you."

Rose smiled sadly. "I know, Mum. But maybe I'm actually toxic for him, like he'll lose his Time Lordliness if he gives in to what he wants. Like the universe really will implode if the Doctor 'dances.' Maybe that's why the other one left me. But maybe...." She heaved another frustrated sigh, pushing her hair out of her face impatiently as she fumbled for words."All I know, is this one can't even find his legs, much less his feet."

Jackie's voice was almost pleading. "Rose, you can't consider that, even for a moment. Even as much as it pains me to admit this, you two were always good together. Even when I wanted him gone. He may've put you in danger before, but he always brought you home safe. Brought you back home to me, so I wouldn't always be wondering and worrying. Gave you this chance so you and this other one could be happy. Don't go throwing that away."

"I want this more than anyone can imagine. I want him. The travelling, the extra heart, the posh accent, that didn't matter. I loved him when he'd no hair to speak of and sounded like he was from the north. Didn't matter, none of it. Still doesn't, because it's him I want. But he can't see it, always thinking he's second best, that he's at fault for me not being on the TARDIS with the" --She used the finger quote gesture sarcastically-- "'proper' Doctor. Thinks he's just a mistake, now, an anomaly. Just a clone. But he's not, and he can't see that. I'm just thinking I'm not enough. Or maybe I'm too much. It's all too much."

"But--" Jackie shook her head, unconvinced, but not knowing what to say for once. Then she suddenly looked suspicious. "He's been insisting all along he is the Doctor. He wasn't taking the piss on us just so he could be a... a freeloader, was he?"

Rose stifled the urge to groan."No, Mum. It's called cold feet, combined with an emotionally repressed Time Lord. That's what's bunged up the works. Add that to all the other issues he's always had, and you've got... this."
DI Gail Evans gathered up some files before heading back into the interview room, gathering her thoughts at the same time. She was rather surprised to see the subject of so many unanswered questions sitting there, calmly sipping tea instead and acting like this was a normal occurrence. The fact Torchwood or the Tylers hadn't come rushing to spring him was interesting, to say the least. He was slouched in the chair slightly, either oblivious or displaying a high tolerance to the cuts, bruises and scrapes that already seemed to be healing. Like it had been days instead of roughly 8 hours since he'd been brought in. He gave her a sunny smile, but said nothing. Clearly waiting for her to make the first move.

"You're looking much better than your intake photos showed, Mr Smith," she said. Looking at him, even after encountering him once before, it was hard to believe the rumors. Harder still was it to believe the once glimpsed and now buried reports. Surely alien hybrids wouldn't look so... ordinary. Would they?

He blinked, then cocked an eyebrow. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

Gail was immediately left wondering if he was oblivious and being serious, or if he was merely giving her cheek. The small, enigmatic smile wasn't an indicator of either. She was debating whether his reaction, combined in the state he'd been in when she'd fetched him from the cells below, was a sign of possible head injury. She'd have sent for a medic to examine him if she didn't think it would treble the trouble she'd be in once it was discovered she'd even had him in this room. "I'm surprised you're still here. Granted, not as surprised as I was to find you here in the first place. Seems like Torchwood would've been along to fetch you back. Or your girlfriend."

Another bland, but friendly look. Another glib reply of, "That makes two of us. Ooh! We've something in common! Isn't that lovely?" he said, leaning forward, propping his elbows on the table, and resting his chin on both hands while giving her a boyish grin. "I'm surprised your partner -- O'Connor, was it? I'm surprised he's not with you. Or is he out there, watching through that mirrored glass? No? Oh, moved on, then. And you, moved up in the world, have you? Good show. Congratulations, or whatever the proper platitudes are."

Briefly wondering if he was psychic or if he'd access to her records through Torchwood somehow, she quickly dismissed the idea. Not like anything would have brought me to their attention. Not for him in particular, at least, she mused as she composed her expression to hide her bemusement.

"Quite," Gail said, wondering if he was mental, him grinning like a loon, like that. Not that she missed the shadows under his eyes. That was the only outward sign that he was feeling any anxiety about anything at all in the world. Perhaps there was more going on than even the tabloids had caught wind of? Though the fact he'd been in a fight on a street in Whitechapel with common thugs when even the police had been unable to get him in a second time to answer the hundreds of unanswered questions about what had happened in Shoreditch, well that was telling. If access to him was so restricted, why was he running loose where anyone without an official reason could get to him? Disregarding the fact he was well enough after his previous injuries to be gadding about Tesco's and ending up in the gossip rags two weeks after.

She gave him a considering look. "The circumstances that brought you here... I'd not thought you the
"Oh, I'm a complex man. Lots more than meets the eye," he replied with a wink. He remained in the same position, smiling slightly, but not giving anything away. "Full of surprises, me."

Remembering that there was a rumor he'd talked and talked the last time he'd been in, but hadn't actually said anything, Gail decided to jump to the point. "Look, I'd be getting the sack if my superiors knew I was even talking to you, but I've got no choice. The clearances required to even speak to you... well, it's impossible, to say the least. You're on the Authorized Access Only list and no one's authorized."

He raised an eyebrow at that but his expression of bland good humor didn't change a whit.

That left Gail wondering again, the sudden mood changes since they'd found him semi conscious in the cell, not to mention the brief spurt of ill temper over the coffee, and now back to an almost forced joviality. Even if he'd almost been deliriously cheerful on their first encounter, but she'd counted that as after effects from the surgery he'd undergone for his injuries at the time. "Are you usually like this?" she said suddenly, deciding to hell with tact or letting his reactions throw her off balance. "Or is just an act to keep people confused or wondering while you do your thing while everyone else is still wondering what the hell happened?"

Both of his eyebrows went up as he sat back suddenly, giving her a look of honest surprise. He stiffly crossed his arms over his chest, the way he moved the only time he'd given any indication of feeling any pain from his injuries. The babbling buffoon act disappeared as he eyed her, considering. It wasn't outright hostile, but it was unnervingly analytical and obviously not so trusting as before. Like she was very much an unknown quantity. "You're sharper than I'd imagined. Call you clever and brilliant, even, but I'm in the room." His voice was even, flat, but eerily calm. Nothing of his thoughts or emotions showed and it reminded Gail of someone suddenly slamming a door. Or opening one. Opening a door to find something completely different than expected.

Either way, the gauntlet was off, judging from the shortness of his tone. She'd somehow managed to turn the tables and jar him out of his comfort zone. You know what they say about holding the tiger by the tail, she thought wryly. Don't let go. "You see, I know things about you. Like the condition you were actually in when they found you after you blew that warehouse to smithereens. Dislocated and fractured shoulder, broken collar bone, ten broken ribs, and the foot long gash on your left side. Like the fact you left enough blood on scene that you should be in your grave, and you were coughing up blood when they found you," she challenged. "Or that your name isn't John Smith -- Doctor."

There was a ghost of a smile, more a smirk, as he said softly, "Smarter than the average bear, like Yogi, DI Evans."

No admission that, but no denial either. He was a canny little blighter, as well as cocksure of himself.

"Care to explain how you're up walking, much less healthy enough to engage drunks in battle?"

Not that she expected an answer, but the half shrug and the even more enigmatic grin as he shifted in his seat was almost infuriating. Same with the way he propped his chin on one hand, rested the elbow of the same arm on the table, and eyed her with obvious amusement.

"You're digging for something, but damned if I know what. Spill it, lady. I've not got the centuries to wait for the intrigue to resolve itself. Busy man, me," he almost purred, the hint of a chuckle taking the sting out of the abruptness of his words. There was a flash of something in his eyes that belied his true impatience, despite the humor in his voice.
Gail shook her head in wonder. "Perhaps it wasn't all hype, what my sister said. Mayhaps the stories and rumors are true," she said softly before she summoned her resolve and continued in a firmer tone. "Hell if I know what you really are, but something tells me you'll be the only one who can tell me what's the meaning of this CCTV footage that was recovered."

She stood and beckoned him to follow her. Violation of protocols be damned, but if he could survive an encounter with that still unknown entity and the explosion that had wiped out several blocks of warehouses and flats in Shoreditch, perhaps he could answer her this. She walked to her desk, pace brisk while she steadfastly ignored the looks she was receiving from her colleagues. Bending over to bring up the file, she queued up the video sequence. He had followed quite meekly, glancing around with barely concealed curiosity. He now stood behind her, looking over her shoulder with a studied expression of boredom. Boredom that changed quickly after 30 seconds of watching.

"This is footage of an attack on one Gerald Estes. I thought his story quite impossible when he'd first came in to make a report of it, but I checked the CCTV anyway. And I found this. Other than the sudden appearance and disappearance of the attackers, it's pretty straight forward. Other than that, I'd have been inclined to call it a prank pulled off by students," Gail explained, even as the Doctor crouched down to look closer.

His nose was almost on the monitor, like he was shortsighted, even as he adroitly rewound the footage with a few clicks of the mouse. On the fifth run-through of the same short sequence, he silently watched the whole five minutes of captured footage. If she'd thought his expression unreadable before, she'd not seen anything. He could have given the Sphinx lessons in obfuscation. A brick wall would've been more transparent, other than his sudden pallor and the careful blankness that didn't hide the depths in those eyes. "You've not taken this to Torchwood."

It was a statement and a question both, the perfectly emotionless tone unnerving. It somehow compelled her to answer. "No. They'd have taken the case. I'd never find out what that flash of light before and after is in that video."

He straightened and looked down at her, looming slightly. He doesn't seem like a very big man, she thought. Not until he's standing over you, eyeing you like a clever little pet that's learned a new trick.

"And how do you know that, DI Evans?" the Doctor said softly. "What makes you think you'll get the answers now?"

Gail forced herself to meet his eyes, proving not only to him, but herself that she wouldn't be intimidated. "Because you're different. You're not one of them. You're not like them. You're going to want answers too, but you're honest."

He laughed. An honest to goodness, laugh. No arrogance, no malice, no derision, even, but a boyish chortle of amusement. Totally unexpected after the obscured reaction of a moment before. "What gave you that idea? Someone's been feeding you a load of shite. That or they don't know me well at all. Then again, who does?"

Gail stared at him, all the while thinking, ignore the eyes, focus on the face. Freckles are not intimidating. Freckles are not intimidating. Call his bluff and don't back down. He's on the outs with that lot at Torchwood, so maybe I can win him over. From the way he got that pale suddenly and the way his eyes suddenly look like he's just had a vision of hell, he knows exactly what that was. If it's as bad with them as I've heard, perhaps he'll share, so this doesn't end up lost in sealed reports and secret archives for all time.
He could barely believe it. He was in the drunk tank, for all intents and purposes and now this silly little detective was showing him surveillance footage of something he'd hoped to never see again. All while trying to get him to feed her information for her little investigation. All hats off to her for even guessing he'd know what it was. Bloody fool if she thought he'd tell her, much less keep her in the loop. He'd not be letting Torchwood within a standard light year of it, their good intentions or no. Suddenly things were starting to add up, and he wasn't liking the maths at the mo'.

"Doctor? What is it?"

The woman's determined tone and the fact she was almost nose to nose with him, despite the differences in their height, made her impossible to ignore. In another place and time, her persistence and intelligence would've earned her an invitation to explore the universe with him in the TARDIS. Now, she was a mere annoyance, nattering on and startling him out of his reverie. Bugger the lot, couldn't give a chap a brief breather to have an existential crisis without the Universe falling apart around his ears. Everything seemed bound and determined to nose in on it, bugger all what he'd favor. Per the usual, par for the course, allons-y! Quite right, too. This human habit of navel gazing was going to do him in. A spot of excitement, that's the ticket. The odds and sods will sort themselves out. Now to just skive off the meddling nuisances bound and determined to drive me around the bend...

"You wouldn't understand," he said shortly, stepping back to put his hands in his pockets. He was going for nonchalant while inside his thoughts were spinning wildly. It shouldn't... can't be... I'd say it was impossible, but there's an entire multiverse bent on trampling the definition of that word. Do I blame this fine mess on Davros or something other me bolloxed up? Bloody hell, why me?

He wasn't too busy with his thoughts to miss the angry flush on Gail Evan's cheeks as she said defiantly, "Think you all are so bloody special, then try me, then. I'm not exactly known for sitting in the corner and drooling on myself."

He couldn't help but smile in appreciation for her spirit and determination. "Never said you were." He cocked his head, watching her reaction as he added, "But I wouldn't let Torchwood near this, either."

Not at all. Too dangerous. He didn't want to go near it, knowing what it was. Knowing where it had come from, what it meant and what it could cause. Tin of worms, that one. Bad enough, he was already operating on automatic responses to external stimuli, the age-old 'I'm always alright' mode. It was working well enough, for despite her suspicions, DI Evans didn't know him well enough to call him out on it. Nor did she know how to pry information, much less any concessions, other than, "I'll handle it, don't you worry. No files on it to disappear."

An hour of cajoling, threats, outright blagging and back to wheedling by the detective, and he was back in his cell. He had to admire the woman's tenacity, since she wouldn't give over, but still. Alone again, but he didn't mind that. A bit of quiet was nice. Jerry and his mates were gone, so it was just him. Him and the thought of him that he couldn't tuck away in some pleasantly dusty corner of his impressive brain. Sodding metacrisis. Donna had gotten the best bits- having complete control over all biological systems and processes was just a fond memory now. No just forgetting anymore. Out of sight, out of mind didn't even cover the half of it.

He was well past aggravation by the time Rose got there 42 minutes before 1 PM. By that time, a PC had tried getting him to eat some travesty called "lunch", because apparently bananas, jammy dodgers and half decent tea were unavailable. The inquiry about the possibility of Jelly Babies, or at worst, celery had been met with a confused look before another denied request. Of course, DI Evans
had come back threatening to file charges for obstruction in a police investigation. He'd merely smirked at the silly little human and waited until she finally gave up hope and stormed off. Let her threaten. He'd faced far worse in his day. Let her come up with all kinds of ways to try getting him to talk. Humans really didn't come up with reliable techniques to interrogate uncooperative persons for another century or two. Well, nothing that would work on him. And this... this went far beyond anything he'd ever spoken about since the war.

Her first thought when the constable brought him out was he had managed to look worse than the night before. Possibly as bad as he was back in the bunker the previous month. Maybe it was the bruising showing better under the fluorescent lights of the station, but he was obviously upset about something. He had that evasive, manic grin plastered on in such a way it was obviously a front. A front for what, she could only guess at, because he tended toward the masking of feelings as much as her first Doctor. He'd still insist he was always alright, like he did when she asked him in the car outside.

"I'm fine, Rose." The rueful grin didn't fool her. "Just glad you came and fetched me. Just like old times, landing in gaol, innit?"

She sighed, not taking her eyes off the road. Traffic was heavy, as usual. Couldn't get distracted anymore than she already was. Not in one of the Torchwood staff vehicles. It had taken enough just to convince Pete to let her bring him home without causing a wreck. Though, that woman detective, she'd been watching them from the hallway; looking like bloody murder, too. Another one he'd obviously failed to charm. She wondered what he'd done to get her knickers in a twist, other than being his (now) normal self. Surprising, really. The woman was a blonde. Natural, even. He usually had a thing for blondes. "Doctor..." What to say, what to say...

He suddenly took notice of his surroundings. Or rather, acknowledged that he was paying attention to more than fiddling with the car stereo. "Oi, where are you taking me?"

Rose didn't bother to glance at him. She could picture his current expression perfectly. She saw it every time he was getting ready to get up a full head of steam about something. She went for a (hopefully) soothing tone. Never could tell about him anymore. "Just taking you to get checked out. You've been holding your side, and I know it's not as healed as you insist it is. It's only been a month. Wouldn't want you to be injured worse than we thought and not knowing and you getting hurt worse, yeah? And the dressing on your arm is filthy. Don't want blood poisoning, do you?" She could practically feel the accusing glare, the raised eyebrow and hear the tirade even before he got done with his "baffled goldfish" face.

"What? What?! No, no no no no. No. Stop the car, I'm getting out. There's no bloody way I'm going in there with those effing numpties. They've already got my sonic, the psychic paper, and know far too much about my physiology for my comfort. I'm not going back in there to get poked, prodded and yelled at like some juvenile delinquent. Or some alien halfwit. Just stop the flipping car, Rose, or I'm jumping out at the light." Rapid fire, louder by the second, and complete loss of the posh accent by the third "no".

Rose knew him well enough to pull over to the kerb, eliciting enraged honks and insults from the other motorists. She counted to ten before looking at him. "What the hell is the matter with you? Can't you see we're only trying to help."

"By treating me like a bloody child? I lasted for nine hundred years without a babysitter, thank you
very much,” he retorted, looking sullen.

Why was it that the only time he'd discard his mask was when he was in agony, just after surgery or when he was shirty? "Calm the hell down, Doctor. It's just a quick exam, then we'll be back at the flat. Just to be certain. You know Owen." Even if Owen keeps threatening to emigrate to Tajikistan if he's got to deal with you again in the next year, she thought but didn't add.

"Right. Pull the other one, it's got bells on, Sunshine. Pete'll be waiting to tear me a new one and add even more to the list of Not Allowed," he said with an offended sniff. "You might as left me in that bloody gaol if that's how it's gonna go."

"Maybe, if you weren't finding every possible way to make yourself stand out in a crowd or act out like a sodding child, we wouldn't be going through this," Rose snapped, again counting to ten. "You're doing a brilliant job at attracting attention when there's people out there that are starting to get interested. Too interested. We're trying to protect you." When she saw the arrogant expression she knew the conversation and the attempt to soothe his offended pride had gone tits up.

Chin up and teeth gritted, every word carefully enunciated, he spat out, "I'm fine, Rose."

Knowing it was a lost cause, she gave in. Call it enabling, but it was better than dealing with the fallout from the inevitable tantrum. It would either be him running into traffic and getting hurt, or him having his snit at Canary Wharf in front of everyone. Call it avoidance, but if she didn't relent now with him in this mood, it was all over but the screaming. She'd seen the other Doctor's temper and that was bad enough. This one, with his added 'take no prisoners' attitude and added dose of even more rude and tactless... well, they'd both be finding out if the Tyler slap was an inheritable trait, like eye color was. Plus, at this point, she was angry enough to take him to task for things she didn't want to air. Bottling everything up wasn't healthy, but neither was letting it all out where it was likely to get you sectioned or back in gaol. If not in hospital, clinging dearly to life after losing an argument with a delivery van or taxi. Controlled detonation was called for, but arranging that with someone who'd been holding back for centuries...

"Good, then," she ground out, pointedly not looking at him again and ignoring the pleased look he was hiding under his sulking when they turned off near their building.

"Great," he muttered as he got out, slamming the door and stalking across the car park to the side entrance. She watched him go, wondering when this carousel ride from hell was going to stop. Because if things kept up, she couldn't begin to imagine where they'd end up.
The shower was a relief. Enough so he spent roughly 12 minutes and 39 seconds just leaning against the wall with his back to the spray. The pounding water soothed tired and aching muscles. Muscles that wouldn't have even noticed the workout before, much less complained about the abuse. Another symptom of his decreased stamina and durability to tick off the growing list. All very humbling and frustrating, to say the least. But the steam shrouded depths of the ensuite were perfect for gathering thoughts. And he'd so many of those to set in order.

If he was good (and he was very good) and lucky (none so much on that account, but well...) he could sort this out before the timelines got irreversibly tangled and snarled. And do it without anyone putting the kibosh on him straightening this mess out, too. He'd have to do it on the sly, so to speak. Less said, better chance of merrily avoiding having to acknowledge the plethora of memories that were threatening to come tumbling from behind firmly locked doors. Because if he was caught, there'd be questions to answer, and those answers would involve things he'd not spoken about to the extent that he'd have to. Since the metacrisis, his innermost walls and defences had crumbled and all the demons and monsters kept hidden in the darkness had come tumbling out to play. Literally, or figuratively, as it were. Like this horrifying relic of the Time War.

Rassilon, he'd never thought... If the universe was kind, it was just some prat mucking about with some bit of tech they'd stumbled over. Not some stupid ape who had an actual idea of what they had and was trying to use it. A few tweaks to that mostly harmless looking little gizmo, wherever it was, and spit spot, there goes the planet. Well, to qualify that, it would do the same without tweaking, it'd just take a bit longer, having to keep it powered up while circumnavigating the entire surface. The battery pack would give out long before they even got to Cardiff, at the very worst, but still. Everything from here to Wales all a mixed up tangle of timelines, temporal disturbances, and jumbled histories. He did not sure want to contemplate the amount of destruction and loss of life if that happened. Much less contemplate moving to Cardiff.

Odds were, someone had picked it up at a car boot sale. At least, that was more comforting than thinking they'd purposely purchased the thing. There was only one real way... must've fallen through a rift. Either here or off world, and then brought here. Either way, he'd be checking up with the local smugglers, just to make sure. Starting with Bryn.

It seemed like he was being forced to confront and face everything he'd been trying to bury, forget, or move on from since... since Then. Add everything else on top of it, and his nerves were too raw to be able to smile and hide it all. He knew his behavior was erratic, but his world, his existence had been turned upside down. Yeah, he'd been exiled to earth before, but even the Time Lords hadn't taken his TARDIS. They'd just disabled it so he couldn't travel. With the bond not working with the one growing, finding his equilibrium was hard. Like trying to adjust to life after losing a limb, or all of them. Without the link to the TARDIS, attempting even a short test flight would be suicide. He'd no problems with the other TARDIS, the one other him had kept, but how much of that was residual? The meta-crisis had stabilized with the link to his other self broken in the regeneration, but it had also caused quite a few of his senses to fade even more after. No full Time Lord to boost the signal, he surmised. Or well, guessed. Not like anyone knew, least of all him. Completely uncharted territory, all this.

Tell Rose? Not on his one, very short (due to wither and die like any human) life. She'd only worry
about him more. Getting her sucked into this mess... no. This was possibly worse than Cernunnos, in its way. Who knew what he'd end up having to do. He didn't want to ruin her expectations of him, or worse yet, have her see what lurked in the depths. He wanted to be a better man, one that could possibly deserve her. After this, if she saw... no. Not going there. She'd seen enough of his vulnerability and darkness as it was. Any more, and the remnants of his pride would be in tatters.

By the time he stepped out of the shower, he felt slightly better, if still worried; fewer aching muscles, at least. He'd made a few conclusions about a few things, before promptly refusing to think about it any more until he absolutely had to. He'd burn those bridges when he came to them. Everything would be fine and dandy, as long as he could keep the façade up. Keep everyone from noticing that there might be something behind the mask. Then, they'd be less likely to ask those bothersome questions, or start prying. Because with this gob, if deflection and distraction didn't work, he might end up actually saying something.

Blimey, he hated talking. Too difficult to remain in a (hardly) blissful state of denial when you've been forced to accept, confront, or acknowledge that which one had been avoiding by actually talking about it. Ye gods and little fishes, then would come the whole feelings discussion and that would be the end of him. No way. No how. Not gonna happen. Stick to the inane conversations, blind 'em with a smile, and if all that didn't work... well, the old snarky temper always worked. Always good to have a backup plan.

Rose waited until well after the sound of running water stopped before she went to ask him if he wanted a cuppa and to order in. She knew if she didn't, he'd likely stay in his room until the embarrassment of the whole incident had worn off by his standards. She also knew that she'd be lucky if there was a single drop of hot water left, since he seemed to have a habit of standing in the shower to think— or mope/brood.

When knocking repeatedly brought no answer, she opened the door cautiously, wondering if he'd done something daft like going down the emergency ladder to escape. Instead, he was leaning against the window frame, staring out over the city. Seemingly oblivious to her being there, he was shirtless and looking more open and relaxed than she'd seen him in weeks.

"You alright?" she asked, eyes equally drawn to the scar on his side and the concentric circles of his tattoo partially visible under his arm. They both served as a reminder of his newfound fragility, and scared her in their own way. She wondered what it meant that he was so exposed now, when he'd carefully kept those marks hidden for the last month. The fact that he merely shrugged and turned his head told her he'd been very much aware of her presence the whole time.

"'M always alright," he said cheerfully. Too cheerfully to be real. So much for him being open.

She rolled her eyes at his glib response. "Right, then. Do you want Chinese or curry?"

"Doesn't matter to me. Not really hungry," he said, turning away to get dressed. "I was going to head over to Edgar's, so its not much matter, yeah? I'm not even peckish at the mo'."

"You should eat. I know you've been missing too many meals lately, with working on the TARDIS and getting into mischief," she said, concerned.

"I'm fine," he said, sounding vaguely dismissive and slightly patronizing. "900 years of living, me. I think I can manage to figure out when I'm due for a meal."
Of course he'd do this. Jump back on the same path he'd been on, avoiding any kind of real, meaningful conversations with anyone who actually knew him before all this. Anyone who'd know him well enough to know not everything was peachy keen and think to press him to tell them anything. Most of all, avoiding talking to her. God forbid anyone should have the chance to figure out what was going on in that head of his, she thought. Much less me. As if I've not seen him in dire straits before, or when he was just as much out of control of everything as he is now. As if I don't know when he's running scared and lashing out to hide it.

"Fine. Whatever."

He gave her a curious look, though she'd not believe for a minute he'd be that thick as to not know she knew he was avoiding her. Or that the pretend baffled look would work on her. "What?"

"Never mind," she said, turning and walking out disappointed. She went back into the kitchen, deciding to put the kettle on. Even if he didn't want, she did. And of course, he'd have to follow, because that's just how he was, wasn't it? Couldn't let anything go, unless it was him trying to avoid something.

"Rose?" He leaned against the doorway, giving her a look she'd never expected to see on any version of him. That much insecurity and uncertainty, paired with an awkward otherness just didn't belong. He was still barefoot, but he'd pulled on a t-shirt and a thin hooded jumper was thrown on over it hastily, unzipped and hanging off his thin frame. It made him look scrawnier than he was, but that was the one he'd grabbed off the rack when they were shopping.

"What?" She didn't mean to sound angry as she set the kettle on the hob more forcefully than the norm, but this was all so frustrating. Watching him floundering around, too proud to ask for help and yet unwilling to take any, hurt. Watching him rebel against everything just to try to soothe the urge to run was almost as bad. How long before the urge got too strong and he gave in? How long before he was swanning off, just like the other? This time, she resolved she wasn't going to go chasing after him. Stay or go, it was his choice. She couldn't choose for him. Not this time. She'd made her decision. It was up to him this time.

He sighed heavily as he looked down and slouched slightly, a diffident look on his face. "What did I do wrong this time?" he said, sounding somewhere between sarcastic, apologetic, and annoyed as he slid his hands into his pockets. "I promise next time I hear someone talking rubbish about you, I'll just keep going on my merry way."

How did she know he'd just dive into that one immediately? And totally miss the point, on purpose or otherwise, while he was at it. "That's not it and you know it."

"Could've fooled me," he sniffed, still avoiding eye contact.

Fine then. He wanted to go there, then they'd go there. No holds barred, either. Time she stopped handling him with kid gloves, because she'd not have let him get away with it before.

"Yeah? It fooled me, too. All these years I thought you were better than this. Getting into fights over something easily ignored, you getting put in the nick. It's not like people haven't said worse about me. With me suddenly showing up here as the previously unknown and fully grown Vitex heiress no one had ever heard of. I thought violence wasn't the answer? And the mark of a civilized person was restraining those base urges? Then what the hell have you become? Just when I think I know you, you pull something like this to just prove me wrong again. You'll be lucky if this doesn't end up splashed all over the papers."

"I'm sorry if I'm an embarrassment," he said stiffly, turning away. "I'll just go hang out at the garage
where I'll be out of sight and out of mind. See if I can't rediscover my manners and civilized behavior under some car bonnet where no one'll see me."

Rose reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him around to face her. She wasn't going to let him go haring off now, before she could try getting it through his head. "Stop. What the hell's wrong with you? You can't just go running off every time you don't like a particular situation. You can't avoid everything and everyone forever, or lashing out so you don't have to deal. I knew you had no sense, but this is ridiculous. You can't keep pulling this shit, because it's getting old, Doctor. Really, really old. Everyone has to deal with the things in life that they don't want to. Not everything is Dalek hordes and saving the universe. Some things are just life. Now tell me what's going on so I can help."

"I'm fi--" he started.

"Don't bloody well lie to me, Doctor. Not now, and not after all we've been through," she interrupted angrily. "God, apparently 'I love you' is Time Lord code for 'you're good enough to pal around with, abandon on crippled spaceships and for minding biological accidents, but hey, anything else? No, sorry, but excuse me while I dump you on a beach in the back of beyond.' Because apparently, my stupid ape brain isn't big enough to handle even a hint at what's going on in that thick head of yours. Or his, for that matter. Bloody arrogant git, you are. Both of you. Here I am, wondering and worrying when you're gonna just bail, you're still warring with yourself since you can't make up your bloody mind about what you want. Well, I'll tell you this much, I'm tired of wondering and worrying and getting pushed away. Tired of wondering what else you'll do to yourself so that I'm left picking up the pieces. Tired of wondering when you're gonna finally fall apart, and worrying if I'll be able to find, much less pick up those damn pieces. And I'm tired of having to be your bloody babysitter all the time."

He just stared at her, strangely expressionless and obviously knocked speechless, even as she was inwardly cringing at what she'd said. Biological accident? She hadn't meant it like that, but before she could even apologize he was nodding stiffly, eyes dark and downcast.

"Right. Glad we got that sorted," he said before he turned and grabbed his battered red chucks. He didn't even bother with socks, much less tying the laces as he slipped them on, briefly bracing himself against the wall one handed.

She tried to stop him, to apologize for what she'd said, but he was already out the door before she could. Running after him, she caught up with him in the stairwell. "Wait- I'm sorry. I didn't--"

He didn't look at her. Just nodded slowly, head down. His voice was barely audible as he said, "No, you're right. I'll just..." The rest was lost in a mumble as he pulled away.

Rose just stared after him, helplessly. That was not the reaction she'd been expecting from the moment she realized what she'd said in anger and frustration. Anger, yes. Doors slamming, shouted curses, yes. Insults thrown back at her, oh yes. Him slinking off in dejection, with his proverbial tail between his legs -- not ever, she thought. He's more of a mess than I ever imagined, and that was just the straw that broke the camel's back. She tried again, just as he was opening the front door. "Doctor-.."

He turned, looking back at her. "What?" His eyes were shadowed, features drawn. He looked tired, the usual unending manic energy slowly dissipating and leaving just him. There was still an almost nervous vibe, like he was on the cusp of releasing the remnants to take flight. To run, and never stand still again. Was it wrong to wish he could stand still, if only for a moment longer? Was it worse that she didn't know if running with him would help, or only make it worse?
"I'm sorry. I'm just trying to help you. Just tell me what's going on in that big head of yours and maybe I could help. Please. I didn't mean it -- what I said," she said, stepping as close as she dared. Would he want her to even go near him, after...

He let out a sad, depreciative chortle even as he put his hand on the door. Ducking his head, he said, just loud enough for her to hear, "I'm still a Time Lord. If nothing else, I've still got that. We don't do feelings, Rose. Nattering on like fishwives'll do not a tuppence of good, so leave it. I'll be back."

With that, he was gone. Stepped out onto the pavement, and quickly blending in with the other people on the streets. She didn't miss the emphasis on the word 'feelings' or the moue of disdain that accompanied it, nor the expression he had like it made a bad taste in his mouth. For all he'd said that emotions and all that were to be treasured before, apparently he was back to bottling them up and hiding them. As if she hasn't noticed. Atleast he'd said he'd be back. Maybe he did need the time to sort himself out. If he wouldn't let anyone else help, he'd be the only one who could do it.

Of course, Pete would be furious. More worried, actually. Like they all were. But what could they do, short of locking him up somewhere? She'd have to report it, just so a discrete surveillance team would be sent out. Just in case one of the vague threats her dad had mentioned turned out to be concrete. I want you safe, my Doctor, she thought as she turned to go back to the flat. I'd be beside you now, but I'm afraid you've gone where no one can follow.

One night in a sewer, the next in gaol, and now I'm hiding behind a rubbish tip in an alley. I've really gotten Rose mad at me, and I've not a clue on how to sort it out. Just absolutely brilliant. At this rate, the next it'll be the asylum or in hospital, he complained to himself. Remind me again why I like this planet, hmm? All these fine messes I've got into, I'd best tend to what I know, and leave the rest to figure out after. At least he could distract himself with this, for now. Worry about the rest later, when he was done saving the world.

He was waiting for Bryn to return from a delivery. Luckily, it was a warmish night, since the jumper wasn't half as warm as his jacket and he'd acquired a true sensitivity to temperatures. Normally, he'd not have come alone, but he had a feeling he'd get fewer answers with an audience. When the glow of the headlamps appeared, he stepped out with a brief wave. He kept his stance casual as he waited for the man to approach. Bryn stepped out of the van, keys jangling as he pocketed them. He gave him a brief glance, looking him over dismissively.

"What the hell do you want?" he grunted, just barely civil.

Cocking his head slightly, and putting on a harmless smile, the Doctor said, "Oh, just a question or two. Nought to worry about. Just satisfying me curiosity, really. Endless curiosity, I have."

"Well, I've not got endless time, so be quick about it. There's a football match on, and I'm not missing it for the likes of you." Bryn was already heading for his personal vehicle, a battered Citroën.

Trying not to seem too intense, too desperate, like this wasn't actually anything important, (not likely to get anything then, was he?) he sprinted over. "Wait." Bryn turned, giving him an impatient look. "Just wondered... had you found anything in those crates of hypervodka or gotten anything else in from Glibni 9 or such like?"

"What's it to you?" Bryn was immediately suspicious, giving him a derisive sneer. "You can't hardly wire a decent security system to keep something from getting. What's to say that this isn't just you
looking for an excuse to shuffle off the blame? I'm still wanting my money back. Daylight robbery, that was."

He contained the urge to roll his eyes and call the man thick. Because that's what he was, thick. From Thicksville, Thickania-thick. "Look, that system was aimed at keeping things out -- not at keeping them in. And that's where it was. Inside, with your precious paper supply and black market off-world alcohol." Seeing Bryn flush at his open statement about knowing some of his more clandestine activities and his lack of candor, he pressed on. No time for beating around the bush. "I need to know what the hell else was in there. Because the rozzers are already asking me questions and if there's a chance this is connected, they'll be here asking you questions next. And I'm damn sure you don't want the police poking their noses in."

Not that there was a snowball's chance in hell the coppers would be making the connection, but Bryn didn't need to know that. There was a reason he'd been a dab hand at poker in his day. Even won a dimensional stabilizer and a year's supply of Cronk burgers off a pair of Terileptils, once.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Feel free to leave a comment or review.

12

It had to be a dream. That, or he'd finally lost it. Or both. Hard telling, really. Either way, there was this wild-haired lady in raggedy clothes that were unidentifiable at that point. She looked half mad and was leaning over him and prodding him. None too gently, either.

"Look at this! I did it. Didn't think-- it's not like they've got grow your own kits for this. And that hair, just perfect." she said, tugging rudely at his hair. "Though, I'm thinking I should invent some kind of growth solution, you're getting a bit weedy. Such a weedy little Sprout."

"Oi!"

By the time he'd sat up on the floor of the tiny lounge, he was awake. The dream was already fading, even if his scalp was surprisingly tender. He absently rubbed his head, silently musing. No crazy bint, but blimey. He'd better lay off the tea before bed or whatever it was that spawned that fantastical dream. If he'd been drinking, he'd blame that and go back to sleep. As it was, he'd be awake for awhile, so he could go back to prepping the wiring for the growing TARDIS. He'd nought else to do, at this hour.

That reminded him he'd unintentionally fallen asleep in the old flat over the garage. Cursing under his breath, he got up on unsteady, barely awake legs to look out the window. Sure enough, still there. Silly bastards wouldn't give over. Determined, they were, but they'd not be getting much to hold their interest in his activities. Not for now, at least. At 3 hours, 21 minutes, and 49 seconds after midnight, he wasn't planning on going for a jaunt. He'd too much to do. Like the sleep he still hoped he could return to. If he'd been feeling more gregarious, he'd have invited them up for a cuppa and subtly (or not so subtly) wooed them with the idea of tottering back to Canary Wharf to bother some other element of the alien horde they were tasked with looking out for. Or half alien, in his case.

His little chat with Bryn earlier that evening had been disappointing, to say the least. Worrying, too. Like suitcases upon suitcases of bad worth of worrying. After some haranguing, Bryn had finally said he'd had something come in the week before that looked interesting. "Bit of a wash, really. Fair bit of disappointment, it was. Didn't do much, other than make a bright flash of light. So what's the do?"

"And? Where is it?" He'd been so hopeful in that moment, an unrestrained smile of joy on his face and he'd nearly been bouncing for the excitement and hope. Always bloody hope. He was a complete plum.

Bryn had then shrugged, pulling away and getting in his car before answering succinctly. "Sold it."

"What?!" He really hoped his ears had failed due to the interference of the added infernal human genetic material. But no. Of course not. The universe just wasn't that bloody kind, was it?
Bryn had given him an annoyed look, pulling the door shut. He locked the others when the Doctor had scrambled around, but had grudgingly lowered the window after he'd started knocking on it frantically. "Are ya deaf, or something? I told you, sold it. Summer hols are coming up and the wife wants to go to France."

"No, no. You can't!" The Doctor had almost been ready to faint in shock and horror. That is if it was possible for a part Time Lord to be so daft as that.

"I could and I did. That collector was plenty willing to pay dear for the gubbins," Bryn had said curtly, looking satisfied with himself.

The Doctor had just stared at him, speechless for the moment. Just when he thought someone couldn't possibly be more idiotic.... He was starting to think some people took that as a personal challenge.

"Who?" he managed to croak, chest too tight to speak any louder. Good thing, or they'd have heard him telling the man exactly how stupid he was all the way in Kensington and beyond. Tell me you did not just sell a Temporal Distortion Gun to a bloody...collector of all the moronic, pea-brained ideas you could come up with. And for a bit of dosh to go on holiday with.... I'm not calling you a stupid ape, because that's an insult to the intelligence of certain gorillas at the zoo that shall remain unnamed. You....donut! Fortunately, he was breathless and flabbergasted enough that he managed to keep his tirade to himself and silent, too. Ha! He'd found out how to short circuit the direct link between gob and brain. When all lines were not quite so engaged, he'd take the time to reflect on how brilliant that really was.

"Dougal Chambers," Bryn had said shortly, doing up his lap belt. "Now, I've got my tea and footie waiting."

With that, Bryn had started the car and drove off, just barely missing driving over the Doctor's toes. And only because he'd pulled himself together enough to jump back out of the way. He'd stood there, numb and in shock, scrambling for a plan. Something. Anything. He'd decided to look up this Chambers bloke, and headed for the garage. He'd have called into Torchwood, but of course, no mobile. He'd left it at the flat. And as flustered as he was, he didn't want to face Rose. Humiliation aside, she'd take one look at him and suss this one out. When he'd looked at his reflection in a shop window, he'd been as pale and haunted looking as he'd felt.

Still felt.

Since then, he'd gained a tail, with a couple of Torchwood agents attempting to be inconspicuous as they followed him back to Edgar's garage. More bloody mollycoddling. The lads hadn't been there, since they'd gone to the pub to watch the same match that Bryn had been going on about. Bloody aggravating that. Humans with all their inconvenient little habits and practices that left them unavailable at the worst times. He'd have gone to the pub after them, but figured the meddlers in the van would just tag along and gleefully remind him that pubs were on the list of Not Allowed. With a pained groan, he'd kicked at the wall after seeing the frustratingly darkened windows of the garage and before heading upstairs. He had not meant to fall asleep, but he had while he'd been working on the wiring and chatting away at the TARDIS coral.

Now awake, he was back to sitting there splicing wires and adding connectors. It was busywork--albeit neccessary busywork-- to keep his hands occupied while his thoughts flitted along elsewhere.

So much to do, so much going on, so much to hash out. A previously unknown collector (a budding Van Statten? Parallel version of him? Another rehash of old adventures? Bloody hell, tell me the bloke does NOT have a dalek in the basement. I think I'll lose it if he did. Another reason to keep
Rose out of this one. If anyone named Adam turns up, that's it. I'm hopping the next zeppelin to Marrakesh and setting up an antiques shop.) and all these inconvenient restrictions to dance around the edges of. Nosy police detectives wanting to make a name for themselves and slake their curiosity (whilst picking at the mystery, inside of a riddle, wrapped in an enigma that is my own splendid self. Though, I should leave my contact information in case the silly girl manages to figure it out. I'd bloody well like to know myself. I mean, I've never proven myself wrong quite so spectacularly as this. The Valeyard would've laughed himself sick if he'd seen this coming and called the trial won there and then. Good thing the Time War messed with my timeline so many times. Identity defined by memories. Ha! Bollocks. If identity comes down to memory, then I'm simultaneously the 906 year old last of the Time Lords, a 38 year old human female that's a temp from Chiswick, and a two month old nobody. So tell tell me, who and what does that make me? Just tell me that, and I'll be able to summon up the courage to go crawling back to Rose. Crawling back and beg her to forgive a stupid old Time Lord who's terrified because time's so short-- ironic that, Time Lord who's always out of time-- and he's tired of running but doesn't know how to stop.) And everything else.

Like these bloody hormones. Hormones, yes. Human hormones on top of everything else. Brashly attempting all his powers of self-restraint, trampling the last of his self-respect and muddling his thoughts every time he was around Rose. Couldn't hold a train of thought when everything in his head revolved around shagging Rose. Also why she wouldn't possibly want him, could do so much better than him, and methods of wooing her. That much was old hat. Been so since that basement surrounded by the Gelth. Except now, his body was adding it's own opinion to that matter, the traitor. (I'm blaming you, Donna. So much for being subtle.) So add in having to distract himself. Or he had been doing all that. Now he was thinking he'd just proven why she'd be better off, why he wasn't worth it, and maybe she could find someone else better. While simultaneously hoping that didn't happen, because this single, lonely heart he had...well, he didn't think it could take it if she did. Even if he didn't have much to offer a girl like her, when she deserved the universe and so much more. And Rassillon on a crutch, he was getting maudlin in his old age. Or young age. Whatever the case would be. Sodding metacrisis. Stop the world, I want to get off......

A moment's distraction from what he was doing and a wire slipped, jabbing painfully into his thumb. Glaring at the offending object as he sucked the even more offended digit, he set it aside with a sigh. Would be so much easier with the sonic. Bloody Pete Tyler and his bloody Torchwood. Heh, always came down to two bits of wire, didn't it? If he'd done as he'd supposed to a long time ago with some very different bits of wiring, he'd not be in this mess. Gallifrey would still exist, Rose wouldn't have been trapped in a parallel world, and he'd not have been condemned by Himself for doing what He should've done in the first place.

DI Gail Evans was still going over the CCTV footage late that evening, looking for a clue to what that John Smith had seen. Nothing obvious, unless you counted that flash of light and the shadowy figure off to the side holding some odd looking item. Half hidden at the corner of the frame, the person (male, judging by height and build) was near the side entrance of one of the shops on the street where Gerald Estes had been attacked. What he held was similar in size and shape to one of the weapons Torchwood agents carried, but still different from what her sister had shown her. Experimental, perhaps? No clue, and all of her requests for information were still being shot down. Not by Torchwood themselves, however. Not hardly. Hartley was denying them before it even left the building.

Nothing else discernible about the attackers themselves. No student pranks reported in the area recently. No TV crews filming historical dramas, documentaries, or even a advertisement for crisps
in the area. No fancy dress parties, no mentally ill transients with a penchant for period costume. Nothing. No one in the files matching those descriptions, either. Just two blokes, who looked like they'd leapt from the pages of a history text. Stranger and stranger, still. Nothing and no answers, apparently. A dead end.

The constant flickering of the fluorescents overhead was a constant distraction. It was also contributing greatly to the tension migraine brewing behind her eyes as she sat in her cubicle. The glow from her computer screen and staring at camera footage for hours on end certainly didn't help matters. Four hours of this, plus an entire afternoon spent rehashing the conversion of that morning. What could she have said or not said that would've gotten him to be more forthcoming? Smith obviously knew what was going on, and that just made it all the more frustrating. She'd had all the answers she'd needed and they'd just brazenly sauntered out of the station with a little blonde heiress in tow. Damn it all. She was cursing the lot of them when McAndrews approached, ever so cautiously.

"Ma'am?"

Wishing the woman would find a bit of courage, Gail looked up. She was hoping her frustration didn't show and spook the girl even more. "Yes?"

McAndrews tucked her chin, like she was expecting to be physically attacked for speaking up, but managed to find the bravery to carry on. Holding out a sheaf of papers, she said demurely, "I took it upon myself to look up the owners of the buildings around the area from the CCTV. The name Miles Holburn popped up- he's the proprietor of the shop directly behind Estes."

Gail thought carefully. "Holburn, Holburn. Where've I heard that name?"

"According to records, he's Bryn Holburn's brother. He's known to have his hand in the local smuggling trade. Small peanuts, however. No convictions," McAndrews supplied helpfully. "Known associate of one Edgar Butler, who is, himself a known Hell's Angel member and a known associate of..."

"The Doctor, aka, John Smith," Gail said, abruptly sitting straight behind her desk. "Bloody hell." Her fatigue was immediately forgotten, as was the stagnation of attempting to go through the official channels. Right, so unofficial methods it was. That one was hip deep in this and getting deeper by the hour, she reckoned. "Did I ever tell you, Traci, that you're a bloody genius?"

"Ma'am?" McAndrews looked totally bewildered.

"Well, you are. Genius, that is. And I commend you for it." Picking up her mobile and glancing at the clock, she made a split decision. Going by the book wouldn't work in this case, so now to find one impossible man and ring her sister up. "I'm off for the night. Don't work too much later, it's gotten late. Can't give up on having a life outside of this place," she advised gently as she passed.

Suddenly, the answers that had slipped through her hands seemed so much more obtainable. With this much, getting her mostly closemouthed sister to help would be simple. Even if getting past Hartley would be impossible otherwise. Smith might be a hard nut to crack, but if she approached him with the assistance of someone he knew, maybe not an impossible nut. Sally hadn't mentioned having any difficulties or hostilities with him, and she was a friend of Rose Tyler. Even if Sally did keep her work and private life separate, that had to count for something, didn't it? Maybe this wasn't a dead end, after all.
Upon waking the next morning, he stretched his back with a groan. This time, he'd made it to the sofa, instead of passing out on the floor from exhaustion. He'd half a mind to see if he could spare the coins for the ferryman, because the support system and springs in that damned settee from Hades was dead. Dead and gone, just waiting the gravediggers-dead. And the lower regions of his spine were telling the tale painfully.

After he splashed water on his face and ruffled his hair to an acceptable disorderly coif, he bounded down the stairs. Holding his breath slightly against the smell from the flat across the hall (Mrs Edwards kept a swarm of moggies, and the summer heat didn't half do wonders to bring out the smell.) he raised a hand and knocked on the door loudly. "Mrs. Singh? Mrs Habib Singh, it's me."

The door opened a hair, and one cautious eye peeped out through the gap between door and frame. It blinked once before lighting with recognition and the door slammed shut. He'd have been horribly offended if it hadn't been shortly been followed by the sound of the safety chain being disengaged.

"Doctor Greasy-man! There you are! Come in." Habib smiled broadly. "They let you out! Looking a touch wan. Eat, you," she continued, dragging him into her crowded flat and shoving a warm chipati in his hands before he could even get a word in edgewise. "Shame, those English don't know how to feed a man. Withering away, you are."

Slightly flustered, the Doctor looked around. Neat as a pin, and amazingly quiet despite the six young children all eyeing him curiously. Or Mr Singh, oddly enough not gone in to the curry shop and also trying to ply him with food. Leftover chicken marsala, in this case. Packed like in sardines in this tiny flat, they were, briefly reminding him of growing up in a house similarly crowded with cousins. Oh so long ago, but the memory of why he'd spent as much time up in the hills as possible was clear as if it was yesterday. He still cringed at the monicker they'd stuck on him, despite his attempts to tell them it was just the Doctor. No "Greasy-man" added at the end.

"You've the internet?" he managed around a mouthful of the warm flatbread, finally getting a word in between the Singh's nattering, scolding and questions.

"Of course. I use it to stay in contact with the family in Lahore," Mr Singh said helpfully, his wife nodding.

"Brilliant! Could I borrow it? I've a spot of research to do, then I'll be out of your hair."

Of course he was welcome. Take all the time he needed. The Singhs were nothing if not hospitality embodied. Fantastic cooks, as well. A few minutes of searching the public records (amazing what you could find on Google) and he had something to go on. He gave each of the six, still staring shyly tots a pat on the way, noticed that Habib was showing signs of number seven being on the way, and deviated from the pattern of behavior. Instead he gave her a wink and said, "Watch out for that seventh one, they tend to be a bit clever. And just wait til you see the ones after."

With a cryptic smile, he waved to her husband and continued down the stairs, oblivious to the consternation and confusion he'd left behind him. Continuing on the the street, he crossed to the blatantly obvious unmarked van, smiling cheerily as he tapped on the glass. Now to get these persistent hounds off the sent, and yelping back to their kennels, as need be.....

"Hello, boys!" he chirped, leaning to rest his arms on the door and propping his chin on the lowered window. "Lane! Jake! Good to see you!"

"Doctor," Jake replied after exchanging an embarrassed glance with Lane. It had to sting, having the
object of your surveillance come marching up to greet you.

"Now don't bother about me. Just popping by to tell you 'ello and not to worry about following me. See that lady over there?" he said pointing to a figure by the post box two blocks distant. "That's Madeleine. Wave hello to the lovely Maddy, boys!" He turned slightly to give a cheery wave to the person in question. Jake and Lane humored him and did as they were told, albeit looking mortified. "Now, Madeleine is a prostitute and we're going back to her place for a bit of fun. So unless you're in for watching... could use a few pointers, maybe? So unless that's your cup of tea, I'd suggest you run along back to the Wharf and let's keep this schtum, yeah?"

The sound of squealing tyres was loud in the morning air, and the Doctor was fighting laughter as he watched Jake and Lane make a hasty getaway. What a laugh! As if. Not that he was going to judge Maddy for his chosen profession, or his tendency toward wearing red miniskirts. Though, he couldn't fault the ginger wig. Commendable ambition, trying to be ginger. And he'd seen stranger things than blokes in heels. Bloody hell, if they'd looked before fleeing from too much "personal information best not shared", they'd have seen his beard. The numpties. The chap's beard was halfway to his belt and dyed purple. Clashed horribly, but he'd seen stranger things. Worn stranger things, he mentally added, thinking of a coat he'd once worn.

*I still don't know what possessed me. Looked like a rainbow sicker up on it. Oh well. Took me a few more gos, but look at me now!*

He was feeling smug as he promenaded down the pavement. He stepped around the few other people on the street, everyone greeting him. He felt so free here, he thought, nodding a greeting at Madeleine. No one judging him, and the odd punk cross-dresser being unusual enough, but barely noted with the familiarity. Even he managed to fit in, somewhat. Or atleast he wasn't the banana in the bushel of pears.

"Doctor," came the surprisingly deep voice.

"Edgar got you on on lookout all this week?"

A disgusted grunt was his only reply.

"Well, have fun. Don't rough em up too much, or pick too many pockets. Give my love to Lydia!" Charming couple really. Lydia was an actual woman, of the natural female variety. Worked on the docks. Strange pair, but it worked-- for them at least. Everyone else was still largely confused. *Ah, humans. Brilliant humans, with all their peculiar little quirks and oddities. Endlessly fascinating. Brilliant, other than the odd donut or two. Such like he was going to see a man about. Personally, he'd his druthers on looking up donuts of the edible fried pastry sort, rather than the idiotic sort of humanoid form, but needs must.*
Chapter 13

Rose could practically feel her heartbeat stutter to a terrified halt when she saw Jake and Lane walking into the hub alone. Suddenly, the day seemed that much colder, the sun a lot less bright. She didn't hold on preamble. "Why aren't you watching him? Anyone could go grab him off the street and do horrible sorts of things to him. Kidnapping, experiments, anything. You're supposed to be guarding him."

Jake looked uneasy; Lane was blushing furiously. "We thought it best if we stepped back a bit. Jason on Comms is monitoring the CCTV system live."

"But why?" Rose couldn't imagine what outrageous stunt the Doctor had pulled, but he'd obviously done something. Lane looked like a tomato. "What did he do now?"

Lane was the one to spill it. "Went off with some weird looking tart off the street. He came over to tell us, firstly."

"Even invited us along for the show," Jake added, looking bemused and slightly fascinated. "Sounds like he's doing some experimenting of his own, perhaps."

Rose sudden had a suspicion of what had actually happened. She was feeling more exasperated at this point, but she wasn't sure who exasperated her the most, these two or the walking emotional disaster who'd most likely just bamboozled them. "Describe the person you saw, please."

Lane spoke up first. "Red hair, red dress, four inch heels. Really, really tall. I mean tall. Taller than him, even. Kinda.... odd looking. You wouldn't forget her, that's for sure. Never in a donkey's years."

Jake laughed, then muffled it quickly, having come to a realisation. He shot an embarrassed and distressed look at Rose. "I'm thinking and looking back now, and.... that was a man, Lane. Not a woman."

Rose could almost see the gears turning in Lane's head as he tried to do the maths. It was all she could do to keep a straight face.

"Does that mean..." Lane started to hazard before he faltered off into silence. At least he was trying to be sensitive to the feelings of hers he assumed would be horribly hurt. Kind enough to be mindful of the possibility of a broken heart. Right.

"No," Rose explained gently, trying not to smile in amusement. "It does not mean that. It means you've both been wowed by the ultimate flim-flam man, the Doctor." She finally let out the held in laughter when Jake started laughing in appreciation of the trick played on them. At least he'd a sense of humor. Better than her own, because he sounded totally amused. "Don't feel bad, Lane. You're not the first, and you won't be the last," she added as kindly as she could manage after she'd calmed a bit. Feeling slightly ashamed. It wasn't professional to laugh at your colleagues like so. Even if they'd fallen for something that obvious.

"So you mean we've lost him," Lane said, remaining serious. "He could be anywhere, and we've not got the foggiest where he is."

"Fuck it all, he's right," Jake complained. "He's absolutely right. We've been had. Big time. And this
is all about to go pear-shaped, I'm guessing. Christ on a crutch."

They all sobered at that astute if vulgar observation. Too bad Lane's visual observation skills weren't up to par with his situational assessment ones, because he was right. "Shit," Rose muttered, the sentiment fully heartfelt. And from the expression on Jake's face, he was finally getting the gist of who they were dealing with. Too bad he couldn't understand the full complexities of dealing with that same frustratingly brilliant and mind-bogglingly thick individual daily. Much less try being in love with him.

Why, of all people, had she not expected this? Or warned them. She'd requested a protection detail on him for a reason. Damn and double damn. Now she'd really have to hope Jason could maintain a visual on him. That or she'd have to go track him down herself, and she wasn't sure if he'd want to see her. After what she'd said to him, it only would be along the lines of a normal reaction. From him, hard telling what kind of reaction he'd have once he'd found the words to express himself. Or how many apologies would it take to convince him she really was sorry.

"So who gets to do the honors, and tell Pete? 'Cause I am out of here," Lane said, sounding slightly panicked. He eyed Rose hopefully.

"Shame. Sally's not in today," Jake added. "She'd do in a pinch. She's the champion bearer of bad news."

"No one is. And certainly not Sally. No one else is getting involved, besides us. Because we're all going to go out there and find him," Rose explained firmly. That is, if he wants to be found and isn't planning to lead us on a merry chase around the Greater London area.

Later in the van, Lane casually remarked, "Wouldn't it be great to be able to step back a bit and appreciate the sheer brilliance of a mind that devious and cunning? Really, the things he could come up with.

Jake and Rose exchanged a tired look, nodding solemnly.

"Right, Lane. We'll all happily do that... after we've caught up with that devious mind. Until then, button it and keep your eyes peeled. He could be anywhere. Anywhere at all. Even where you least expect it," Jake said sagely, recalling things Mickey and Rose had told him in the past.

"Especially where you least expect him," Rose added grudgingly.

Finding the shop from the CCTV footage was no hardship. Miles ran a lovely little shop. One of those ones with second-hand odds and sods. And this was a fine one. Just about everything you could imagine was stacked to overflowing on disorganized shelves-- provided your imagination was limited to earth in the 19th through 21st centuries, but still. It was oddly impressive. He'd love to have a good rummage through a pile like this one. Never knew what you'd find, rubbish or treasure it was all waiting to be discovered. Unfortunately, exploration would have to wait, since the only treasure he could spare the time for now was information.

"Ah, Miles! How are you? How's business? How much does one of these cozy wee holes in the wall run, when it's up to let? And to whom do you make the payments?" A flurry of questions, but things like that usually worked on the man. While he was busy thinking up a clever answer to one question, he was already being bombarded with the next. Confusing all the mental reservations, verbal cues
and voila! Out pops the answer you were looking for. He'd be easy-peasy for the coppers to crack in an interrogation room. Should tell Bryn, with the loose lips and ocean going vessels at risk of being scuppered. Could do. After he'd decided whether to hang that particularly thick individual out to dry. He was the one who'd started this particular mess.

Not happening this time. Must be serious business, he thought as Miles shook his head. "Nope, not happening. I know how you work, mate, and I'm not talking. I've got a family to consider."

The Doctor paused briefly before taking a different tack. "I already know it's Dougal Chambers. I just need to know how to get ahold of him. Nothing major, just something he might be interested in. A deal of sorts, you might say." Like hand it over and I might not do everything in my power to set the Shadow Proclamation after you. Interference with a level 5 planet be damned, see how he'd like that close encounter of the third kind.

Miles gave him a glare. "I told you once already. No. Now bugger off."

The Doctor knew when to declare the battle lost, even if the war wasn't over by any means. There were more properties on that list of council taxes that he'd memorized. He'd find another way about things. He gave a brief glance around before giving Miles a knowing smile. "Sorry for wasting your time. Ta." He knew that business was dismal. Or at least the visible legal one. As for the sidelines job of running illegal betting, well... all bets on that could be off in future. Depended if that DI was still following him around. Really, as if he'd not notice the panda car. Or the glaring female copper inside.

Then again, he reckoned she was purposely being obvious about the surveillance. Her lack of subtlety was devious in it's own way. Rather refreshing, that kind of openness, he thought as he ran over and unabashedly pulled the door open and jumped in on the passenger side. Time to make an impression. If the first round hadn't taken. It was so hard to judge whether one's actions had the desired effect. So hard to tell with humans sometimes. Could go too far overboard, or be too subtle and they'd miss it entirely.

"The hell--" Gail Evans cried, completely shocked.

"Drive, woman! For heaven's sake, drive!" he shouted urgently, turning to look behind them. "Drive!"

Automatically, the DI stomped her foot down on the accelerator, grinding gears as she went. She checked her mirrors, on full alert. "What is it? Did Chambers threaten you?" Her voice was tense, ready for action.

He leaned back in the seat, stretching and putting his hands behind his head comfortably. "Naw, forgot my bus pass and fancied a cup of tea in Highgate. I'd rather not walk," he added cheerfully, ignoring the look of offended disbelief and giving her a sunny smile. He was good at being cheeky. Always threw 'em for a loop.

Gail almost slammed on the brakes she was so angry. She stared at him before turning back to focus on the traffic. "Has anyone told you you are a complete arse?" she asked dryly.

"Oh, a few times. Alien git, insufferable prat, and/or even rendering them totally speechless with rage comes up just as often. More so perhaps, now that I think about it. Why ever would you ask?" he said, blinking innocently. He gave her a wink when she looked at him in outraged amusement.

"You think you're so clever," she snorted.
"I am! Blagged a free ride from a copper without any handcuffs being involved," he said, insisted, smiling smugly. "You were even ready to put on the emergency lights back there. I am so clever."

Gail snorted. "So clever that you didn't notice me throwing the locks to the doors, you mean. You'll be getting out when I say," she replied, even more smugly.

"Right." Deflating slightly, he sheepishly decided to bargain. "What do you want to know, then? I mean, you'd hardly be hauling me off for my good looks. Though, wouldn't blame you if you did." He gave her a teasing smirk.

Right, possibly too far overboard. Perhaps. Maybe?

"As if. With that gob, hmmph. What I want to know is who the hell are you and how the hell do you keep ending up in the middle of things, and why?"

He paused thoughtfully, pretending to study the topmost edges of the windscreen. "Well, to answer your questions. Dunno, but does anyone really know anyone? Really? Even themselves? No. People see what they want to see mostly, and call it good. As for the rest, I'm just lucky. I suppose. My lucky number keeps popping up, I guess. If I'd this luck with the lottery, weel..."

"Doctor, or whoever the hell you are? Shut it. Just finish answering without the philosophical debate or speculation about things of which the possibilities are slim to none. At this point, you finding your way into my good graces and staying out of the gaol cell you were in yesterday are included on that list of possibilities that are slim to none," Gail advised him. "Why are you poking around in my case?"

"Just rattling a few cages. Chumming the waters, so to speak. Waiting to see what turns up-- or doesn't," he admitted. "Staves off the boredom." He had to admire the woman, in a way that left him aghast. She could turn a phrase, that she could, but did she have to be so... harsh?

"What do you know about this Chambers? I've tried accessing his file, since even Interpol's on the watch for him, but that's also on the Authorized Access list. Like you," Gail said pointedly.

"Don't look at me. I'm not in charge of how they manage their filing system," he said sarcastically. "I know no more than you. I'd go round asking them, since I'm sure they'd tell me, but I'd rather not. That would really show my hand and well... you can probably guess ol' Pete wouldn't be too thrilled."

"But you could get that information?" Gail pressed.

"Could do," he said evasively. "But I won't. There's a better way to handle that lot than just going in storming La Bastillé, so to speak."

Gail pulled the car over by the kerb so she could look at him safely. She didn't see any overt signs of deception, just plain earnestness. Maybe that should be the signal to be more concerned, she thought. "What do you propose, then?"

He made a face, clearly considering it. "A fair exchange of information, and you unlock these doors as a sign of good faith."

Gail nodded slowly, considering, before flicking the lever to the master locking mechanism. "Deal. What do you want to know?"

He cocked his head slightly, expression grave and very serious. "Now, you humans-- you've some curious expressions. Like 'your goose is cooked', implying one is in a situation that extrication is
highly doubtful. Now, rhetorically speaking-- of course-- if one was in such a situation without possessing said goose-- but an actual one, mind you- could one's goose be properly considered to be cooked? Or would it be in a state of absolutely being uncooked for want of said goose, proverbial or otherwise? Or for that matter, both?"

Gail was once again staring at him in disbelief. "Did your parents drop you on your head? When you were a baby perhaps. Or a bit older, maybe?"

With his loftiest expression, he looked at her with all the disdain and affronted dignity of a Time Lord of Gallifrey. "I think not, madam. I was loomed. They'd antigravity cushions 'round the whole complex to prevent such mishaps. No telling, however, how many branches your ancestors hit on the way down when they fell out of the flipping tree." Just disregard the touch of Chiswick in his inflection, and no one would ever know but him.

Chuckling to dispel the feeling she'd just been horrendously insulted, she said, "You are totally and completely mad. You know that, don't you?"

Immediately the haughty appearance of extreme offence disappeared from his features and he smiled in delight. "Really? How kind of you to say so. I most ever so humbly return your kind sentiments and regards."

Rolling her eyes at the sudden show of almost courtly manners, albeit sarcastic, DI Gail Evans turned serious again. "Now, what concrete and verifiable evidence or information can you give me?"

She would later wish she'd taken note of their location beforehand, because that's when he said dramatically, "Just this." Before she could even blink, he was bounding out the door at a full run, yelling as he went. "Thanks for the lift, but this is my stop. Buh-bye now!"

He should be sectioned, she thought. He's mad as a hatter. Nearly got run over in the street twice, pulling that one. But he did turn her on to the Torchwood connection and hinted at taking a softer approach. She had to admit that. Crazy like a fox, that one, she thought as she restarted the panda car. Since we're in Hackney, perhaps he's got some local haunts I can pick him up again in future. Can't hurt to try it. Not like he actually told me a damn thing that I didn't already know, the nutter.

Jake looked at Rose with a hint of concern. "There's no sign of him here, or anywhere."

Indeed, there was little sign of anyone having been in the small flat recently, with the amount of dust layered on the few uncluttered surfaces. Jake wondered if it was even possible to have been able to discern the Doctor's recent presence, with all the scattered bits and bobs. There were reels of wiring of various gauges, broken radios and other electronics of earthly origins torn apart and cannibalized for parts. Also plenty of things of non earthly origins that he recognized as probably belonging back in the vaults at Torchwood. Things he supposed hadn't been reported missing and the records now likely lost, destroyed, or erased. He trusted the Doctor enough to know that none of this would be exploding and wiping out the city. Atleast, not on purpose. He hoped.

"He was here. I know it. See--" Rose pointed to the discarded jumper thrown across the back of the sofa. "That's his. He was wearing it yesterday evening." She looked around. Hard to tell beyond that, but the oddments of wiring that were out of their rolls were carefully spliced together and starting to look like something purposefully done.

"Yeah, but since then... Edgar's not seen him."
"Jake, he's not going to leave that alone for long. Not without someone to look after it for him. He had Donna and Wilf doing it while he was recuperating from his injuries. No matter what, he'd not have the TARDIS coral unattended."

Jake looked at the unassuming looking large tan lump that was now sitting in what looked like a kids sandbox as far as he could tell. Now around the size of a small filing cabinet, it was hard to believe it was a spaceship of any sort. More like a giant loofah, or something belonging on the seabed in a tropical lagoon rather than a small one bed flat in Hackney. There was a strange looking device and a wiring harness of some sorts over it.

"How long before it looks like anything?" Jake asked, hoping that didn't sound too particularly rude. He knew Rose had hesitated to bring him here. Going in by herself at first, before she came back to tell him it was safe for him to come up. This was pretty much the Doctor's inner sanctum, as well as his workshop. Everyone knew he spent more time here than he did in the garage he was supposedly employed at below.

Rose shrugged. "Dunno. He's not really said, and I'm not sure he knows." She bent and reached out to gently pat the coral, getting a sense of somnolence and peace from it, but nothing else. Standing straight again, she took another look around the flat for anything else that might've given her a clue to where he'd gone or when he'd last been there. "He probably went to cadge a meal off the Singhs below. They'll have seen him, anyhow. Habib is like that, keeps an eye on things."

As they were descending the stairs, Lane suddenly buzzed them on their communicators. "Jason's called through." He was nearly breathless with excitement. "We'll have to postpone looking for the Doctor, he said, unless you've found him. He said we could really really use him if possible."

Jake and Rose sped up, both listening in carefully as Lane relayed the information from HQ. The remote controlled robot, equipped with the time stream sensors recycled from the Dimension Cannon had been sent into the tunnel less than an hour before apparently. It had taken most of that time to get to the vicinity of that corridor with the three doors. Only to find that the turn off wasn't there, and all the readings came back normal.

"What? That's impossible!" Jake snapped.

"We all saw it. The Doctor was ready to jump in head first," Rose insisted. "It couldn't have just disappeared like it never existed."

Having made it to the van, they all glared at the view screen in frustration and disbelief. Jason shrugged at their expressions and sighed over the Comms unit. "Sorry, just telling it like it is. Nothing but a blank section of concrete wall, and nothing else to see other than a few decades worth of grime on it. Don't shoot the messenger, but I saw the whole thing, live. Coordinated the visual relay feeds to the Director himself. And yes, Rose, your dad knows you-know-who is AWOL. He said to tell you never mind that for now, and there's a disturbance in Shoreditch to be checked out. If you're lucky, you'll find the Doctor there already, being nosy and caught wind of it. That is, if he's not started it," Jason added.

Rose closed her eyes and started counting to ten, really hoping the Doctor wasn't involved in this mess. With the run ins with the police, and everything else the last few days, if he got a field team called out again, Pete would probably hit the roof. "What is it this time?"

Jason glanced away, obviously busy monitoring several feeds back at Canary Wharf, even as he was filling them in. He had a look of wonder when he turned back a few moments later. "Now, that's a new one. Got some chaps dressed like medieval monks on the High Street. Seven of them, to be exact."
All of them in the van crowded closer to the view screen, as if they subconsciously thought that would help them see better. "Monks? What're they doing?" Lane asked, craning his neck more.

Rose shifted uncomfortably as her personal space was invaded, while Jake elbowed him as Jason replied, "Marching about. Chanting, from the looks of it. I can see their lips moving."

"I knew we should've pressed for the upgrades that would have added audio to the CCTV feeds," Jake said sagely, as he shot Lane another glare. He started up the van, causing Lane to scramble back into the rear section of the vehicle.

Rose nodded, agreeing. "Would've helped. But monks, in Shoreditch?"

Jake smiled, obviously feeling the thrill of adventure blooming. Anything was better than trying to track down the Doctor. Not that he wasn't worried, but his opinion was that if they gave him some space, maybe he'd stop causing such a ruckus. "Apparently. Hopefully it's some reenactment group, or just some nutter. Could be a new ingenious method of busking for the tourists," he speculated.

"Yeah," Rose mused. "But why've I got the feeling we're just not that lucky?"

They all purposely ignored the sight of Madeleine cheerfully waving goodbye as they passed. They already had a silent, unspoken agreement that they would never speak about the earlier incident ever again.
Chapter 15

Pete leaned over his desk, reading through the day's acquisition requests and departmental reports when his secretary rang through. Scowling at the disturbance from his work, he hit the intercom button. "Yes?"

"Sir, there's someone here from the police, wanting to speak with you."

"Send them in," Pete said, sighing. He already had an idea what this might be about, but really hoped he'd be wrong. He was surprised to see DI Evans step through the door. "May I help you?" Didn't he have enough on his agenda? He was already planning to take a couple hours this evening to track down his daughter's half alien flatmate for a serious talk, man to man. Or man to half alien, as it were.

DI Evans squared her shoulders and spoke calmly, having already decided to disregard the orders from her superiors. "This isn't official, sir. It's about a mutual acquaintance of ours. The Doctor sent me. Told me you'd be able to give me the information I need. About Dougal Chambers."

Police looking for the Doctor with questions? Yes, he'd almost resigned himself to that possibility on a daily basis. The Doctor sending the police with questions for him? Definitely not on his list of the Expected Eventualities Involved With Dealing With the Slightly Unhinged Product of a Biological Metacrisis. He gave her a look of unrestrained surprise before politely waving her to a chair, wondering what this was really about.

"May I offer you some refreshment?" he asked even more politely, stalling for time. Hopefully this wasn't about criminal charges, reckless behavior or any untoward disturbances caused in the last 24 hours. Or a message being relayed from Hartley complaining about using the gaol for a failed attempt at an intervention.

Gail perched on the offered seat, barely glancing around the plush office suite. She was too focused on the conversation to care about looking around. "No, thank you, sir. I would rather the information and he told me you'd likely know or be able to get it."

Pete raised his brows in disapproval, surprised at the young woman's determination and direction. "That's confidential information best gained through the official channels," he advised.

This was definitely unexpected. And he wasn't certain he appreciated having his own valuable time used like this, being a method for distracting the police. He leaned forward, extremely interested in this puzzling development. There was likely more to this then met the eye, the Doctor's methods of subterfuge and machinations aside. Pete was well despairing of the fact the man was either straightforward and tactless, or subtle and scheming with no middle ground between. And the more subtle he was being, the more Pete had to worry. He had come to regret explaining to the bloke that he was not the boss of them, and no longer a law unto himself. Having twisted the message Pete had been trying to convey, now he was left with these kinds of situations to deal with.

Gail wasn't daunted by the fact she would likely be facing a stern lecture and reprimand and possibly getting the sack with just one phone call to Hartley. Indeed not. "I've tried, and it's impossible, everything is Authorized Access Only, and that authorization is not likely to happen. Not for one in my position. But this, this is extremely important, I fear. This could possibly mean more than is immediately evident. Please, Mr Tyler, is there anything you can tell me?"
Pete rubbed at his forehead, leaning back in his chair and giving Evans a look of frustration. He didn't know why she was so determined about this and couldn't fathom why the Doctor would send her here, of all places. Rather, he could after seeing the woman's bulldog tenacity. But the urgency seemed unwarranted, especially on an individual long since forgotten by most. Obviously the Doctor wasn't interested in answering questions either, and these ones were not ones he'd have any answers to himself.

"Look, Dougal Chambers is most likely dead. He was a research scientist, as well as a crony of Lumic's. Disappeared back before the Cybermen were barely even a vague idea just starting to fester in Lumic's fevered imagination. You're probably chasing a ghost, so there's nothing to go looking for there," he said firmly. He didn't want to contemplate how much acceleration of the events after there would have been, but for that rumored falling out. Add in the disappearance, and the whole thing had always looked a bit dodgy. Especially now, with a young copper coming in on her noontime break.

"Then why is he still listed as owning seventeen properties throughout the Greater London area?" Gail inquired pointedly, refusing to let it go.

Pete gave her another look. "Probably because he died without heirs and the probate court hasn't sorted the whole mess out?" He gave an arm wave of exasperation. "I don't know. There was a lot of cases like that right after the Cybus mess, as I'm sure you'd imagine. His solicitor probably handles such things, if the solicitor even managed to survive. I barely knew the man and the intricacies of the courts and inheritance relating to that particular case are hardly my concern when I've got enough on my plate as it is."

He'd not even heard anything on Dougal Chambers beyond a casual mention a long time ago and a second investigation into his disappearance that had been reopened once the Cybermen had been eradicated. An investigation that had turned up nothing, same as the initial one when he’d first gone missing. Then came the stars going out, and everything not directly related had gone by the wayside with all efforts and resources going into the development of the Dimension Cannon. Things had been prioritized and things not of immediate importance had been set aside.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you on his whereabouts. No one's seen him in almost fifteen years."

"What sort of research?" she pressed, leaning forward in hopeful anticipation. She had an inkling this might be a relevant question. With many, even more relevant answers.

Pete sighed, giving her a rueful frown. Just as determined as he'd first thought. "That's something that they checked into in the first two investigations into Chambers' disappearance. Figured that there'd be a connection, besides Lumic, but nothing. Other than rumors of his interest in alien tech, which would put that squarely in our jurisdiction," he said pointedly. "That was never confirmed, nor denied, as all the records were lost in the subsequent chaos following... well, you know. Everything." He gave her a sharp look, silently reminding her of how much had been lost by so many back then.

Gail nodded, knowing well what he meant. She and her sister had lost their parents to conversion, and had had the fortune to survive by being some of the many orphans sent into the countryside away from the cities. But still, there was so much unanswered, and too many ties to recent events to ignore. Either Dougal Chambers was alive, or someone else was bent on making it look that way. It would be a shameful and unlikely thing that someone would try casting the blame on a dead man. But if they were, they obviously were privy to his records and personal information. More information than she was currently getting. Information that she desperately needed, if the Doctor wasn't willing to be forthcoming on his end of the mess.
She made a face expressing her dissatisfaction and looked Pete straight in the eye, her voice almost pleading. "Isn't there anything else you can tell me? His name keeps popping up in my investigation and the records are sealed. Come up almost as much as the Doctor's does, for that matter. There's too much there to ignore."

Pete narrowed his eyes, feeling almost a wave of triumphant satisfaction. Finally, they were getting to the crux of the matter. After a very roundabout way to do so, he noted. It looked like subterfuge was the order of the day, from both this detective and her now obvious target. "If you're thinking the Doctor's done something nefarious, then you're barking up the wrong tree, madam. He may be daft, irresponsible, and fully infuriating, but he's mostly harmless. As far as acting by intent goes, that is."

Gail made a disparaging noise in her throat before replying with a hint of bitter humor. "Other than obstruction, refusing to answer questioning and sending me on wild goose chases after dead men, he's done nothing." She gave Pete a sympathetic look, using a confiding tone as she said, "I'm not actually aiming to get him, but if I have to...." She left the rest unsaid. "He's got ties to several of the names that keep popping up, and when I had him look at the CCTV footage, he didn't half look like he'd seen a ghost. Then he buttoned up, wouldn't tell me anything, then later sent me here under the premise that you knew something."

Business as usual, Pete surmised. At least as far as dealing with the Doctor was concerned. He was just busy making someone else's job a misery, not just mucking about in affairs that were properly Torchwood's. With some persuasion and promises to not take over the investigation, he got DI Evans to outline the case. He too was concerned when she mentioned the Doctor had known exactly what he'd seen on the footage and had refused to indulge anymore information. Not precisely because of the Doctor's stymying, more why he'd be that reticent.

When a bloke with that much of a gob is being closemouthed, he thought, that's not a good sign. Not good, indeed. Perhaps it was time to bring the man in for a proper sit down and talk. Find out what the impending doom is, try to divert it, and try for the impossible. Like getting him to not jump headfirst into it, so he can tempt fate and sanity alike.

He gave her a sympathetic look in return. "I'm sorry I can't help you any further, but I will try my best to get him to talk to you. He can be rather... difficult, you might say, as I'm sure you've found out for yourself already. If he knows anything... well I can't promise much, other than I'll try." He folded his hands and breathed out heavily, already thinking deeply. He looked up and smiled. "Not to be rude, I'm a terribly busy man, and I've got field teams out handling a situation that really should have some supervision," he said standing and hinting that the meeting was over. He figured one of Chambers' projects was the reason for the sealed files, but the rest of it made no sense to him. Illogical or not, it wasn't something he'd be speculating about with a common detective looking on. Especially if there happened to be any ties to the anomaly in the sewers.

As Gail was leaving, he added, "Do tell the Doctor that it would be more prudent if he'd handle his own business in future, instead of sending someone else, and that he should take care to not get himself into too much of a mess. We've already gone over budget, cleaning up his messes for this quarter alone."

Gail flushed, refusing to qualify that with a denial. It would be pointless, and she was already planning to have words with the bloke in question. She didn't appreciate being deceived or manipulated, even if this hadn't exactly been fruitless. Not like she'd come in an official capacity with any authority, either. She now knew that Dougal Chambers was missing and presumed dead. She had a niggling worry that the old saying about assuming would be coming around to bite them in the arses.
Jake slammed on the brakes, barely missing the kerb and the back of another haphazardly parked (abandoned) vehicle. Before them, the High Street was almost completely blocked by gawkers, all gathered to stare at the unusual group in the street. "Lane, anything on the scanners?" he asked as he gathered his gear. Rose was already jumping out, a universal translation device in hand.

"Just some unknown residual energy, same as what was showing up down in that sewer," he said, barely looking up from the display on his palm top device. He'd already been assigned to stay in the van to relay the happenings to HQ.

The monks were already known to be in a panic and shouting something the translators had said were accusations of the work of the devil. In a mixture of middle English and Latin, no less. It all called for an interesting and peculiar situation. And weren't they in a bother! Not surprising, getting pulled from the 12th century to the 21st with no warning and no previous experience with time travel for that lot. "There's a bit of chatter coming in over the feeds- this isn't the first strange happening that's been reported in this area. Seems like there's a police detective sniffing around, already been at HQ asking questions. The Director's got an alert out to all field teams to keep an eye out for her and you-know-who," he added.

Jake was already looking over the crowd for any signs of familiar faces or what could've caused this anomaly. He answered Lane over the comms unit. "Yeah, we'd already figured that. Do let them know back at HQ that this isn't exactly our first time out dealing with him. If it's weird, potentially dangerous or just plain not good, expect him to be right in the midst of it all."

She'd pushed her way through the crowd, using polite commands to "step aside, please" and "official Torchwood business" to outright blunt shoving, all to see what the spectacle was. Seeing it, she couldn't say she'd seen anything of the like before. Seeing people from different times and places was one thing. Seeing them juxtaposed against the backdrop of a modern location, with very modern locals rubbernecking and capturing photos with their mobiles -- it was rather surreal, so to say. She was already scanning the crowd for a familiar mop of unruly brown hair, knowing this would be something to tickle the Doctor's fancy.

Already she was missing him like mad, regretting every minute what she'd said. Or rather, how she'd said it. Semantics aside, they needed to sort things out, but as always, things kept popping up to distract them. Like it had always been between them. So much left unsaid because it wasn't the time. (Disasters looming, despots to depose, or alien invasions of various types -- some things never changed.) Or the place, unless they really really had no choice, then temper, snark, and glaring (and later joking and deflection) had been the proven methods. And because the universe seemed to have decided (along with the proper, Time Lord Doctor) that it would be hilariously funny, she had her blue eyed, broken soldier in the body of her brown eyed charmer with the really great hair. Along with a healthy dose of forthright ginger temp in there, just to keep things interesting. She reminded herself to ask him about that again, when he finally came home and she'd managed to unruffle the feathers and rebuild his much maligned ego.

Rose approached the group of seven men in their brown homespun wool robes all huddled together, moving slowly and holding her hands out in a nonthreatening manner. "Hello?"

They were busy praying, didn't even acknowledge her presence other than their fevered chants grew louder. "In nomine Patri, et Fili..."
"Please, we mean you no harm. We're here to help. You've been pulled out of your own time..."
Rose offered, but saw that her words were anything but a comfort. She was trying to think what the
Doctor would have done in her place when she felt the air around her changing.

It felt like the air during an electrical storm, just before the lightening struck. Her misgivings about
the whole situation went into overdrive and she tried to back away. Trying to retreat, but only finding
that she seemed to have been suddenly immobilized by some unknown force was not in the least bit
comforting. It was a similar feeling to the jumps with the Dimension Cannon, but not, at the same
time. And not in a good way, either.

"...et Spiritu Sancti..." came the rising chant, the monks praying for salvation from the agents of
damnation, just as the air seemed to tighten like a fist around her.

Rose could faintly hear Jake calling her name, the air around her and the group of monks taking on a
bluish cast. The crowd of onlookers seemed so much more distant than the ten meters her memory
told her and she noted the distortion to her perceptions. Blinking in apprehension, she noticed time
seemingly slowing to a stand still. She was on the verge of letting herself panic for once when
something heavy hit her from behind. Then everything disappeared into the waiting darkness.

The Doctor ducked back out onto the street after he was certain that DI Evans was gone. It was a
relief, dodging that particular question and answer session, though he knew eventually he'd not be
able to avoid it. At some point, he'd have to tell what he knew, but he hoped that happy little
occasion could wait until after he'd sorted this mess out. Before then, he'd have to have another
"chance encounter" with the lovely Detective Inspector to see what interesting bits of news she'd
managed to pry out of Pete. Of course, he could've asked himself, but that would have defeated the
point. The point being that he wanted to avoid any well intentioned meddling by everyone bent on
mother henning him to death or mollycoddling him to madness.

Really, insecurities and identity crisis aside, this was all old hat to him. Rush in, save the day, rescue
the damsel in distress, and slay the monster. All very normal, really. Other than the bothersome,
traumatizing times when everything went pear-shaped. Like when the damsel ended up slain, the
monsters survived (or worse, their spectres took up residence in his mind, forever mocking him from
the darkness within) and the day generally went to shite. It tended to be 50/50 odds for him.

He was wandering along, considering his options and his next move when something set the hairs on
the back of his neck to rising. Something was up, as clearly evidenced by the mob of people gathered
on the High Street. It wasn't something normal on a week day, during the hours people would
generally be at their humdrum, mundane jobs. But something had caught their attention, distracting
them from the usual business of their humdrum, mundane lives. And that, in turn, got his attention.
Hey, anything for a bit of excitement. Could be worth it. Could even be tied into this whole
confounded mystery he was finding himself hip deep in.

Hip deep and getting deeper, he mused when he caught sight of brown homespun. Blimey, what's
with the sudden spate of blokes in robes around here? Newfangled fad, or something?

Content to be a spectator for once, he just stood back and let event unfold as they would. Honestly,
he didn't think he wanted the attention that stepping in would bring, nor did he think he could fake
the confidence required. Someone more qualified (or at least someone who's job it actually was)
would show up and handle it. Plus, he didn't think his appearance would be any comfort or be any
more likely to convince these medieval monastical types that this wasn't the work of their particular
devil. For all he knew, it was. Not that he subscribed to their belief system, but he didn't have any
more likely suspects. Misguided human or alien menace, he had no clue either way. But at least he
knew what they'd used to cause this.

He turned away when he heard mutters of "bloody Torchwood" from the people around him. He was getting ready to slip away through the crowd to a more advantageous and less visible observation point, when he saw a familiar looking van, and a more familiar looking pink and yellow human.

Of course she'd turn up, he thought fondly. Couldn't miss the excitement. That's my girl.

He couldn't contain the proud grin when he watched Rose trying to calm the clearly terrified monks. His precious girl. Doing the job he'd taught her, and doing far better than he could've managed at this point.

She was so strong and capable now, he thought. Why'd she need me about, holding her back and making her life miserable, he thought. She's got that fantastic life I always wanted for her, going out every day, defending the earth and being so magnificently Rose Tyler. Why ruin a good thing?

Clutching his fists against his own self doubts, he was making his way back through the crowd when he felt the air change. Rose. Jeopardy friendly as ever, he just knew it. His head snapped around, instinct and experience putting him into a full on dash. Shoving people aside with no time spared for manners or apologies, he ran.

The figure standing in an alleyway holding the Temporal Distortion gun was dressed all in black, with high leather boots and cargo trousers. The weapon was on a strap slung about their shoulders and aimed at the one individual in any universe that would guarantee them an instant enemy.

Clichés firmly adhered to, he noted wryly from that oddly detached corner of his mind that always stayed separate in those moments of crisis, when his whole world was teetering on the verge of collapse.

He felt the fabric of time begin to warp around him as he felt his lips draw back in a humorless smile. Ha! Time Lord. Try and beat that. I don't know who you are, or where you found your shiny new toy, but you'll not get away with this. I will hunt you down and stop you, and then you'll be sorry you ever thought to aim that bloody thing at my Rose.

Breath coming heavy and pulse pounding in his head, he threw himself through the air as the distortion field formed around Rose and the monks. Just barely did he manage to knock her aside in time, landing heavily on the pavement just beyond. The blinding flash of the monks disappearing back into whatever section of the timeline they'd been ripped from stunned him. It felt like someone had suddenly inflated a balloon inside his head -- then popped it just as quickly. That or they'd detonated a canister of Nitro-9 in his skull. Or maybe it was landing almost headfirst on the kerb. Plus it felt like he'd left half the hide on his arms and torso on the tarmac, and he was pretty sure that same kerb had cracked some of those ribs that weren't fully healed yet. Been a bugger of a week, he thought. Shame it's not over yet.

That same detached part of his consciousness was thoroughly bemoaning the fact he'd left the flat without his jacket or the hooded jumper that would've afforded him some modicum of protection, even as he was just glad he'd been at the right place and time to save Rose. Who knows what would have happened if she'd been caught in the collapse of that anomaly. Well, he'd a good idea, but it wasn't pretty.

Oh my head, that hurts just thinking about it. How long she'd have been trapped out of her own time, and what if... no, not going there. I can lay awake and relive the terror of all the possibilities later, but first... Rose.
He was just barely conscious when the crowd started pressing forward, and Jake was just a blur when he scrabbled to a semi upright position to check on Rose. Propping himself up on elbows, he looked around while fighting the sudden feeling of vertigo. "Rose?"

Jake merely glanced at him over his shoulder, voice tight with concern as he said, "She's just knocked out," before he got on the comms unit, shouting into the radio for a med team. Lane suddenly appeared from the crowd and was bending over him, poking and prodding him and pulling up his eyelids to look into his eyes.

"Bugger off," the Doctor snarked, trying and failing to pull away. The man was blocking his view of Rose and he didn't have the patience to deal with someone fussing over him. "Rose! Worry about Rose, I'm not important. Rose?"

"Doctor?" Her hesitant and bleary reply was music to his ears, even as he could hear the distant sounds of sirens approaching.

"I'm here, Rose," he reassured her. Letting himself fall back, ignoring the feeling of his head thumping against the pavement, he just laid there blinking in exhaustion. Feeling the adrenaline wearing off, he could not say how relieved he was, or how terrified he'd truly been in those millennia long seconds. Or how tired and old he suddenly felt. Too tired to want to deal with the likes of this again. Not that he'd ever have wanted to. Bad enough every time he closed his eyes, he could see himself standing in a rundown barn, hand hovering over a big, shiny red button that never ever should've been pushed, and pushed it he had.

"I'm here," he mumbled, almost to himself. It was a benediction and a prayer both.
Chapter 16

Rose sat up blearily, noticing Jake's anxious expression as he crouched next to her. "God, that's terrible." Seeing his concern visibly grow, she quickly amended that to, "Don't worry. It's nothing worse than I handled with the Cannon. Just knocked the wind out of me."

Jake looked doubtful, but he nodded. "Well, I suppose that might explain the state of Himself, over there. Also the other half dozen or so in the crowd that are down for the count."

Already hearing sirens approaching, Rose knew it was bad. She tried to get up, ignoring the warm ache behind her eyes, but Jake was trying to persuade her to sit, catch her breath. "Let someone else handle it, the main response team was on its way."

Glancing around, she didn't see the monks and all she could see of the Doctor around Jake and someone else was his trainers. The only comfort was the sounds of him arguing with Lane and protesting he was fine and didn't need any primitive medical professionals hovering over him.

"Doctor?" She heard him say he was there, then an incoherent mumble followed. That set off the alarm bells, and she tried again to get up, but Jake pushed her back gently.

"Just sit. You're more likely to keel over and do yourself a injury otherwise. Lane's looking him over right now," he said, obviously trying to sound cool and collected. "He's fine. Or as well as you can expect with him."

"What the hell happened?" Rose asked immediately, seeing through the thin veneer of calm. The adrenaline rush from this wouldn't wear off for hours.

Jake sighed, but didn't try distracting her from the seriousness of the situation or what had spooked him. "I don't.... just everything seemed to happen at once. Looked over when I heard people yelling, saw him running at you and knocking people aside like bowling pins. Before I could even blink, the air around you and those blokes in the funny robes went all.... strange." He blew a breath out through pursed lips. "At the same time, Lane was yelling about hostile action and I was already bringing up my blaster."

Rose stared at him, all vestiges of disorientation fading. Jake didn't have to say the rest, because she knew. Such a close brush with a near tragedy, all because of a few mixed messages. Getting her breath back became peripheral, as she bolted upright and then ran over to make sure her the thoughts that haunted her in the darkest moments of the last two months hadn't come true.

Sure enough, the Doctor was stretched out on the pavement. But he was awake, blinking up at the sky in a dazed way. Almost like he was concentrating on a solution for something, judging from the furrowed brow. Tunnel vision seemed a novel experience she thought as she knelt next to him. "God, Jake. You didn't..."

Coming up beside her, he gave her a snort of disgust. "You don't think I'd...? It was set to stun, anyhow. Never even fired it. Didn't have the time."

"Doctor?" No response, other than a slightly ditsy looking smile.

"Doctor!" She was more insistent, more harsh as her frustration and distress was getting stronger by the moment. The Doctor looked fine as far as she could see right then, other than a skinned elbow,
various scrapes and bruises. His breathing was fine, but she'd wait for the final verdict from the med team.

This time his eyes focused and he sat up suddenly, looking around like he expected them to be surrounded by enemies. He stood and pulled her behind himself, looking through the crowd and beyond where the monks had been. "I'm alright. Just a bit disoriented from the Distortion Wave. Right as rain, don't you worry," he threw over his shoulder in explanation.

"Doctor, what is it? What's threatening us?" she asked, trying to peer around him, only to have him push her back gently.

"Did you see him? The man, over there? He'd a gun-- he almost--" He whirled to face her suddenly, eyes intense and voice clipped. He turned to point at Jake and Lane. "You lot, get searching. He's still out there."

Rose looked at him with concern. Had he bumped his head or something? Or had they all been distracted by the anomalous medieval clerics in their midst?

"Who, Doctor? What did they look like?" Jake asked reasonably.

He gave Jake a look of disbelief. "What, does none of you have a decent set of eyes in your heads? The bloke over there by that alley. Black cargo trousers, boots-- the whole 'secret commando' get-up. Had a stonking great gun, pointed at Rose."

At that, Jake immediately called in backup. Within minutes the area was swarming with Torchwood agents and the entire crowd was being shuffled off to Canary Wharf for questioning about anything witnessed. The CCTV footage was pulled and being searched, according to Jason on Comms and Pete was on his way. That was barely a warning, as the black SUV was already pulling up.

Pete wasted no time to start barking orders or stopping the Doctor who was already trying to push everyone into hurrying faster. "Doctor, what the hell is this?"

The Doctor was also trying to make Rose stay in the middle of a group of other field agents for protection. She wasn't impressed with that idea, either and didn't hesitate to tell him either. "Doctor, I have crossed universes. Stop fussing. I'm a big girl."

He snorted. "Yeah, and you'd have been a big girl in the Crustaceous Period or Rassilon knows where else if I hadn't pushed you aside. Now, back behind the nice big, strong blokes who make lovely, and much larger targets. Much better ones than little pink and yellow Roses."

Pete obviously caught the last part, as he stepped forward and grabbed the Doctor by the arm. "You are coming with me." He ignored the indignant squawk of protest from the Doctor and motioned for Rose to follow. By the SUV, Pete turned to the fuming part Time Lord. "Now, before you go setting everyone in earshot of that last statement into an immediate state of insane panic, you're going to clarify that with a full explanation." He gave the Doctor a pointed look.

The Doctor was definitely in a mood, brushing Pete's hand off his arm with an offended sniff. "Pushy, pushy," he complained, rolling his eyes. "What I wouldn't give for one single ounce of respect around here."

"What I wouldn't give for there to be one single brain cell in that thick head of yours that wasn't bent on rebelling against all rationality, being an army of one and sheer bloody mindedness. But you can't always get what you want, now can you, Doctor," Pete retorted. "Now spill it."

The Doctor raised his chin stubbornly and crossed his arms over his chest. His attempt at being
intimidating was rather defeated by the torn t-shirt and the untied trainers. "I'll have you know I'm doing this under protest, and if we all get stuck in a weird real life imitation of that movie 'Groundhog's Day', it's on your head, Pete Tyler. Since you're going to be wasting time, faffing about, when I could be out there dealing with this." He glowered darkly. "Your head, not mine," he spat out.

Pete leaned forward slightly, getting close. "Yeah? And it'll be your arse in a containment cell for obstruction of an investigation until pigs fly and there's intergalactic peace, not just world peace if you don't tell me what the hell's going on here."

The Doctor gritted his teeth, fists clenched and posture ramrod straight. "You wouldn't dare."

Pete gave him a grim smile. "Torchwood. Try me. This is my world, not yours. You're not God, you're not the designated saviour of worlds here, you're just an aggravating little prat who's really trying my patience. Defending this planet, and all these people on it is my job, not yours. Your job is to quit the attitude and tell me what I need to know and shut the hell up."

The Doctor reared his head back, all ready to start an all out battle of wills with Pete, but he caught Rose's eye. She shook her head, silently begging him to give over, just stop being so stubborn. Already some of the security detail had been edging closer, ready to step in if things started to get too aggro. It was both relieving and heartbreaking to see him sag with defeat and step back, nodding slightly. A relief because nothing that wouldn't be too too regrettable had been said, and heartbreaking because she had an idea of what this concession cost him.

"Fine, but not here," the Doctor said wearily. He looked around uneasily, before looking back at Pete. "There's too many extra eyes and ears, and with what I've got to say..." He paused, reaching up a hand to rub the back of his neck. "Weell, let's just say they'd be running around panicking. Things would leak to the public, and next thing you'd know there'd be riots in the streets and looting everywhere."

Pete gave an unamused chuckle as he ushered them to the SUV. "Like the last time you 'handled' a situation your way? I'm sorry, but there's no way I'm letting you take your little biker pals in and deal with this. We've had enough destruction for the next three years already. If not longer."

The Doctor settled himself in the back seat indignantly, giving Pete sullen look, only looking less upset when Rose settled in next to him.

Pete started the vehicle, ignoring the Doctor's snide comment about that being unusual with not having a hired driver. He glanced into the mirror, catching the Doctor's eye after a few tense minutes of silence in the SUV.

"Now, I'm sorry if I've ruffled feathers, but this is getting out of hand. There's a DI Evans sniffing around, thinking we've got answers and as far as I can see, you're the only one who knows what the hell is going on. Even if I have to threaten you with bodily harm to get anything out of you," he added wearily. "There's also the experimental drugs back in R&D that would have you singing like a bloody canary in five minutes or less."

The Doctor hadn't failed to notice that they'd turned around and were presumably headed back to Torchwood HQ. He would've said something, lodged a protest, but knew it wouldn't help. He settled for glaring daggers at Pete's back. She tried diffusing the situation and his temper both.

"Come on, Doctor. Please," Rose said, hoping he'd be more tractable. "If it's this important..."

"What? So I can spend a couple hours dillydallying and running me gob, while one of those hopeless
idiots can get themselves zapped into the next century? Or set the lunatic who's got it into panicking
and- Whoops! It's Thursday, FOREVER?" He looked totally disgusted with everything about this
situation. "Bad enough this all started with that donut, Bryn bloody Holburn selling a Temporal
Distortion Gun to a flipping private collector. He just got the 'Idiot of the Week' award if you ask me.
If not the century. The dumbo."

Rose realized that Pete had probably purposely dragged her along, knowing the Doctor would be
more likely to tell her anything. Even if Pete was bluffing about experimental truth serums. At least,
she hoped he was. She was trying to place where she'd heard that name before. "Bryn? Didn't you
do a job installing an alarm system in his warehouse?"

"Hmmph. And turned a blind eye to all his extracurricular smuggling activities, too. A great stonking
great fool I am, since if I'd kept a closer eye on him, that weapon would probably be destroyed by
now. Dismantled and scattered in ickle tiny pieces across the English Channel 'bout now." He
slumped back to stare at the SUV's ceiling, shaking his head in contempt for himself.

Pete cut in then. "Who built it, and why? Where'd it come from and who has it?"

The Doctor straightened, holding up a hand with a flourish and using the other to tick off his answers
on his fingers with a sarcastically false jovial tone. "Time Lords. You don't want to know. Gallifrey,
but that's impossible, so I've no idea. And Dougal Chambers has it. That is, unless he gave it away,
or it was stolen. In which case, don't ask me."

"Dougal Chambers is dead," Pete said firmly, not wanting to accept that truth. Rose had never even
heard of the man.

"Fine, then Casper the bloody flipping Friendly ghost has got it, and you've got a serious haunting on
your hands, mate, and I'm fresh out of me ghost busting supplies. But don't go telling me you've got
anything better to go on, 'cause you don't," the Doctor snapped.

Suddenly Rose understood why he was so flustered. Forget being coerced into answering questions,
that was minor compared to what she was guessing was really upsetting him. God, between his
identity crisis that's in full bloom and this... "This thing. It's from the War," she stated simply,
knowing she was most likely right.

He nodded, eyes sliding away to stare towards the window, but she knew he wasn't seeing the
passing scenery or the other traffic. He swallowed, his lips twisting into something unreadable before
he schooled his face into a carefully blank expression.

"What does it do, this Temporal whatsit gun?" Pete broke in, guessing that was at the usual point
where someone else would be steering the topic onto lighter fare. "Besides making blokes in funny
clothes appear in the streets at random times and places."

The Doctor's voice was tired and strange, like something timeless and ancient dragged up from the
depths of antiquity as he answered. "It takes different points in timelines that should never ever
touch, and pulls them together. Hold the trigger too long, and they'll end up tied in a knot. Go further
than that, you need a Time Lock. Further than that, the whole timeline, from every point in the
history of the area starts to collapse. Then you've literally got everything happening at once and the
whole fabric of reality goes tits up. Unless you got a Panopticon and the Eye of Harmony hidden in
the broom closet to stabilize the time loops and keep it from spreading, or a spare De-Mat gun to lock
the whole planet as it burns. Because when I mean everything happening at once, that includes the
whole shebang forming from space dust and debris AND being incinerated when the sun expands in
the year 5.5/apple/26."
Rose couldn't help but shudder slightly at the odd way he managed to sound so emotionless and detached and still put emphasis on certain words. She reached out and took his hand, squeezing it silently. She knew what he was really saying, what he was admitting. What he wouldn't and couldn't say. This time he wouldn't face this alone, she vowed. Pete gave her a questioning look, but she shook her head. Some things only the Doctor could answer. It wasn't her place to tell Pete the little she knew about the Time War that still haunted the Doctor. She'd heard him wake up crying out enough times, heard him say in a doom laden voice, completely without hope, "The Daleks have the Crucible." She squeezed his hand again, almost surprised he didn't pull away. Forced every ounce of unspoken forgiveness, understanding and acceptance into that gesture.

Everything has its time. Everything dies, she wanted to say. Even Gallifrey. You may've been the instrument of it, but you were being played by the hand fate dealt you. You were doing what no one else could've. She knew him well enough to surmise that, but also well enough to know he'd never accept any absolution.

He wanted to close his eyes, but didn't dare.

Not again. To think it could all happen again... it was unthinkable. That weapon, here. He'd seen one in action. The Could've-Been King and his army of Meanwhiles and Never-neres. Whole armies dying hideous deaths, only for the timeline to loop so they went through the agonies without end. Looping without end right up until the Moment. But that was then; this was now.

From what he guessed, whoever was mucking about with the infernal thing either hadn't the foggiest on how to use it as it was meant to be and were just playing around. Or they hadn't the power source available to key it up fully. As dangerous as it was at a fraction of its capacity, insufficient batteries were hardly a comfort.

Pete brought them directly into the main briefing room and had him start outlining the rest. Starting with the obvious: "Do you know where it is?"

He gave Pete a look. The answer to that one was so obvious. Really? He sighed, trying his best to be patient, but letting some of his annoyance bleed through. "No. If I did." He left it unsaid. They couldn't be that thick. What else could he do, break out a biro and the A4 and draw them a diagram complete with not so pretty pictures?

He looked at Rose, silently apologising. Maybe if it was the other him, he'd be handling all this better. He could just go weeks without sleep and avoid the dreams. He could stuff the memories back behind the locked doors and throw away the key. As much as he'd always reveled in the sanctity and importance of emotions, he'd give anything now to summon up the Time Lordly impassivity. Since the metacrisis, everything felt so much stronger, more raw.

"What would the Time Lords have done if they were here?" Pete asked.

*Stick me -- both of me -- in a cage and poke me until they figured out what went wrong. They'd hide the embarrassment that is me in a hole to never see the light of day again. Worse yet, make me president again and chain me to the High Seat in the Council Room. But he said none of these things.*

"Same thing anyone with any wits would do. Find this loony, and take away his toy. Then start asking why, after they'd made sure there were no more things like it floating around where others can
have a go at destroying a good segment of reality."

He paced restlessly, keeping his eyes on the floor, the wall, anything without eyes. Eyes that he would have to gauge reactions and all that tricky business. Pockets were for hands, inanimate objects were to gaze at without really seeing, and the empty area beyond the conference table was his own little impenetrable island where no one and nothing could touch him. Nothing that didn't come from within.

Pete shook his head firmly. "That's too much for one man to do. Especially you. Not like you are."

The Doctor couldn't help but resent the hint of concerned compassion in Pete Tyler's voice. How dare he? As if he needed, much less deserved anyone's understanding. How could they possible wrap their little minds around the totality of what he'd said? Of what he'd seen and done. He didn't need their forgiveness. He'd done the unforgivable. Unforgivable because he'd started the whole mess. And he didn't need to wrapped in cotton wool. He'd been a lot worse off than this before. Far worse.

"Just give me the sonic back, and I'll have him tracked down in a day. Maybe less. Probably less. Be back in time for tea, even."

Pete gave him a skeptical look. "Then why didn't you have Dougal Chambers all sorted already? Seems like you'd have picked it up then."

Ooh, good point. He'd hoped they'd miss that embarrassing bit. He shuffled his feet, staring at his trainers. Time he washed these, or got a new pair. Put these up for special occasions, or when he wanted something from before to remember it by. Blimey, he was waxing nostalgic now. Worse than being maudlin.

"Doesn't have the range. The TARDIS scanners would've picked it up and notified me ahead of this, but..." He gave a shrug.

What could he do? No working TARDIS. Even if it could pick up any unusual readings at this stage of its development, he'd not know about it. Rose might've gotten a sense of its unease, but not know what it meant. Bloody metacrisis mucking everything up. Useless. Just flipping useless. At least Rose was being supportive, or hadn't realized how much of this cock-up he was to blame for. Because in the end, it was his fault. He wasn't what he used to be, couldn't do what he used to, and it looked like they were both just as jeopardy friendly as ever, without him being able to protect her so easily. It never should have gotten this far, and now everything was at risk.

In the end, the teams came back in empty handed, with no leads, no information and no one else who'd seen that man standing there. He'd not even showed up on the CCTV footage from the surrounding areas. Not a single glimpse. The only evidence it hadn't been a hallucination symptomatic of PTSD, as Pete had obviously been considering, was the burned out battery pack found in the connecting alleyway.

And that was the only ray of hope at the end of that long, too. Because Pete insisted they all go home and catch their rest as they could in the early evening, while the reserve teams patrolled the area and set up remote sensors for any similar or unusual energy signatures. After that, it got worse. Rose wanted to talk once they got back to the flat. He almost wished he'd gone back to Hackney. He could've tinkered. But then, he couldn't have handled that. He wasn't letting her out of his sight with that barmpot out there.

"Explain this metacrisis to me better," she said in opening. "So how much Donna's in there?" Rose asked, reaching up to tap him on the side of the head gently.
"A fair bit," he said, bobbing his head indecisively, wincing at his renewed headache. Just when he thought things were stressful enough. And he'd just gotten settled on the sofa, closed his eyes, and blessedly hadn't seen a single replay of anything.

"What exactly does that mean, 'a fair bit'? Does that mean you're gonna start chasing blokes around at the pub, or what?"

He opened his eyes and gave her a strange look. Had she lost her bloody mind? Did she think, regeneration energy, handy spare hand and Wham! Second coming of Jack Harkness? Bloody hell, one in any of the universes was enough, immortality aside.

"Pfft. Not hardly. More like... we did a full memory exchange thingy, besides the whole biological part of the metacrisis. But she got all the brilliance. She got the ability combine all that knowledge from me and that little kick of gut instinct from being human. She could to put two and two together and come up with four.” He had a sad smile, full of pride for his lost friend. He raised an eyebrow, giving her a sheepish smile. "However, when I try to put two and two together, I end up with pi. And not the wonderfully brilliant kind that sometimes comes in the banoffee variety. More like pears." He shuddered dramatically then gave a bitter laugh, admitting, "It's all a fair bit muddled up there."

"Why didn't you say anything? I've been trying to help you," Rose burst out, hurt he'd held so much bottled up inside.

He gave her an exasperated look. "Maybe because it's embarrassing as hell?" he snapped. "Maybe because it makes me feel like an idiot talking about it, and more of a useless tit than I already am."

"Doctor, after all you've done, maybe you deserve the chance to be a useless tit," Rose said patiently. "After all, it's not like we're hard up for lolly, if you come down to it. Vitex heiress and all."

"I'll not be a... kept man!" he squawked indignantly, jumping to his feet. "I've some pride left. Not much, but some. I just wanted to do it on my own. It's the only way I know how."

"Definitely too much Donna in there," Rose remarked. "Independent streak aside, you're rubbish on your own, you know that."

He nodded glumly. "Yeah." But still, he had to hold on to something. His pride was the only thing left that was guaranteed to stay like he expected it to. And they’d managed to avoid that uncomfortable bit with the apologies and all that lovely shite. That was a comfort.
He found himself unable to sleep, sneaking back out of his room once he heard Rose's breathing settle into the rhythm of sleep. If he hadn't been so afraid to let her out of his proverbial sight, he'd have done more than lean up against the wall outside her bedroom door. Even that seemed too much distance, like he was daring fate to send one of the universe's many dangers to attempt something. But, well, there was the whole creepiness factor to take into account on that.

Otherwise he'd be sitting guard by her bedside. Forcing himself to stay awake, he let his back slide down and knees bend to leave him crouched, sitting against the wall. Stifling a yawn, he tried ignoring how much this all bothered him.

If he'd his druthers, he'd have Rose stashed away somewhere out of harm's way and be started on getting down to business. Namely, going after this Dougal Chambers bloke. Come on, who the hell needs sleep when there was some sodding lunatic wanker out there playing around with things well beyond their understanding? Even if there were experienced Torchwood agents hunting down every lead and they'd be liaising with that DI tomorrow, that was hardly a comfort when all was said and done.

This Torchwood might not be bent on tearing down the walls of reality for a new energy source, but still... The whole Dimension Cannon thing was bad enough. They'd let his Rose launch herself through the Void looking for him. The sheer brilliance of that aside, she could've been killed, or worse for his sake. What if THEY actually found the bloody thing and insisted on locking it in the Archives. That was hardly a secure location, since he knew of at least a dozen ways to break in. Plus they let him in there. Showed their judgement was catastrophically flawed, Rose Tyler's potential endangerment aside. The idiots. The careless idiots. Nothing could be worth risking Rose. Especially not to summon the likes of him. But on that note, that's why she was here with him and not Him. If he had still been what he was before and had to choose between saving the world and saving her again... Besides that, he hated goodbyes. Really, really hated goodbyes. That's why he left them before they could leave him. If he could, that is. Until now.

No, he should be out there now, tracking that weapon down and the person who had it before anyone got hurt. The fact that Chambers or his minion had burnt out the power source wasn't a comfort either, since he knew of a dozen or more alternative means to power it up. Of course, knowing they weren't likely to have access to or even know about the other methods... well better safe than sorry.

Rassilon, he was really starting to hate this. He didn't know if it was the energy in this universe that was preventing him from forming any connection to the growing TARDIS, or the metacrisis, but that combined with everything else. So much had gone pear-shaped, he thought, rubbing at his bleary eyes. What on earth, or Pete's World that is, was he able to offer Rose. Besides being unable to hide his emotional instability, and a growing TARDIS which he had no connection to. 'Did I mention, it also travels in time, but it might just chuck us into the nearest super nova thinking it's been hijacked' wouldn't exactly be much of an incentive for a girl like her.

Right, going to avoid that depressing line of thought and focus on something he could actually do something about. Like how to bypass good old Torchwood, keep Rose safe, and deal with all of this palava. Only thing he could think of was to play along and pretend to follow the rules and hope he got there in time to stop the insatiable human trait called "curiosity". Between greed and the lovely thing that killed the cat, he was already wondering how he'd managed to survive exile in his third
Oh right, that's how. At that point, he knew it wasn't forever. Now he was terrified it was and forever in one place and time, trying to fit in, trying to not leave Rose with a target on her back just because of her association with him...

He blinked furiously. He'd almost fallen asleep, lulled off to nightmare land with all his usual worries and insecurities. Time to try ignoring that it was all pear-shaped and be magnificent. Even if it was a sham. Just fake it, if you don't belong. Time to stifle this part of him that was resisting dishonesty, since a pretty little lie would keep so many people so much happier and give him so much more freedom. And maybe, just maybe, if he was very, very good, he could even manage to fool himself.

And that crazy lady was back. What's worse, he was awake. Or he thought he was, but if he was awake, then he was...

"Aha! Caught your attention again. Finally! Really, you've got the attention span of a mayfly," the crazy lady said, leaning over him. She cocked her head to the side, studying him for a moment before copying him and settling herself opposite him in the hallway.

He stared at her in confusion, not daring to speak since he was pretty sure that conversing with one's hallucinations was a milestone he didn't want to achieve. Really, what did it say about him when his mind was conjuring up barmy bag ladies in ball gowns that really should consider a less revealing décolletage.

"I heard that!" The woman in question glared at him, shooting to her feet and waving an admonishing finger under his nose. "Really, Sprout, you've got no concept of gratitude. None at all! After all I did, after seeing the whole thing coming and having to take action to keep all the timelines right on track all way through, prophesies to be fulfilled, and the occasional mental nudge. I even had to take into account silly prats who defy all logic, just to end up with this." She waved a hand, huffing.

He could only gape at the woman insulting him. Whoever she was. Whatever she was. Dream, mental aberration, or his subconscious trying to tell him something. This was all... so weird. And not the good weird. More like 'have I finally gone off my head now' weird.

"Still rude, thick, and rather useless. See if I do the whole 'grow a Thief' bit again, you never get an ounce of appreciation." She then noticed his baffled, speechless gaze and gave an indignant flounce. "And never listening to a thing I say! Really, what's a lady to do for some respect around here. First the strays, and now this. Rude, I tell you. Rude! I'll be back when you're less of a bumbling fool and a high maintenance prat than you already were to begin with."

His mouth fell open, angry protests and questions at the ready, but she was already gone. Vanished into thin air, like the final nail in the coffin of his sanity. Blimey, if it wasn't for the crisis brewing, I think I'd section myself now. Before I get to the point where I'm breaking out the tin foil hats, collecting cats and preaching the approaching Apocalypse to all and sundry on the street. Mayhaps I'll do that after this is over. Donna would gladly sign me in to the nearest nut farm.

He jumped to his feet, only for his legs to tangle, sending him sprawling across the floor. On the plus side, he was wide awake, it was morning, and that was all just a terrible dream. On the negative side, Rose was standing over him and looking at him like he'd finally lost it. Maybe he had, after all these centuries.
"Rose! There you are! Waste a third of your life sleeping when there's so much to do!" he babbled, sorting his limbs out and standing with as much dignity as he could muster, wincing at his new collection of scrapes and bruises from the previous day.

"Doctor?" Rose was looking concerned. Too concerned for his liking and making him feel guilty. He hoped this wouldn't scare her. "Why were you down there on the floor?"

He rubbed the back of his neck, smiling sheepishly. "Um... inspecting... the quality... of the... flooring?" he said hesitantly, sounding out the words before continuing in a rush, confidence regained for the moment, "Right! Just making sure the materials were completely up to the standards necessary to prevent structural collapse and subsequent injury to my Rose!" Seeing her look go from worried to skeptical and suspicious, he added, "Time's a-wasting! Got to get dressed, greet the new day, and sniff out the bad guys. Allons-y, Rose!"

He disappeared into his room too fast to see Rose shaking her head in consternation. She'd begun wondering if she'd ever known him as well as she had thought she had. One thing was certain, for all his stammering deflection, he'd been standing -- or in his case, sitting -- guard over her bedroom door all night.

Surely the threat wasn't that great, that he felt her safety was questionable in their own flat? Then again, knowing him, he was just too rattled about whatever he'd seen yesterday and was unwilling to admit it. Of course, he'd be that way. How many times had he hovered close by before after a particularly harrowing adventure. After Krop Tor, she'd woken from her sleep to find him standing by her bedside, studying her face like he was memorizing every feature. He'd done that once before, when the Wire had stolen her face. Then he'd spent hours just staring at her face and tracing the shape of it with wondering fingers.

Traumatized, clingy Doctor was something she knew how to handle. Good thing, that. I've the experience, she thought wryly as she got ready for the day. I've dealt with similar situations to this before. Sort of, that is. Sort of, and not at all. God, why does everything have to be so complicated?

Rose almost gaped when he reappeared, showered, shaved and dressed roughly a half hour later. Besides the fact he'd put on a suit for the first time since before the incident with Cernunnos, he'd actually bothered with his hair. Granted, it wasn't as spiky as it was when he'd first gotten to this universe, but it wasn't just lying flat or just left to do as it wished. And it was that suit. The one he'd arrived here in. He gave her a shy, almost uncertain little half smile, before glancing in the hall mirror to straighten his jacket diffidently. Of course, no button down shirt, or tie, since this version of him had never seemed that inclined towards wearing formal attire.

"You're wearing that?" Rose remarked in surprise, catching a glimpse of what was under the suit jacket.

"What's wrong with this?" He gave her a baffled look, eyes flicking down to the green and red striped t-shirt he was wearing. The look was one that didn't fool her, since she could hear the barest hint of a challenge in his voice.

"Fine," she acquiesced, herding him toward the door.

No point in trying to explain it, if he doesn't see it for himself. Figures he'd go back to the suit for familiarity. Armored up against the meeting this morning. He's more nervous than he's letting on, she
thought. It won't kill me to just let him have his way. Even if that shirt doesn't quite go with that outfit, what with the stripes all going in different directions. Much less the colors. To think he used to be vain and almost obsessed about his appearance. Then again, it could just be him purposely being all stubborn and defiant, but in a passive-aggressive manner.

As always, he looked up when they hit the street, momentarily befuddled by the soft buzzing of the passing zeppelins overhead. That was the hardest thing for her to get used to when she first got trapped here. Truth be told, she didn't have time to think she'd ever get used to that much. How much worse for him, when this isn't even his world? At least she was used to being a denizen of planet earth, if not this one. She could know what it was like to lose the stars, but she'd only had them for a little over two years. How much worse for someone who had centuries and was trying to hide the fact that they were terrified they'd never get out there again?

She was so terrified she didn't have what it took to bring him back from the edge this time. Terrified and angry he was still too much like his counterpart to be able to stay, no matter what he wanted. And for all he'd insisted that he was still him, still the Doctor, there's the flashes of something else. Something other. Something more alien than the true Time Lord. Because this was the man behind the alien, stripped down to the bare essentials, floundering in unfamiliar skin, and halfway between losing the charisma and defences to hide what had been broken so long ago. What made it harder, was through it all, he was still recognizable as Him and the thought of the full blooded Time Lord with all that power at his fingertips all alone scared her. He was still out there with no hand to hold, and dancing just as close to the precipice as this one. If not closer. Hurt feelings and betrayals aside, this one seemed too uncertain now to want to hold on. At least he was sorta trying today. For that she could be grateful. One day at a time.

When they got to Canary Wharf he was quiet and staying close, but still hanging back to follow her at a tentative distance. The way he watched everyone that approached them in the corridors and scrutinized everyone on the lift with them made her roll her eyes.

"Trying out for the bodyguard position now?" she asked lightly, hoping to point out how absurd he was acting but without getting his dander up. "Make up your mind whether you're coming or going. Cock of the walk or Billy no mates, pick one and stick with it. The jumping from one extreme to another is giving me whiplash," she thought in frustrated bemusement.

He raised an eyebrow and shrugged, stuffing his hands in his pockets and trying for a nonchalant pose as he leaned against the wall of the lift. "Not especially. Though, if there's an opening, Jasper and Percy would be the ones to hire," he said breezily, not meeting her eye.

"God, you didn't...." Rose gave him a bit of a glare. "Doctor, you've not set those two to following me everywhere from now on, have you?"

He gave her a haughty, incredulous look, staring down that long nose of his. "I've not." But that quickly became a speculative look. "However...."

"Don't even think about it. I'm glad you were there yesterday to protect me, but that doesn't mean you're putting me under guard 24 and 7," she warned him, poking him in the chest.

She could very well imagine him doing that. Hacking into Personnel, forging IDs for the pair, and her seeing one or the other popping up every time she turned around. How did he manage to be so shy and awkward, yet be so bloody arrogant at the same time. He would do something so high handed, and not spare a moment of chagrin upon being discovered after.

"Pete would do well to snag Jasper, at least. He'd be fantastic keeping you lot safe, plus he could do the heavy lifting on recovery missions," the Doctor murmured softly, musingly, eyes now focused on
the toes of his trainers.

Right. Suit, trainers, and still trying to run things his way and smother me. Can't accept that I don't need to be wrapped in cotton wool, either. Some things never change, even if everything else does. "You're not going to push Dad into hiring your buddies just so you can soothe your need to be overprotective. We're hardly in any danger here. Perfectly safe in this building."

Pushing her annoyance aside, she straightened her own smart business suit before getting off the lift on the top floor. This wasn't what she normally wore, but Pete wanted to make an impression on this copper. That or he was trying to push the Doctor into being just as forthcoming today as he was yesterday.

Pete looked up, nodding in greeting when they both stepped into the room where the meeting was being held. Just another anonymous back room whose only purpose seemed to be for holding meetings that weren't quite meant for the common knowledge of the public.

People would know that something was going on, of course; but they wouldn't know anything more unless a plan of action was formed. Then there'd be briefings and all released to the relevant teams. Far different than one of the straightforward alien ship crash-landings or the like. The Dimension Cannon and the stars going out had started out from a room like this. Once it went 'live', if it did, it would move to one of the Situation Rooms. DI Evans was already there, with a junior officer taking notes.

"There you are, Doctor. Rose." He gave his adopted daughter a slight smile, before giving the Doctor a hard stare. "I took the liberty of bringing the DI up to speed with the information you gave us yesterday," Pete said. "To save us all the time. And avoid you deciding to clam up on us again, was unsaid, but was still understood by all of them.

Especially the Doctor, who flushed slightly but he only nodded. He followed Rose's lead on approaching the table before slumping in a chair nearby. Far enough so he wouldn't feel claustrophobic, she noted, but still in reach if he needed a hand to hold. She couldn't help but smile at the way he bonelessly flopped down, but the knee crooked over the chair arm and the bored expression was a bit over the top. Pete gave her a questioning look, obviously having hoped she'd gotten something else relevant the night before. Rose shook her head in apology. She had gotten something pertinent, just not to this. Not directly, at least. Just a possible insight into his more erratic than usual behavior. Give it time, and he could possibly be his cheerfully, erratic but more predictable self. Or something in between, hopefully. Happy would be good.

The Doctor watched the group uncomfortably, wishing he was anywhere but here. Adjusting his collar, only to remember that he wasn't in his familiar suit and tie, he watched the proceedings while wondering exactly why he'd let himself get dragged into this. He plastered a friendly smile on anyhow.

Couldn't he just do this in his own style? Oh well, he could just humor them until he got far enough ahead to get some space to operate freely, without setting off alarms. There may be no 'I' in 'team' but there was no 'Doctor' in there either. Not even any letters in common, in fact. And no signs of Dougal Chambers apparently, despite the Torchwood patrols. Of course, the subtlety of this kind of investigation wasn't exactly in their usual casework. They were more the active/reactive defence
"I do have a few trained agents that have assisted Interpol in dealing with contraband and smuggling of various artifacts," Pete admitted grudgingly. "Unfortunately, it was after the whereabouts of the items or persons of interest were already known and identification, containment and disposal were called for."

That had to smart, admitting something that wasn't in the mighty Torchwood's skill set. Though he wasn't particularly chuffed with the slight emphasis on the 'smuggling' bit. But as Pete kept reminding him, he wasn't a law unto himself anymore, so why should he be policing these silly humans desires for things like hypervodka. Really, two shots and all but the most resilient of tipplers were under the table and down for the count. There was far worse out there. And he'd already confiscated any tech that they shouldn't have. Other than their current problem to date. He'd missed that one until it was too late.

"Anything on the street or any way to track this particular one?" Rose asked, nudging him under the table where no one would see.

"There's Bryn," he admitted. "But he's not giving anything away. I've already tried, and that's going to be a tough nut to crack."

"We -- the Met -- has seasoned interrogators," Evans offered, eying him with a confident smile. She was silently telling him that he might be on more familiar turf, but she wasn't deterred. Nor would any possibility of support from the Tylers be an intimidation.

Daring woman, he thought as he smiled in amusement. "Right, yeah," he drawled. "If he's not going to talk to me now, fat lot of good you are. Go in all official like, and you'd have better luck getting blood out of a stone."

Pete waved a hand to encourage more clarification, even as Rose gave him the Look. The one that said he was being rude. He sighed.

"Honestly, I don't know why you're faffing about like this. I could pass the word, and before you know it, I'll find him," he pointed out. "Subtle is the name of the game. If he's been hiding out this long, he obviously doesn't want to be found. Putting a hundred boots on the ground isn't gonna do a bit of good, not unless he decides to be colossally stupid."

"And this man is not that," Pete agreed.

"Nope," he replied, popping the 'p'. "Whatever he's planning, it's bigger than it looks, and more than someone mucking about for funsies."

"But how could anyone stay under the radar this long?!" Gail protested. "I mean, fifteen years!"

The Doctor smirked. "They don't. Not without help, that is. Which means someone has known exactly where he is all this time."

Rose and Pete exchanged a knowing look before Rose spoke up, "There's been a few anti interference activist groups we've been keeping an eye on."

Gail cocked her head in interest. "Like the Earthers?"

Rose nodded. "Earth for Humans," she explained at the Doctor's blank look. "Highly against extra terrestrial intervention. Got rumored connections with a few people in power. No names that are definite. We'll be looking into this further, however."
He made a disgusted face. Not like he had been in the world saving business for the accolades, but getting lumped in with every bunch planning invasion and subjugation? Just typical.

"They've been tied in with some anarchist groups in the past," Gail said, concerned.

"Hmmph, I've known a few anarchists. Bit batty, the lot of them," he muttered, ignoring the sudden stares and suspicious looks. Leave that silly detective chasing her tail for a bit on that one.

"Which means you sticking your neck out and rattling cages could make you a target," Pete added.

"Pish posh. I'd the other Torchwood after me for over a century," he said dismissively, waving a hand and staring up at the ceiling, thinking. Threats to his safety and hostility of a planets natives were par for the course. He might live here now, but he was hardly a native. "Look how they ended up when I was finished."

This was likely deeper than that, with the current sentiments on the street about Torchwood. How quickly people forgot the Defenders who'd saved their arses from the Cybermen. Him, weeell, he didn't properly exist then. Still didn't really. Not in this strange half life caught between the tabloids and a forged identity. Trapped between uncertainty, guilt and forging ahead on a type of relationship he had little experience with. Rather, make that none. He'd never managed to stay before, though he wanted to. More than anything else he wanted to, if he could just find his feet and get everyone and everything from interfering. Including himself.

"Yes," Pete said, glaring at the Doctor briefly and clearing his throat. He looked at the two police officers. "You do remember that all of this conversion is extremely confidential? Not a breath of this is to leave the room. Do you hear?"

Evans and McAndrews nodded, glancing at each other with big eyes. They were finally getting the point that this wasn't a run of the mill investigation, nor was he the average delinquent. The Doctor stifled the urge to groan. Pete's friendly little reminder was the equivalent of waving a flag in front of a bull. That infernal woman would be even more curious about him now.

"What kind of urgency is this situation? I know it's deadly serious, but how soon can we expect another incident of this kind?" Gail asked.

"Days, weeks, if not longer. Fried the battery pack, they did. Spares aren't something you can pick up at Tesco's," the Doctor mused, still busy thinking. "But if there's more to this..." He left that to hang. They couldn't all be that thick. There usually was more to things like this. Always expect the unexpected.

"I've heard there were people, civilians affected by this."

Pete nodded. "Symptoms ranging from mild vertigo to disorientation. All were thoroughly checked out and released to their families. No lasting effects, I presume?" He looked to the Doctor.

The Doctor shook his head, raising his head to look at them all. He gave a tired little smile that was far from the manic grin or the other ones he used as a masks. He looked at Rose, hoping she could see he was trying, but that this was hardly a walk in the park. All this was all so new and strange and unfamiliar. He was new and strange and unfamiliar.

"Thank your lucky stars for small mercies, aye? Could be worse. Imagine if you could just pop around to the shops and bag one. You lot'd all be in the deep end then. If we don't find him... weeell, ain't nobody what's got a life preserver big enough for that one."
Chapter 18

Forgive the metaphors, and angsty fluff. No Shakespearean quotes or unidentified blobs were harmed in the writing of this.

Seriously.

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DI Evans didn't miss the furtive glances that the man who called himself the Doctor kept throwing toward Rose Tyler. Almost like he was affirming that she was still there, or that she was the only thing keeping him from fleeing the area. The hesitancy was intriguing, in light of his poor attitude towards any and all authority.

More and more, she was wondering if the daft rumors in the tabloids were true. Certainly, there was an air of superiority in the cavalier way he'd dismissed the thought of any hate groups targeting him and being an actual threat. But more than that, it was the dark knowingness in his eyes that showed he was more aware of the harshness of reality than he'd be letting on. The face was young, the body language was youthful, almost boyish, but the eyes... The eyes told too much, and not enough. Of course, she didn't believe him for a moment when he said he'd be careful to avoid making himself a target. Neither did the Tylers, but that was their immediate issue. She just hoped he'd stay out of the sort of trouble that would put him on her to-do list. She had enough on her plate at the moment. She had an e-fit to get out with Dougal Chambers pertinent information, blazoned with warnings to not approach him under any circumstances, plus combing through all the recent incident reports that showed any similarities. With no clue on the man's whereabouts, she'd be mapping out any incidents she found record of in hopes to triangulate and narrow down the search.

The Doctor had emphatically said that they needed to not make this an overt search, and even a covert one would likely fail miserably. His idea to draw the man out was put aside for later discussion, if things got to the point where that method was unavoidable. He'd rolled his eyes, muttered several rude comments under his breath, but had grudgingly agreed to not do anything rash. No one believed him but as jittery and twitchy as he was, his restlessness and concern had been evident. Beyond that, he was still a cypher. One she was just beginning to appreciate the full complexity of. He was an exercise in contradictions. From the barely restrained frustration, to the way his eyes never strayed from the young woman next to him, and to the way he managed to sound apologetic but confident, shy but determined and defiant all at the same time. It should've been impossible, but he managed it. She'd met conmen that were less skilled than him, and that was even without the air of complete honesty that still told her he was holding more back than he'd let on.

The fact that he was more put together -- even if the shirt clashed with the suit to the point where she wondered if he was colorblind or taking the piss on them -- was some kind of indication. Of what, exactly, she wasn't sure, but it was a change from seeing him battered about or in regular street clothes. Had Pete Tyler made a suggestion on his attire in an attempt to convey a different truth, or was it all on the part of the lanky man who'd been watching Rose from the corner of his eye while trying to fade into the opulent woodwork? Really, she felt a tad out of her depth, dealing with these quasi-governmental black ops types. The rumors about how far above and beyond Torchwood really
was hardly did it justice. It was more than just the stereotypical Men In Black bunch. Apparently they extended into pinstripes, much to her amusement. She couldn't imagine him to be a regular there, especially after her first experiences with this lot.

Gail could feel the amazed bafflement just flowing off of McAndrews beside her in waves. She'd forgotten that McAndrews had never actually seen him other than in passing at the station that night of the brawl, and knew little beyond her own voiced frustrations over his bullheadedness. She had not forgotten his shenanigans the previous morning, and fully meant to have words with him over it in future when she'd the chance. Later, she'd try explaining what she'd learned to McAndrews, but that would have to wait until they had a more opportune moment with less pressing matters at hand.

"Ma'am? That Smith, is he always like that?" McAndrews had asked later in the panda car.

Gail had chuckled dryly. "You have no idea. No bloody idea at all how infuriating and maddening that man is. But boring and a known quantity? Most likely never. The mystery of that one is one I aim to suss out, manipulations and the full protection of the Tylers backing him be damned."

"Do you think he's up to something?"

Gail had thought that over a moment before replying, "I would imagine that 'being up to something' is like breathing for him. What exactly he's trying to pull off, I don't know." She smiled to herself, adding, "I'm not even sure if he does either, for that matter."

The meeting hadn't ended until close on noon. The question of the still unknown creature in the basement was addressed that afternoon. Something Rose had suggested to keep him occupied and discourage him from going out looking for trouble before it was necessary. After hours of experiments and modifying scanners, he had decided to leave it where it was in containment and continue keeping it supplied with pulp until they could ascertain where it came from and if it could be returned.

"Could be something from out of the primordial soup, or got dragged here from some unknown future invasion or who knows. Good for getting rid of the bumf," the Doctor speculated cheerfully when every method had been exhausted and the sun was likely to close to the horizon outside.

Rose didn't know, they'd been down here for hours. He'd tried various radio frequencies, heat signatures and even aimed one of the scanners at it trying to find a method of communication that afternoon. The thought of anything more invasive was never considered. Unknown creature or not, they'd still treat it as humanely as possible. None of his tests achieved anything beyond keeping him entertained and out of harm's way. The only thing they could say with any certainty, was that it had enough of a primitive instinct or memory to slither away from corn flour, avoid wall plugs, and the Doctor. He'd been mildly offended, but shrugged it off, even if it obviously bothered him.

"Well, it can learn from experience, which is better than some people I know. Present company not included," the Doctor said cheekily, trying to keep things light. He was noticeably uncomfortable outside of Torchwood's basements and had avoided contact with the others in the building as much as possible. "Though, whether that's a sign of true sentience or merely a Pavlovian response..."

"So we'll just keep it here until we can find it's proper home?" Rose asked.
He shrugged, running a hand through his hair. He'd shucked off the suit jacket before the DI and her assistant had even left the meeting. Everyone had steadfastly refused to comment on the way he was dressed, but the young constable had given him a few strange looks. "Buggered if I know what else to do. For now, that is. Some day, maybe..." He'd smiled wistfully, before he shook himself.

The dopey half smile and the cheerful demeanor was back in place within seconds.

"Home's more than a place and time, yeah?" Rose added before he could hoist the bridges and close the gates entirely. If she could get past those defences, draw him out... maybe he'd actually let her in. Maybe even invite her.

He raised his eyebrows, tone slightly teasing even though they both knew they were no longer talking about the creature inside the glass fronted cell. "Wander too much, for too long without one, and it's everywhere and no where. Then you find yourself a tad off kilter when you run out of petrol, stuck out in the back of beyond, and no clue how you ended up there in the first place."

He cast a final glance back at the creature before grabbing his jacket, casually slinging it over his shoulder and walking to the corridor that led to the lifts. The off-white halls echoed with their footsteps with a lonely resonance. No one else was down in this part of the basement, and the Archives were on the opposite side of the building. That section was unreachable from here due to the blast shielding between the containment area and everything else. The security buffers around the area were also stronger than anywhere other than the Archives themselves. There were guards in place when anyone was in residence, but with the 'S'not', it was being done remotely via cameras and motion sensors. If the Doctor had any thoughts or opinions on being near the dreaded Torchwood cells, or the fact the blob was the only thing down here, he didn't share them. He'd been tenser than normal, however, but that wasn't exactly a surprise. Not like he hadn't been jumplier than a cat in a room full of rocking chairs since he'd gotten here.

Rose followed him, watching his posture and nervous ticks for any signs of what was actually going on behind those dark eyes. Expressive, emotive face or not, what showed was rarely even the half of it. Even if he was full on furious, he restrained himself and held back so much it was sometimes hard to tell what he'd reply to, what would set him into a rant, or what would just be ignored.

"Then it'll have to redefine home and self all over again," she said quietly. It figured he'd be sympathetic and feel compassion for a slimy shapeless mass that was currently working on two weeks' worth of back recycling. Even she could see a few parallels and similarities in their situations, since it was hard sorting out how to communicate properly with both blobs and metacrisises. Buggered if she knew which was the stickier issue in it's own way.

He considered that before replying, "True. Sorting out the bits and bobs of being blobs is a hell of a job that all has to be bloody confusing. And extremely fun to say, at that. Bits and bobs of being blobs."

Rose didn't blink at his jokingly vague admission, but she smiled. It was going smoother than she'd imagined, even if this much honesty was still something so unexpected from him. Him actually talking, instead of jumping onto a different topic or into an adventure or anything to distract himself and everyone else -- she wasn't sure if that was a good sign or not. Did it mean he was purposely taking down the barricades, or that he'd just run out of the wherewithal to maintain them?

"No matter where you go, there you are," she said succinctly. "Even blobs. A blob is a blob is a blob."

"Exactly," he said, looking at her with a proud smile.
In that moment, he'd been closer to what he'd been like before and Rose wondered if it had anything to do with him wearing a suit again today, or if it was just an indicator of his mental state.

"But the definition of 'self' is something that'll keep the philosophers in knots for millennia."

"Still, you've got to wonder if it misses it's old stomping, er, slithering grounds," she hazarded, hinting at something previously unspoken. "And wants to run back there, or as close to something of the like as it can."

"I imagine it would," he drawled out in a soft voice as the lift dinged its arrival. He raised an inquiring brow, and politely indicated that she should enter first. Oddly gentlemanly of him, she thought, and rather unusual. Normally he'd just bounce in in all excitement and boundless energy, not even glancing back to see if anyone followed because he just assumed they would. "Wouldn't you?" he added after, almost hesitant.

"But that's life, innit? Never know where you'll end up," she pointed out as she stepped into the booth.

"Or who'll be there. But maybe if we set it free... off to be a blob as best as it can manage without people telling it how to be a blob? Let it sort its blobbiness as it needs?" He stood there in the corridor, immediately as still as a statue or like time itself had stopped, an unreadable expression on his face. "No," he said, voice slightly hoarse. "Freedom's more than just the running, or the slithering along. It's also the staying, putting the loo lid back properly and popping round the shops for the groceries. And consuming telephone directories, as the case may be. Blobs don't do well alone, no matter how much they want to in the bad moments that come in the dark."

"Better with two, even for blobs," she agreed.

"Exactly."

That was him, promising that no matter how screwed up he was, he wasn't rejecting everything about this entirely. That he would keep his promise for forever, if he could. He'd promised twice now, the last time before the differences between the universe he knew and this really set in and scared him more.

She silently watched him step in and wedge himself in the back corner. He looked impossibly tired, moved stiffly, and she wondered how badly he'd actually banged himself up the day before. He'd brushed off getting looked over by the medics, but she knew his ribs had to be bothering him. He was still scuffed up from the brawl before that, and his side still hadn't healed up from the Shoreditch incident over a month ago. Also, when was the last time he'd had some real sleep that was uninterrupted by nightmares? This morning he'd been moving fitfully when she'd caught him dozing on the floor and had seemed particularly rattled when he'd jerked awake.

"Though, our slimy friend's probably wondering if everyone would be happier with a better blob and maybe he thinks so too," he murmured shyly. He studied the walls, ceiling, his trainers, everything but looking at her. But he was being as open as he could be. This was new for both of them.

"Yeah, perhaps. But what's to say another blob wouldn't just go swanning off again? Or that it hadn't already bolloxed its chances to hell?" she asked defiantly. "Or maybe we're all just afraid that all blobs are alike?"

"Maybe blobs just don't think they deserve to be loved? That others deserved far better than them? Or p'haps they're afraid they'll end up destroying everything and ruining everyone around them and be all alone in the universe again," he said in a surprisingly even tone. "Or maybe if people knew the
real blob behind all the yucky slime, they'd all go running in terror, because blobs aren't as nice as people think and have done terrible things."

"'Better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved', according to Mr Shakespeare. Suppose that applies to blobs, no matter their past?"

He stifled a chuckle at that. "Met old Will. He'd get on great with Jack. Two of a kind, those two, and just as bad. Fancied Martha and me, both. Can't fault his tastes, even if the advances were unwelcome." He made a face of bemused annoyance at the memory, before continuing, "But what if that blob wasn't as impressive as it used to be, didn't know this world and its history well enough to navigate with any accuracy, couldn't guarantee all of time and space? What then? And that loving and losing it all again would break it's one, single, lonely little blobby heart beyond all repair?"

Rose had to restrain the urge to laugh. His metaphors were ridiculous, but what he meant wasn't. And technically, she'd started this. "What if that blob wasn't as impressive as it thought it was, and no one really cared because it had other qualities worth loving and that blobs aren't the only ones afraid of losing someone again?" she teased with more than a hint of seriousness as they arrived on the ground floor and the lift doors opened. "Or that said blob couldn't find the way to its own arse while driving with both hands, a copilot AND a navigation system?" she added pointedly.

He was walking closer to her now, but seemed a little more at ease this time; less standoffish and suspicious of their surroundings and her coworkers. But she didn't miss the stares directed his way, or the whispered conversations likely going on behind their backs. This would be gossip fodder for weeks, especially since it didn't seem possible for a quiet Doctor to exist. Certainly not this version.

"Oi! It is so impressive. Only blob of its kind. Never been a blob like it before, and that means that poor little blob doesn't know exactly what it can offer now," he retorted indignantly. "Not easy being a blob. Supposed to be six of those blobs driving. Count yourself lucky we got as far as we did with just one blob."

"I'm sure it's not, blob --" she said sympathetically, before catching her mistake and blushing. "I mean, 'Doctor'. But blobs don't have to be infuriatingly stubborn, just because they're blobs and think the universe will crumble around their ears if they admit they aren't always alright. Because sometimes they're not, and it's OK to admit that. No one's going to hate the blob for it or think it less of a blob. Especially since we mere mortals get that way too. We all have our moments of self doubt and being scared, not just the brilliant, oh so impressive blobs."

He looked at her, hope, fear and uncertainty plain for once. But there was trust. Above all, there was that. "Yeah?"

She nudged him before reaching down to take his hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. "Yeah," she confirmed. "And maybe that poor little blob could talk to those more experienced with all these things that come with being human. Or part human."

They both ignored the curious looks from other people as they walked through to building to the security station and the main foyer. The guards noted their identity and waved them through indifferently.

It was already early evening by the time they were standing on the pavement outside of Canary Wharf. It had been a long day, longer than they'd really noticed with every they'd been busy with. Meetings and experiments had eaten all of it, and neither had stopped for a snack, much less the midday meal.

The Doctor pulled away somewhat, fiddling around with putting his jacket back on. He looked back
up at her after fastidiously straightening his cuffs. "So what now?"

Rose scrunched up her face, thinking. "Well, I'm beyond peckish. Famished, really. You?"

"Could eat," he admitted, scratching his chin and shifting from foot to foot nervously. He was plainly feeling shy and out of his depths again with so much aired but still up in the air.

"Chips?" Rose suggested, smiling.

He gave her a smile that quickly turned sheepish. "This blob's out of lolly. Left my wallet at the flat in Hackney," he said, miming turning out his pockets and finding only lint.

Rose pretended to be angry and frustrated as she said, "You're still a cheap date!"

He looked abashed at that, but she laughed and grabbed his arm, pulling him along. He quickly shifted to take her hand, showing a little of his former confidence. She rolled her eyes at his cocky grin and the way he was almost sauntering like he'd won the lottery. "Come on blob with the gob and the lousy job. It'll be my shout. Again."

He grinned at her, relief evident that she hasn't pushed harder than he was ready for and she didn't pull away. They both had hope. She wouldn't fret about wondering how long that would last. "Brilliant use of rhyming. You're certainly just as fantastic as I always knew you would be."

"It's not been easy," she admitted, ducking her head at the compliment.

"Nothing worthwhile ever is," he said sagely.

"But thank God Dad's a millionaire and I've got a good job and the money. Seriously, I'd not be surprised if your excuse next time is "Sorry, I left my wallet in my other TARDIS.""

He chuckled wryly. "No, but can I use that one when we're expected to show up at your mother's birthday bash next month?"
They decided on a nearby chip shop and were headed that way when Jake and Sally came out of the front entrance. "Heading home for the night?" Jake hailed them. "We'll all be on call for the next week until this is all resolved."

"Don't remind me," Sally moaned.

Rose looked at the Doctor who merely looked at her, leaving it up to her. She could see he wasn't exactly thrilled, but he was keeping a neutral expression on his face. "Just catching a bite first, then after, yeah. Probably."

It wasn't long before they were all headed in the same direction, finding a chippie a few blocks down. After getting their orders, they settled into a corner booth well away from the few other customers. The booth was cozy enough, even if the cracked and sun-bleached red vinyl was a bit manky. The place wasn't the cleanest, but the food was always decent enough that no one cared.

In the years after the first time at Darlig Ulv Stranden, this place had been a painful reminder of home. Now, it was more bittersweet than hurtful, with him sitting next to her. It also reminded her that if he wasn't quite the same as the one in another universe travelling on, neither was she the same girl that had narrowly avoided being sucked into the Void on that fateful day. Neither of us are what we used to be exactly, she thought. We are, but we aren't. I've seen things I'm sure even he couldn't dream of, and he's... well, he's him. All awkward and confusing, but not just giving over and calling it a wash.

Rose and the Doctor shared a fresh order of fish and chips, since he'd said he wasn't that hungry to warrant a second. She figured he was just being cheap, thinking the price for a second order was too dear, or something. That didn't stop him from drowning his half in salt, or making weird little faces and running a finger through the grease. The slight moue of guilty pleasure/disgust told her he was of conflicting opinions about the nutritional value of the food, but that he was going to keep it to himself.

That was something else he'd picked up since the metacrisis. The occasional tendency to show the side of his diverging memories influencing his present mind frame until he remembered that no, worrying over diet and losing an extra five pounds was not him. Definitely not him. More Donna. The other Donna from their original universe, of course. Not the parallel version here that they were friends with.

Then again, it could have been something as simple as the fact everything tasted different to him now. He'd admitted once that the flavors of foods didn't quite match up to how he remembered them. Indeed, he mostly picked at the food while keeping his head down or pretending to watch the passersby on the street. The few times he'd twitched or looked up suddenly were the only indications he was even paying any attention to the conversation.

Rose winced at his obvious discomfiture, and she suspected her dad had arranged this 'casual meet up' as a discouragement to the Doctor trying to go do some investigating on his own. She was already wondering how to make their apologies and leave without seeming too abrupt. He was acting shy, but not exactly hostile to the encounter. More like he'd rather be somewhere else, and most likely tinkering or working on the TARDIS. Or better yet, hunting down the bad guys and disposing of the artifact, so he could smugly tell Torchwood and Pete that it was all sorted and could
he go back to being himself without everyone butting in now? She couldn't blame him for resenting the way things were being done, but that's how things were.

Confidential or not, there were protocols and accountability for a reason. None of them could go flying off in their magical blue boxes to avoid the aftermath. Part of the reasons for protocols was to reduce the amount of aftermath to deal with. Not just saving people and preserving lives, it was trying to avoid big, showy messes that made it all but impossible for the more sheltered civilians to go on living their lives, going to work and coming home to beans on toast and telly. And this was a world where Torchwood, while not exactly in the limelight, was well known to the general public.

Sally and Jake were chatting idly about their day and the lack of leads on Dougal Chambers' whereabouts. Lane was working the CCTV monitors with Jason, looking through back footage of yesterday's incident. The fact that no one had actually seen the figure with the TD gun- as they'd already shortened it to -- besides the Doctor was a minor point of discussion. That and the doubt that it had been Chambers himself. They'd both tried getting the Doctor to engage in the conversation so far, but he'd only ducked his head, mumbled something unintelligible, and gone back to pretending to be a wallflower.

"Likely a lackey, or a junior accomplice," Jake said. "According to the records, the bloke's what--70?"

Rose nodded. "He's 74, or is if this is actually him and not someone just using his name and identity as a cover."

"See? Well past the age where it would likely to be him on the street," Jake said easily.

The Doctor made an amused sound in the back of his throat, but declined to elaborate. He went back to studying the details of his napkin like it was the Holy Grail or something.

"Right," Jake said, realizing his words. "Still, for a human, that's well out of the norm."

"We're Torchwood -- we don't exactly do 'normal', you know. Kinda our definition," Sally added dryly.

"Normal is for the birds," Rose agreed, reaching a hand down to squeeze the Doctor's hand. She wanted to draw him out of his shell, but knew it was probably too much. He'd need time to put up his barriers and maintain his distance after opening up so much earlier. "But still, that opens up a whole new dimension to this: the whole question of accomplices."

He looked at her sideways through his fringe, keeping a blank, stoic expression on his face. But he wasn't looking so uptight and closed off, merely distracted. Which worried her. If they'd been alone, she would have asked him. He'd been bored with the idea of the Earthers' focusing on him if he got too involved. His easy dismissal bothered her, since she knew from what Jake and Mickey had said that people here were capable of some drastic measures when under threat. Like the Cybermen. The Cyber factory in Toulouse had been taken out by the local population before the Defenders had even gotten there. Then there was the invasion of the Tzargas, thwarted by a farmer's wife with a can of bug spray...

"As much as I enjoyed the rare day off, especially knowing that we'll not be getting any for awhile," Sally sighed. "I wish I'd not missed seeing those monks."

"They were even doing the 'Dies Irae' one," Jake added. "Strangest thing I'd seen of a day."

"Stranger than Tzargas?" Rose asked.
"Weirder than those shape shifters that were hiding out in the produce section at the Asda?" Sally added.

Jake held up his hands, amending his previous statement with, "OK, it wasn't the strangest, since giant carrots from space with plasma blasters are strangely scary and up there on the weird scale, but you've got to admit we've not had the likes of this before."

The Doctor was definitely paying attention now, as his head had come up and he was leaning forward slightly, interest piqued. It was like he'd suddenly woke up, or snapped out of his brief moments of insecurity. "Really? Could be this universe's version of Rutans," he mused. "Or something completely different. Wonder if there's something like the Sontarans banging about, too. Or if they've all still got that war going on here too."

"War?" Jake inquired.

"Oh yes, gone on fifty thousand years, raging amongst the stars -- or it did in the other universe. Don't know about here." The Doctor looked at Rose, with a shy half smile. "Last time I ran into the Sontarans they were trying to turn earth into a world suitable for cloning more of them to replenish their ranks. The war was really dragging on, I dare say. Even cloned Martha -- you remember Martha?"

"Of course I do," she replied, trying to keep the surprise out of her voice. He'd mostly been closed mouthed on what had gone on between the time they'd been parted and that moment that would forever be defined by that damned Dalek ray in a street hemmed by abandoned cars.

Jake and Sally also looked surprised, but Jake had a small smile that told Rose he'd been purposely trying to find something to get the Doctor to join in. With the short time he'd actually been at Torchwood, only Jake, Rose, and Pete had ever known him, everyone else mostly had just heard the stories from the time before or just seen him as he'd been in the last two months. Even with that, Rose was still finding there was a lot about him she didn't know.

Things like the fact he'd once loved cricket. Completely gaga over it. Unfortunately, Rose and her mum were the only ones in here who'd ever heard of it, since its popularity had waned around 1900 to the point of obscurity. Everyone else was big on sports like football, rugby, and that American import, baseball. He'd yet to get over the fact that Ian Dury was busy selling double glazing in Glasgow, and that was his big contribution to the world. Not a single album to his name. Or that scarves over two metres long were banned due to safety issues. Too many people getting hurt when their scarf got caught in the doors on the Underground. Come to think of it, he'd found all that out that week he'd been convalescing at her parents'. And right after he'd lost this universe's version of Trivial Pursuit to her mother was when he'd gotten skittish and dove headfirst into the funk he was just starting to come out of...

"So, do you think there's some kind of conspiracy behind this?" Sally asked him, referring to the TD gun and Dougal Chambers' successful bid at disappearing.

The Doctor gave a knowing smirk, leaning back against the seat. "Isn't there always? I mean, yeah, he'd have needed help for all this, but some shadow group out there secretly plotting the installation of their own paranoid worldview by upsetting the paradigm to highlight the dangers of the alien horde and discrediting you lot in the process? Come on, what is this, some loony political thriller from late night telly?"

He made a derisive sound, and tipped his head back, closing his eyes and clearly giving his opinion on the matter. "But what do I know. Pete told me to try for being humanly normal. And this is me, gleefully being humanly stupid and naïve and refusing to consider the bigger picture. Much less
even stopping to consider that there may BE a bigger picture."

"Still," Rose hazarded, biting her lip. "It could happen. Stranger things have happened. There has
been growing resentment against Torchwood for not being able to entirely prevent certain things
from happening. It's like they expect us to have godlike powers, and can't understand why we didn't
have some fancy antigrav mechanism to stop that stadium crash last year."

Even Jake and Sally looked like they were thinking his negative assessment through, and still finding
it worryingly plausible.

"There are some real crazies out there," Sally added. "A few balls short of a match, even."

"Don't think they're the sort for coming up with anything that complex, though," Jake added,
thinking it through. "Last time the crazy reactionary types got het up, they were only blowing up
rubbish tips. That's a far cry from messing about with contraptions that could destroy reality. And I
mean, its not like anything all that dire has happened. No one's dead, and a couple dozen people
seeing weird things and getting woozy..."

"That's happened YET," the Doctor said, snapping his head forward suddenly to focus dark burning
eyes on them. His voice was low and intense. "If any of you could even grasp the utter seriousness
of this, the absolute destruction this thing can cause in even the right hands, you'd not be expecting
me to just sit here nattering on and stuffing my gob with artery clogging food."

"But the burned out battery pack--" Jake started to protest.

"Only stops them until they modify another power source," the Doctor interrupted calmly, starting to
fidget again.

"And several hundred persons looking for him. His description was on the telly -- my cousin called
and asked about it," Sally added. "We've got this well in hand."

"That's only going to push him back into the shadows. Or worse get his friends all panicky and
worried. Next they'll be doing something rash, or speeding up their plans with everyone's focus on
finding him," the Doctor explained with a hint of impatience creeping into his voice.

Rose had a sudden suspicion. "So what would you do, then?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Go sweet talk Bryn into giving up his contact details. He got ahold of him once to sell
him the bloody gizmo, and the way he said it sounded like he'd sold him stuff before."

"So, if he's sold him things before, you're what- gonna walk in there with some kind of made up
story and get it back?" Rose asked in disbelief.

"Yup!" The Doctor popped the 'p' with relish, smiling broadly in satisfaction.

Sally shook her head in amazement. Jake didn't look too impressed either. It could work. There was
the chance of that. But more likely it would go pear-shaped within minutes, if not immediately. If
Chambers and his cronies were smart enough to remain undiscovered for so long, they'd be smart
enough to see through the ruse at once.

"I can see why the Director shot that idea down. I mean, I'm usually for the gung-ho method, but
mate, you've no idea what you'd be walking into," Jake exclaimed, letting out a low whistle.

"If Chambers' been buying other things before this," Sally murmured, concerned at the half thought
out plan herself.
"See, Doctor?" Rose said. "It's not just me and Dad that's not liking that idea."

The Doctor gave her an annoyed look, clearly still being stubborn on that point. "I've done it plenty of times, Rose. Dab hand, me. Go in, spin a tale, distract the bad guys and slip away in the resulting confusion with my objective. Spit spot, all sorted. You lot go in after and clear everything up. Haul the bad guys to gaol, or whatever after I've told you where they all are," he said triumphantly.

"Yeah? And what if you get hurt?" Rose challenged him, glaring. He was so impossibly stubborn at times. "Or killed. You can't regenerate anymore. What then?"

He fidgeted uncomfortably under her intense glare, reaching up to tug at his ear. Really, he knew the plan had its flaws, but still. Other than someone involved getting a sudden attack of the conscience (she really didn't see that happening, not if they were really aiming for what he suspected) it was the only way they'd find Chambers before he did something that could rupture the fabric of space and time.

"Is there any other way?" he asked in a low voice, looking into her eyes, letting all his barriers drop for once. "I'm not big on the idea of risking life and limb, since I'm not getting any more of either, but if there's no other choice..."

"Is it that far gone? Is there nothing else to be done, no other way?" Rose asked, eyes never leaving his. "Is there no chance this way will work, or we can't come up with a better, more safer plan than yours?"

Jake and Sally were watching their exchange raptly, but in that moment, the rest of the universe could've ceased to exist and he'd not have noticed. Well, he'd have noticed, but only peripherally. Like he would the faint hum of the zeppelins overhead, or the whoosh of traffic passing, or the steady beating of his heart. Right now, his world had shrunk to Rose's brown eyes pleading with his. Oh he knew what she was asking, and he knew she would step aside to let him any sacrifices necessary to save the world. But that wasn't what she was asking. She was asking if this once, just this once, did it have to be him.

He shook his head and sighed, closing his eyes briefly and letting it all go. All of it. The mantle of responsibility, the ancient duties of which he'd been the sole bearer since the Moment. Everything that his other self could not, that he could, if he wanted. In that moment -- this moment that was no less defining and transforming -- he remembered that he could be free, if he wanted. If he dared. But if he just gave it all up completely, just turned his back and walked away, then he would have to change his name. Because he wouldn't be the Doctor. And for all the other complications and fears that he tried to hide, he was still that.

"No," he said softly, letting himself relax again, tension fading away. "Not yet, at least. I can stay, wait it out."

Rose smiled in hopeful relief, eyes searching his. "Yeah?"

He let out a relieved chuckle, amazed at how easy it was. He could sit back, let Pete and his little toy soldiers handle it, and step in if it all went to shite. Like it probably would, but he had hope. They'd handled the rest of the Cybus mess after they had the code to override the emotional inhibitors.
They'd developed and built the Dimension Cannon, and from the sounds of things, plenty of other various troubles on their own without him. Bloody hell, maybe he could retire. Take up beekeeping if the bees in Pete's World hadn't fled to their own planet, or something else. Focus on him and Rose and building their TARDIS. "Who knows, you might actually get lucky. Someone's granny could even call in tomorrow and say she found some odd doodah stashed in with her post," he teased lightly, hearing an annoying three beat electronic jingling and glanced over to see Jake look down and pull his mobile out. He was only vaguely interested watching Jake quickly flip it open, and noticed the display was flashing. Rose and Sally were immediately on alert, though he wondered why. It wasn't as if their mobiles were doing the same thing. Didn't people get calls on their mobiles all the time? Enough so he didn't see what the fuss was about.

When a grim look came over Jake's face, just as Rose's mobile began the same flashing and buzzing, then he perked up. Something really was going on. He heard it in the grave, serious way Jake said, "Yes, sir. I understand, sir. He's been with us since he left the building."

Jake hung up and looked at him, Rose and Sally having both politely turned aside with their own phones and listening without comment to whoever was on the line. Jake had an unreadable expression, but the way he was looking at him so intently was unnerving.

"What's the tragedy? Why are you looking at me like that?" He looked at Rose for support, and found she was also looking at him, her phone conversation over. They were all standing now, looking down at him for that matter.

"Doctor," Jake began slowly. "There's been a murder."

"That's terrible, but who? And why are you all looking at me like that?" He was getting exasperated. He was a big fan of dramas on stage or a decent programme on telly. Even the cinema was a fine place for the dramas. But why was everyone getting all hushed and upset? Couldn't someone just explain in plain English what the hell was happening here?

"It's Miles Holburn," Sally said, giving him her own odd, ominous look. Almost like she was looking at him with pity and concern.

"Oh? Miles? Who was it what done it, do they know? Did someone figure out he was tipping the betters off illegally?" he asked curiously, reaching for a chip idly and popping into his mouth.

Rose was the one who answered, taking a deep breath first. "The police want you to come in for questioning in relation to his murder."

"What?!" He almost spat the chip out then and there, and almost choked trying to keep it in his mouth. He was stunned. Just completely and absolutely stunned. If he could've regenerated from the shock and absurdity, he would have done. Right there, in the chip shop, with a dozen amazed and stunned humans looking on. And even then, they'd not be half as flabbergasted as he currently was. "But I only talked to the man!"

"DI Evans' the one you'll be talking to, so it's someone you know," Rose soothingly said, like he was a skittish colt ready to bolt for the horizon.

Honestly, grabbing her hand and yelling 'RUN' was his first instinct, but he couldn't very well do that. "Rose?" he croaked, throat tight and managing to fit whole libraries of meaning into the most important word he knew.

"I'm sure it'll be alright, Doctor. Just a formality," she said in an undertone, but her eyes wouldn't meet his. "I'm sure it's nothing but a mix up."
"We've agreed to take you in, so the police don't have to come and arrest you in public," Jake said softly. He too looked concerned, but not as scared as Rose. "Plus you could probably use some friends with you on this one."

"But I only talked to him. He told me to leave his shop, so I did. Didn't lay one finger on him. Not one hair on his balding, smarmy little head," the Doctor insisted. What a load of bollocks. They couldn't actually think... No, no. There was no way this could be happening. Not now. Not when he and Rose had just finally started talking. Not when there was a chance now. If the universe had ever been kind, had ever taken into account what he'd done and sacrificed over the years... just not this. Not with Rose looking at him with fear in her eyes. He couldn't tell if she was afraid of him, or afraid for him.

"We've got to get a move on," Jake urged. "Time's short on this one, and they'll not be best pleased if they're kept waiting."

He stood carefully, trying not to make it any worse by moving too fast or acting threatening. Reaching down to take her hands gently, he said, "Rose, please. If you've ever had any faith in me, just a morsel, believe me when I say I did not do this."

Rose looked up at him, eyes bright and determined even though her obvious worry. "I know that, Doctor. But the police... they've evidence and it's not good. And that's all they would say. Other than you've got twenty minutes to turn yourself in, or they'll come for you themselves."

He swallowed and nodded, accepting what she'd said. There'd be no running now, not from this. Whatever evidence they thought they had, they were wrong because it was not him. All he could do was face their accusations and calmly prove them wrong. He could account for his whereabouts exactly for the last few centuries, much less since the last time he'd seen Miles. And the man had been perfectly fine (other than being a complete prat) when he'd left him.
They said little walking back to Canary Wharf, all of them lost in their own thoughts. Rose had had a bad feeling he'd find himself in trouble if he went nosing around and here it was. Text book example of trouble. Of course she knew there was no chance he'd actually done it -- he wasn't that type. He couldn't have changed that much in the time they'd been parted. This had to be a misunderstanding of sorts. Except his reaction didn't match with what she'd expected of him. The near complacency in the place of the anticipated volcanic reaction was startling. His gob should've run away with his temper, not just a look of shock and a cool, collected statement of innocence. Though she could see he was reeling. They all were. And his hands were stuffed in his pockets, preventing her from giving his hand a reassuring squeeze.

The growing dusk seemed darker than normal, and the warm summer night seemed cold, the thick, humid air heavy with possibilities. Possibilities that were portentous and ominous with a gloom that the street lamps didn't dispel. Rose couldn't help a slight shiver as she considered the phone call minutes before. If Jason on Comms had called saying the police had found a dead Dalek and he'd done it, then she wouldn't have batted an eye. That would've been entirely believable and within character. Murdering a shopkeeper wasn't. But would the police believe that?

Pete was waiting for them by the side entrance in the carpark. His face was tense and serious as he said to the Doctor, "They've just got some questions. I've managed to get them to do it here, instead of the police station. Keep the risk of publicity to a minimum. DI Evans is already inside waiting, and her boss Hartley's come along. This is just them trying to sort out if you know them they don't already know. They'll not be wanting to search your flat, or anything of the like. Luckily they don't know about the one in Hackney. Yet."

The Doctor let out a shuddering breath, a slightly shaky hand reaching up to ruffle his hair. "Right. The TARDIS -- she's in Hackney. Probably safe there, then."

Pete nodded brusquely. "I'll send a team over to check the place out, keep an eye on it. Though you might consider moving anything you don't want anyone getting their hands on, after this. Just in case." He hesitated before adding, "I have no idea what they've got, but it was all I could do to get this arranged for here, instead of one of the Met's interrogation rooms."

"Thank you."

Pete gave some hushed orders to Jake and Sally, with no complaints from them about suddenly being on duty. He turned and gave the Doctor a tight lipped smile. "Don't worry. We've got your back, Doctor. All of us. If this suddenly starts going south... there are already arrangements in place, if need be. We'll protect you."

The Doctor met his eyes, a long moment passing before he dropped his gaze away and nodded. He gave Rose a brief crooked smile before he looked back at Pete and gave him a curt nod. "Let's get this over with."

Pete motioned for the Doctor to proceed him, directing him toward one of the ground floor containment areas, just outside of the PR and Diplomatic Relations sector. There were few people about other than the uniformed security people and a few agents monitoring the news feeds. Most of those on duty were out searching for Dougal Chambers.
This was all very odd. If it was just some questions, why would they go through all these motions and threaten him with possible arrest, she wondered.

Rose wanted to stay close to the Doctor's side, but she decided to hang back slightly to find out the severity of the situation. She didn't mince her words. "Dad, what the hell is going on here?"

Pete frowned, watching the slightly hunched figure ahead of them. The Doctor was obviously scared of what was ahead, but gamely going forward. "I'm not sure, but I have a feeling Isaacson is involved somehow."

Rose almost froze at that name. "He's not a friend of Torchwood's."

"He's not. Still blames us and everyone else for not stopping Lumic in time. Conveniently forgets there was no Torchwood then. Just me leaking information to the Preachers."

Eamonn Isaacson was a good suspect as any for having sympathies to the Earther movement as anyone. If not secretly being a part of it, Rose thought. The MP that had lost his entire family to the Cyber factory in Battersea had won the election by gathering enough constituents of like mind in the last election. He'd even gone as far as trying to blame Torchwood for the stars going out and claimed that the Dimension Cannon had been a coverup to hide an experiment with alien tech gone wrong. The man was totally mad and paranoid. Scarily so, since there were plenty that shared his opinions. If he was putting pressure on the Met...

There was a uniformed police officer waiting by the door to the interview room, looking grim and businesslike. There was no hostility on his face when he opened the door and ushered the Doctor in, or when he blocked her from following.

The Doctor looked back and gave her a wan half smile that she knew was meant to be reassuring but really wasn't. "I'll be fine, Rose. You'll see. We'll be back at the flat watching the EastEnders before you know it." The hint of enthusiasm he tried to inject into his voice fell flat, but she appreciated the effort. Her legs felt like lead when her and Pete retreated to the observation area. If need be, Pete could use his clout to intervene if the questioning strayed into areas designated as Official Secrets, he reminded her in a low voice as the stepped into the small room.

Hartley was already there, also looking through the glass that was mirrored on the other side. He gave them a nod in greeting.

"You better have a damn good excuse for this," Pete warned him.

Hartley gave him a lofty look, but accepted the cautioning. He pointed a stubby finger at the Doctor on the other side of the glass. "His name, written in the victim's own blood seems a valid reason to want to question him and him being seen leaving the crime scene around the same time the coroner's estimated time of death," he said reasonably. "After all, you did have me hold him well beyond the legal limit with no formal charges less than two days ago. Factor that in, and there's good reason to have some concerns."

Rose immediately spoke up. "Whatever you think, he's not a killer. It's a hell of a leap from a brawl with three men who were itching for a fight to murdering someone in cold blood. This uhas to be a set up. This is someone trying to distract us from another case, that this is obviously tied to."

Hartley gave her a cold look that chilled her to the bone. "I assure you, with the condition of that crime scene, it was certainly not in cold blood."

Pete stepped close, forcing Hartley to back away. "This could have been handled entirely by
Torchwood. Much more discretely, I might add. There is currently an ongoing joint investigation into use of contraband weapons and this is likely part of it," he reminded him.

"This is discrete," Hartley retorted. "He's not in restraints and still on your turf. It's just a friendly chat and from what you've said and the case file alone, your boy in there hasn't told you the half of it. I'll bet my entire salary he's only told you a fraction of what he knows, and we both know people are going to start panicking if there's any more incidents. That's disregarding the fact that my office received no official notice on any of this matter involving this cooperative investigation."

"If this is about you getting riled and feeling all left out--" Pete started.

"He's said that any more incidents are unlikely for the immediate future," Rose interjected a protest, jumping in when her stepfather paused dramatically. "Blown battery pack. And there's almost a hundred agents working this case. We're all on call. He'd be out there jumping into the thick of things if we'd let him."

"Most of the information is bottled up inside a cocky little git who's been watching us chase our tails," Pete reminded her with a pained look. "He does have a point."

Rose looked at them both in consternation, disbelief writ on her face. "Don't tell me this is all some vast scheme you've cooked up to get him talking," she said angrily. "We could have done this more nicely. Been polite, instead of pulling this horseshit."

Pete gave her an offended look. "Believe me, it's not a plan of mine, and I wholeheartedly agree. I had no idea about this murder until less than an hour ago. And according to them, the body wasn't even found until this afternoon."

"He talked plenty yesterday and this morning, what more is there to say on it? You know this is leads back to the War, and how much that bothers him," Rose said flatly, smothering her growing anger.

"You've said it before, Tyler," Hartley butted in rudely. "Being heavy handed with this one is sometimes necessary. Call it tough love, if you like, but let's wait this one out and see what he knows."

"There's tough love and then there's being just plain cruel and this is it," Rose retorted, turning to look through the observation window before she spoke too much of her mind. She would've walked away there and then, angry for the Doctor's sake, but she didn't. She wanted to stay close. He was going to need someone when this was over and they let him out of that room. This wasn't fair to him, and she was afraid this was only going to rattle him more.

God, Rose thought. If he ever finds out about all of this, he's going to be furious. Save us if he ever figures it all out. He might be one for manipulating others, but he's not fond of being on the receiving end. I just hope he doesn't think I had anything to do with this. She tuned out the argument that was still going on behind her.

The interview room was stark with its utilitarian grey walls, two plain chairs opposite each other across a sterile white table. Like all of the ones she'd been in questioning suspects, the temperature seemed colder than it actually was. Not that the idea this man was a viable suspect would even hold water. A material witness was much more likely. She just hoped he'd give some clearer answers,
since all he'd given them that morning was a lot of technobabble concerning the device itself and its
effects.

DI Evans looked up in surprise when he stepped into the room. If he'd been looking halfway decent
during the meeting this morning, he certainly wasn't now. He had the beginnings of a five o'clock
shadow and looked bedraggled, confused, and slightly worried. But not guilty. Whatever he was, her
gut told her he probably wasn't the culprit, even if that had only been the most absurd possibility.

She smiled sympathetically when he sat down carefully and gave her a determined look. She reached
over and pushed the button to start the recording. A folder with several important papers and crime
scene photos lay beside it. "Interviewing John Donald Smith, alias the Doctor, interview done at
Torchwood's holding. 8:53 pm," she said clearly, before looking up at him again.

He'd already sorted himself in that short time, his body language vastly different, reminding her of an
actor on stage. He was calm and collected now and wore an expression of bland curiosity. He
crossed his arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow, settling himself more comfortably and silently
urging her to start.

"Where were you between the hours of noon and 2 pm yesterday?" she began, starting as she
normally would.

"Ah, a Wednesday. And not a boring one, at that. I hate boring days," he said in a cheerful tone.
"From 7:23 to 12:46, I was walking from Hackney to Shoreditch. Took a circuitous route, since I
was trying to avoid several annoyingly nosy Torchwood agents who were set on following me all
over creation. Didn't half drive me mad, but I'll give them credit for having determination." He didn't
hesitate on the second part and spoke evenly, staring at the ceiling like he was reading off a script
and almost sounding congenial. As if this was a casual conversation at a dinner party. "Then, at
12:51 I went inside his shop, after thinking about it for 4 minutes and 47 seconds. I went in, talked to
him, he told me to leave and I did. That was 3 minutes and 29 seconds later. 2 minutes and 14
seconds I decided to pop in to see me and well, you know where I was. Still didn't answer my
question."

He gave her a cheeky smile when he finally stopped. The use of exact times was disconcerting, to
say the least.

"Are you being clever, or are you an obsessive compulsive who carries a fob watch everywhere?"
she retorted, thinking he was having her on.

"Never. Why would I? Don't even have a Chameleon Arch. Wouldn't do much good if I did --
wrong biology now," he blinked at her with almost child-like innocence.

Deciding to try deciphering that nonsense at a later time and switching her opinion of him to
'complete nutter', she continued. "Right, after you edited my vehicle in a highly inappropriate misuse
of government property as your personal transportation, what then?"

"Spent roughly 23 minutes and 31 seconds wandering around Shoreditch High Street until I saw the
crowd and-" he started before leaning forward suddenly, voice rising to echo around the walls dully
as his patience obviously ran out. "Come off it, you know what happened next. Spent four hours in a
meeting this morning upstairs in this very building, in the same bloody room. When the bloody hell
was I supposed to have done anything? Now, tell me what the hell all is this is really about."

She evaded his question with one of her own, ignoring his temper. "Why did you go see Mr
Holburn? Was it related to his brother's dealings with Dougal Chambers?"
He glared at her for a few moments before he saw she wasn't going to give over, letting out a sigh that was almost a groan of frustration. When he spoke again, he sounded resigned but calm and almost bored with the proceedings. "Yes and no. Mostly no. Dougal Chambers is on record as the owner of that building. That building is the same one from that CCTV footage you showed me two days ago, now. Same one that mysterious figure was near. Same bloke who used that Temporal Distortion gun in Shoreditch yesterday afternoon, most likely. Recognized the shop front, since Miles has an acquaintance of mine on retainer for protection services. There's some hoodlums in the area. Only had been in the once. Just asked if I could speak to whoever he paid the rent to. He told me to shove off, so I did."

None of that he'd seen fit to mention in the meeting that morning and Gail was quick to point that out. Neither did she take him for someone who'd give up so easily.

He gave her a rueful half smile, tugging at his ear in embarrassment. "Weell, I figured I was short on time and Torchwood was likely to be along soon to try herding me back where they think I belong." He leaned forward, glancing over his shoulder at the one way glass behind him, whispering conspiratorially, "They think I need a minder," before winking.

Well, that explained him eluding Torchwood, but still. Gail could only watch in amazement at the rapidly shifting moods. At no time, however, did it look like his emotional control was slipping. Not a bit, even when he went from jumpy to calm, and from frustrated to jovial within moments with no warning. This was someone used to complete control over themselves and the only thing that led her to believe it was all a show was the eyes. Never once did they waver, or show anything beyond a certain unreadable watchfulness. It was like he was studying her reactions just as much as she was his. "I don't believe you," she said flatly. She was wondering about his near mention of dodgy dealings, but doubted he'd be forthcoming on that. Or if he'd been truthful at all. "You know more than what you're telling."

He gave her an assessing look, shrugged and said, "That's your problem, innit? 'Cause I did nothin'."

So much for this being just a friendly conversation. He wondered if was karma, or the gods he didn't believe in or just the universe in general that had it in for him. Seemed like everything was against him, especially this little police detective lady. He'd told her everything. The whole sorry tale of his attempt to track down Dougal Chambers and the fact his charisma had totally failed him with getting anyone to give him information on the man. Everything. What more could he say? What were they really after? But she wasn't giving up, and he wasn't sure if she believed him or if she was sizing him up for a prison uniform. "Did you kill Miles Holburn?"

"What? No. Why would I? I had nothing against the man. If he didn't want to talk, so be it. It's a free country. He wasn't under any obligation and there were plenty of other ways to find out where Dougal Chambers is hiding. All without having to stir up the entirety of the grim underskirts of London," he said plainly. "There's things hiding down there you just don't want to know exist."

"Believe me, I have seen more than you'd think and I would prefer to have not seen them. You act like you can handle this better than everyone else," Gail snorted, clearly unimpressed.

"Because I can," he told her simply. "Or I could, if they'd let me." If it was the old days before the metacrisis (only 64 days before this, and it already seemed like a millennium in retrospect) he'd have
just smirked and proudly said, "Time Lord. Beat that. 906 years of outthinking and outsmarting everyone I've met." But this was now and telling every Tom, Dick, and Harry his secret with no way to get off this primitive rock would just be idiotic. Even if it was already suspected and rumored, it didn't do to confirm those suspicions. Bad enough they were cooking up new ones about him.

Or was it. Maybe it was time to stop pretending and drop the pretenses. Could work. What else did he have to lose? They might even focus on the important part. Which was finding the real culprit, instead of going after the first person who was different enough to scare them. Maybe it was time to abandon his reservations and take a page out of the brilliant Donna Noble's book and go be magnificent. Full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes. "Look, there wasn't a drop of blood on me when I jumped in your car," he said softly. He decided to drop all the masks and looked at her in all honesty. "I did not do this."

"Do you know who did, then?"

He sighed. Round and round they went. Whatever happened to logic and reason and being polite and offering nibbles to smooth things along? Manners these days. Whole world gone to pot, and not even a biscuit or a cuppa to be had. Typical. And Rose said he was rude.

"No, but not like it's going to stop all your endless bloody questions. If you ask me, it's probably our mystery man, or someone else who's directly connected to Chambers. Seems the most obvious explanation to me."

She had to believe him. As reluctant as he was answering that last question, what else could it be but the truth. If he hadn't done it, and the CCTV cameras showed no one entering the building from the front, and no signs of forced entry, who did? People didn't just turn invisible. Or did they? Her whole world had been turned upside down once before, and was now merrily tripping along into the twilight zone.

"Then who did do it?" she sighed, starting to wish she'd never decided to talk to Gerald Estes in the first place.

The Doctor let out a humorless chuckle and gave her a look like she'd dribbled on her shirt. "Whoever he'd told I'd popped around with questions and didn't want to chance him answering. Find them, and you've got your murderer," he said in a slow, steady voice, like he was explaining it to a child. He shrugged then and put an elbow on the table to rest his chin on, looking at her evenly. "Of course, I suppose that means I'm on a short leash for a long time after this. They'll hardly let me out of the flat for fear I'll be next."

He looked put upon, but resigned to his fate as he said, "So the only other way to pull this off is to approach it sideways. Do it carefully where no one will notice anything out of the ordinary."

Gail had no idea what he was talking about, and told him so. Suddenly sitting bolt straight in the seat as he said in a voice of wondering horror, "Oh, I am thick. So thick."

Thinking it was a sign that the possible destruction of everything might be imminent and he'd only just realized it, she reached across the table to grab his hand in urgency. "What is it?"

A beautific smile of pure satisfaction spread across his face as he said, "I know exactly where
Rose had stood there watching and listening in, ready to step in and cry foul if it looked like they were taking things too far. Other than him getting a little impatient and annoyed, he seemed fine, and Evans wasn't pushing too hard. Though, she'd have to make a better judgement of that from his mood in the next few days. He hid more than he showed. Her suspicions of what he'd been up to that day he'd taken off were accurate. Of course he'd have gone poking around on his own. Insatiable curiosity and an ingrained inability to leave anything well enough alone, with no regard for any possible danger. And if someone had murdered Miles Holburn for merely talking to him, that just stood to reason there was plenty of danger.

If he still wanted the thrill, then fine. She couldn't fault him for that. That adrenaline rush was something she missed during boring meetings with difficult government officials. Really, things had slowed down too much since the Dimension Cannon. Then again, quiet and boring was good when you didn't have to wonder who wasn't going to make it home from a mission. It was him trying to do everything by himself that scared her. He shouldn't be alone, she knew, because then who would stop him from going too far? Who'd hold his hand when he'd admit he needed it?

No one expected him to come barreling out of the room like a shot from a cannon, DI Evans following close behind and looking just as excited. "Pete! I need a map. I've got it! I know where he is!" he crowed, dashing into the observation area.

He looked directly at her and gave her that look of unabashed joy that she hadn't seen once since he'd got here. That and the look as though it was Christmas and his birthday, all of them, combined. Before anyone could even answer, he was dashing back out the door, only to run back and poke his head around the doorframe.

"Almost forgot. Rose, you don't have to worry. I don't have to go painting a target on my back to draw them out, because I've found them first. Ha!" He turned away again before returning just as quickly. "Oh, can we stop somewhere and pick up some jammy dodgers? I'm a bit peckish and you lot have a disturbing lack of nibbles," he added, pointing an accusing finger at Pete. "Hardly any way to run a place like this and not very welcoming. I'm very disappointed in you."

Hartley was just staring in bewilderment as Pete smugly said, "Now do you see why we put up with his antics as much as we do? When he can manage to get his head out of his arse, he's completely brilliant."

Rose couldn't have agreed more as she shucked off her professional demeanor and went running after the Doctor. It looked like this might turn out to be the good times come again. He was acting normal -- for him at least. That had to be good. And even the DI must've felt the excitement in the air, because she wasn't wasting any time either.

He was already in the situation room, ordering people about when they got there. He was the very embodiment of restless motion, bouncing on his toes and chivvying people to go faster than they were. A map of the sewers was up on one of the displays and he was leaning close, squinting at it. It was surprising he'd not just moved someone aside and done it himself, as impatient as he was.

Rose had to roll her eyes. He clearly needed glasses now, but refused to accept that his superior
biology could possibly include less than perfect eye sight. She could've teased him about it, but instead went over to see what he was looking for.

"Overlay the map of the local area," he threw over his shoulder to one of the techs. Once it was brought up, he nodded in satisfaction and looked at her, pointing at a particular spot on the map. "There it is -- or that general area. Right on top of the anomaly in the sewers."

Rose smiled back at him, glad to see he wasn't going to go off in another funk and hoping he wasn't going to do something rash. "You did it."

"Yup," he replied. "Or near enough. Still have to go in and find him."

"Really? That simple?" Gail Evans asked in surprise, coming up beside them.

He snorted in good humor. "Simple? Who said anything about simple. But then, yeah it is. The hard part is sorting out which building he's in, without giving the whole thing away."

"Are you certain he's actually there, though?" Gail pressed.

Pete and Hartley had finally caught up, and like everyone else in the room they were waiting for his answer.

"Weeell, no. But its the best we've got and they were there four days ago. Can't be too many places Dougal Chambers would find secure enough to try powering that thing up. Probably has a secret lab there."

Pete walked over and studied the map, looking grim. "Are you absolutely certain about this?"

The Doctor shrugged, looking a little uncertain now that everyone was so focused on him. "Near enough."

"It does make sense, if you think about it. Close enough for you to feel it and get all woozy, and close enough for our tech to pick it up," Rose told him, urging him on.

Come on, don't stop now. Don't start second guessing yourself, she silently pleaded. But he just stood there looking shy suddenly. All the confidence just seemed to fade away like it had never happened.

Pete sighed and exchanged a look with Hartley before he replied, "You do realize whose house is right in that area, right?"

The Doctor gave him a look that said he was trying not to be rude. It didn't work. "Nope, since I've not had the time to memorize every street address in the Greater London area. Been a ickle bit busy. You could enlighten us though."

Rose wasn't sure either, but she still cheerfully elbowed the Doctor for his sarcasm. From the wink he gave her, it was expected.

Hartley was the one who spoke up after muttering a curse under his breath, looking like he really wanted to be some place else. "Eamonn Isaacson's."

The only one who was completely unfazed was the Doctor. He just gave them a look that clearly said 'why should I care who he is' but he didn't do anything other than yawn. The look of outraged horror was almost priceless, but reminded them all that the hour was getting late. It was already half ten, and they'd all had a long day.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Here's Donna....

And trouble, of course.

He didn't mean to yawn that time. Honestly, he didn't. But there it was, popping out at the most inconvenient of times. As always. Something else coming along to remind him and others around him about these new human-ish frailties. Bugger it. Maybe it could come in handy. Pete and Rose were looking at him with concern, coming to a seeming consensus between them and exchanging a nod. That didn't bode well.

"Doctor," Pete said cajolingly, making him cringe. "Why don't we send a reconnaissance team over to monitor the area while you and Rose go home and get a night's rest? We've all had a long day...."

He knew this was code for 'run along now, we'll take care of things while you get back to being all mundane and domestic'. A glance over at Rose only confirmed his suspicions since she looked ready to protest herself. So she knew the score as well. And they were trying to send her off as well. Well now... that could leave room for other possibilities, couldn't it?

"Right!" he said, abruptly forestalling Rose's chance to put her two pence in. "Good idea. Face the new day, bright eyed and bushy tailed and ready to face trouble tomorrow!" He put as much enthusiasm into his words as he could muster and still sound believable, grabbing Rose's arm. "Come along, Rose. EastEnders, a good cuppa and jimjams await!"

Scrambling and pulling Rose along, they made their exit while he tried ignoring Rose's murderous glare. He also ignored the incredulous and disbelieving looks from the others in the room. DI Evans looked unconvinced and so did Pete, but if they wanted to play things this way ...

"Doctor--" Rose complained loudly.

"Spanners," he hissed gently, trying to look totally exhausted and that his biggest concern in life was falling into bed. He even managed a purely theatrical second yawn as they were checking out with security for the second time that night. Hopefully they wouldn't be coming back here for at least a few days. Better yet, a bit longer than that, and with no coppers with their unending questions. At least Rose was somewhat cooperative until they got out of the building. But by the time they were far enough beyond the doors that the doorman wouldn't hear their words Rose was having none of it. She grabbed his lapel and steered him a block down into an alley and there, behind the wheelie bins came the confrontation. Of course she'd be miffed. He would be too if he wasn't so used to being dismissed offhand now.

"What the hell, Doctor?"

He tried the innocent look, arms spread and eyebrows raised. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, and
even the worst intentions of babes in arms were far more dastardly than his own. "What?"

Rose stomped a foot, frustrated growl muffled by the brick walls around them. "You're just going to let them send us home like that? You do realise they're just trying to get you out of the way, and sending me along so you'll actually do it."

He couldn't help but chuckle at her misplaced assumptions. "Who said anything about going home?"

"You did," she retorted. "With your babbling about the EastEnders while dragging me along like a sack of potatoes."

"I said absolutely nothing about when we'd be watching telly, just that we would do in future. That could be next week or next month for all they know." He was careful to stress the 'when'. Silly language, with such inexact terms. Then again, if it was in Gallifreyan he'd have had to lie outright, instead of skirting the truth. He'd just told them what they wanted to hear, hadn't he?

Rose gave him one of those looks he hated. The one where she was wondering if he'd finally lost it. "You're thinking of going in there with no backup?"

"Well I've got you, haven't I?"

He hoped he did. Even if he wasn't as impressive now and no one had any faith in his capabilities anymore, surely he still had her. Didn't he?

"Doctor, it--" Rose shook her head, looking at him like he was missing something very important. "We can't just go sauntering in, ask to borrow a cup of sugar, then casually just ask what they're up to. Things don't work like that."

"Whyever not? It always worked before."

She was biting her lip, obviously reluctant to say what was on her mind. It hurt, even if her saying what she was thinking would probably hurt more. That was the crux of the matter. Nothing was like it was before. Or rather, it was all just like Gallifrey in the same stultifying, boring way with all the rules and expectations. He'd run away to see the universe to avoid that, then kept running because it was better than being suffocated alive.

Like now. The things he endured for love.

"C'mon, Rose, I'm dying here. Live a little!" he pleaded, leaning close. "Don't tell me all their silly little rules and protocols have gone to your head. Don't tell me that all that bravery and sense of discovery was lost hopping worlds." She still wasn't looking convinced. "Dimension Cannon? Stars going out? Walls falling, and all that. So you could come back?" he prodded teasingly, with a hint of seriousness behind his words. "What happened to my feisty girl? Get left behind on Davros' Crucible?"

She wanted to retort 'you left her on that damn beach, you arrogant prat' but couldn't. Not to him. The blame wasn't properly his. Not on that. It was hard separating the two of them in her mind, even now. Which one would keep the promise never to leave her behind or send her away, and which one wouldn't. No, she thought. The other's a bit more human because he knows it's all a show he's
putting on for the rest of the universe. This one can't muster the controls and defences to fake it convincingly anymore because he's stuck wondering and worrying how much IS human. That or he was letting little glimpses from behind the façade leak out on purpose. In 900 years, and all those lives before we even met, how could I even begin to guess at it? Or even understand it all? But was she going too far in trying to protect him? Wrapping him in cotton wool and pushing him to the point where he'd eventually have no choice but to run to save what little of his sanity remained?

He looked ready to drop, but his eyes shone with determination. After everything else, it was refreshing to see him looking alive and totally in the moment again. Maybe it would bring some of his confidence back, let him drop all his guards for once. He'd said freedom was also in the staying, so...

Fine. She'd let him run with this, see how far he'd go. If it all went pear-shaped, she could always call in for support. And he was right, she'd forgotten what it was to wholeheartedly throw caution to the wind and just run with it. Even if it meant she'd also be on Pete's shit list when he found out. Because he was not going to be happy.

"Fine, but how are we going to get there without a vehicle?" she sighed, giving over. So much for reining in his more reckless impulses. "Signing out a Torchwood SUV would be as good as posting an advertisement on what we're planning."

His grin could've lit up the alleyway, it was so bright. "I thought you'd never ask. Where's your mobile?"

"We're only taking a quick look," she cautioned him, handing him the phone reluctantly and wondering who he was dragging into this mess now.

Of course he was calling Donna. Blagging a ride and apologising for getting her out this late. It was rather funny watching the chagrin on his face as he squirmed through Donna's lecture on him being foolish, irresponsible, and generally just being him in between him giving her directions to meet them three streets over.

"Oh, and I wanna speak to Rose," she heard before the phone was thrust at her.

"Hello?"

"Is this all some crazy idea he's come up with suddenly?"

She had to bite back a laugh, looking at him leaning against the wall scowling. He looked more offended than anything. She must've really laid into him. "Um, yeah. But it's important."

Donna huffed on the other end of the line, saying, "Why do I always get pulled into your silly adventures. I'm not a hire car service -- it doesn't say 'Donna Noble, auto for hire, ring for a lift' anywhere on my résumé. There is public transpo available. Even for aliens, I'd imagine," even as Rose could hear the telltale jingling of keys.

"Thanks, Donna. We really appreciate this."

"You better," came the grumbling on the other end of the line. "Lucky for you I've got tomorrow off, and EastEnders was a repeat."

She hung up, to the Doctor's self satisfied smirk as he said, "Could've told her that. Half the reason there was no point in going home."

Rolling her eyes at another of his new quirks, she pocketed her mobile and gave him a playful shove.
"Come on, your arse will be in a sling if we're late."

He was fairly bouncing as he walked, all the tiredness forgotten, leaving her to wonder if it was all an act. Other than the shadows in his eyes that were a constant since Norway, it was the only clue that there'd been any truth to any of it. Almost everything about him now made her realize how much more there was to him than she'd ever thought when they were travelling.

There were few people out at this hour, and the Doctor seemed to be instinctively choosing a route away from the CCTV cameras. Either he'd scoped out this route a long time ago, or he still had that uncanny survival instinct. He'd occasionally give her a reassuring look, or make a quiet observation on something much like he used to. Other than this being modern London, and not a different time or an alien planet, it was much like before. OK, it was a parallel London with a smaller population and the constant hum of a busy metropolitan area was occasionally covered by the droning of passing airships overhead, but still. She could feel the irresistible pull, the thrill of adventure that had come every time they stepped out the TARDIS doors.

Alright, so catching a lift with a mouthy ginger was nothing like travelling in a dimensionally transcendent time ship. First of all, there was a lot more leg room and there was only one person running their gob the whole time. Secondly, she didn't end up in the back seat because he gleefully cried 'shotgun' and jumped in before she could even blink. Even if Donna was probably a better driver. Safer, too, since no one was getting tossed around on the landings. God, how did he and the other Donna manage to travel together? Did they bicker like siblings the whole time, and drive each other mad and everyone else wherever they went?

Donna did not know how these two had managed to inveigle their way into her life so surely, but they had. Silly story about knowing her on a parallel world aside, there was something familiar about him particularly. Rose was as much as a cypher as he was. I mean, the bleeding Vitex heiress and that skinny streak of nothing? C'mon. Pull the other one, it's got bells on. But it worked. Somehow it did, even when they were both being thick and stubborn about it. Especially him.

The whole part about him being an alien was completely believable, not even considering the loofah. The way things would slip out, and him knowing his way around her Mum's kitchen from the get go was eerie. Gramps had told her all about that. Or the way they'd all be sitting around talking and he'd suddenly get this odd look on his face and his eyes would seem impossibly old and deep. Like there were whole galaxy's worth of secrets and pain hidden there. Or how he managed to talk everyone into doing things against their better judgement.

Like now. Here she was, out driving around, just before midnight on the whimsy of a lunatic. With no plausible reason, other than he was curious about something and to top that off, he kept fiddling with her stereo. No matter how many times she slapped those long, skinny fingers away from the controls. Mind control, she was starting to think. That or she was easily manipulated by the totally daft.

With some impatient hand waving and hasty directions, they were soon turning off the B121 into Stepney.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Spaceman," she grumbled as he pointed her to a dark street.
"Of course I do," he said defensively, surveying the unlit street. His brow was furrowed in concentration as he looked for whatever it was he was after. "Strange. Hardly anyone about."

"It's going on midnight, what d'you expect?" she returned with a snort. Really, did the time not actually matter wherever he was from? People, normal people, kept regular hours. And these hours were meant for sleeping. She had pointedly informed him of this when he'd come barreling into her car like a kid after too many sweets.

"This area also got hit pretty hard during the night of the first Cybermen attacks. Hasn't really recovered," Rose added from behind her.

At least she could count on Rose to be somewhat grounded in reality, because her compadre wasn't. Then again, she put up with the twit in the first place, so her judgement was probably suspect.

"Seems odd they'd just leave it all," the Doctor mused, craning his head to look further down the street.

Indeed, it was pretty desolate. Almost spooky, with only a few houses with lights, cracked pavements, and shuttered shops that looked like they'd been closed for several years. It wasn't exactly the most welcoming place to visit, especially at this hour. She wished she was at home right now, tucked up in bed. Maybe having a hot chocolate and reading a good book.

"Wasn't there something on the news about someone in Parliament trying to get all the derelict houses demolished awhile back?" Donna asked, trying to remember. All those political things just bored her to tears and who could keep up with it all? It was all this policy, that policy, and in the end nothing really got done, but the taxes sure went up no matter what.

Rose leaned forward, nodding in confirmation. "Yeah. Eamonn Isaacson. Said until all the victims' relatives had been notified, it was imperative that their rights and claims be safeguarded."

"Sounds well and good, but after eight years, I'd think they'd have shown up by now," the Doctor retorted, getting impatient and opening the car door. Rose quickly joined him.

Wondering if she secretly liked jumping into trouble (since it seemed trouble followed these two around like a shadow) Donna followed. Locking her car, she gave it one last fond look, hoping it wouldn't end up impounded or stuck behind police barricades like last time she got involved in one of their plans. "Really, you two need to find something normal to do."

Rose giggled, while her skinny companion gave her a scandalized look. "What's so odd about this? We're just having a pleasant walk through a peaceful area."

Donna waved a hand at the graffiti on some of the doors, the bedraggled hedgerow at the far end, and the rubbish lying where it had been left in the gutter. And the lack of street lamps. Mustn't forget that. "Hello? Spooky, mostly abandoned neighborhood?"

"It's not the neighborhood's fault," he rejoined loftily. "I'm sure it's a lovely place to live."

Like that made it any better. "Yes, yes, lovely to visit, I know. In. The. Daytime."

"Let's get a move on before the fairy godmother here revokes her magic and we're stuck with a pumpkin," he said rudely, pointing to her with a thumb. "No adventuring spirit in anyone on this bloody rock."
Rose was walking ahead, peering up at faded signs on empty shops and studying street addresses. They'd already gone up several streets, and checked out numerous alleys along here with no results. "Do you remember which ones it was?"

He looked around, trying to recall what he'd seen on the display at Torchwood. Nothing looked exactly like those primitive maps they had, either. Blimey, he'd be glad once they switched to the holographic ones. Even better his own on the TARDIS. To hell with the big no-no about introducing anachronistic technology advances prematurely. It's not like Pete's World wasn't already jumping the gun on a whole shed load of things technological.

"Um, I'm not certain." He scratched at his neck in embarrassment, wishing his memory was as good as it had been. Or he'd had the chance to nick the sonic when he was at Torchwood earlier. Then he could've scanned for any lingering traces of the energy signatures. "Let's try up ahead. That street there looks promising."

He pointed to the next street ahead, that branched off the this one. Smaller, and even more poorly lit, it seemed to be drawing them ever onward. Even Rose must've felt it, as she was visibly readying herself for action. Donna wasn't even complaining about the insanity of wandering darkened streets in desolate wastes now. How refreshing that was. Also, with no signs of CCTV cameras, it was a blind spot that anyone with any sense would take advantage of. On top of that, the next street beyond looked more populated. The glow of street lamps was a dead giveaway. Indeed, it was. He could hear the sound of voices ahead. An argument, of sorts, if his ears weren't entirely shite now. That was always a good sign he was onto something. Or a bad sign he'd stuck his foot into it, and everything was going to go wonky. But he could always hope? Plus, this beat meekly going home like a good little pet alien any day of the week.

Of course. If you were trying to disappear, hiding in an area that was mostly ignored by the population surrounding it was a good option. Especially in a distressed neighborhood where the few remaining residents had seen so many horrors that they weren't inclined to look in case there were more. He remembered being marched through here long ago, with Cybermen escorting them to the factory at Battersea for conversion. Oh such a long time ago, but he could almost hear the marching feet and feel the tension in the air. Marching to their possible doom. And for so very many, it had been. Even now, the houses seemed to be waiting with bated breath for their inhabitants to return.

Coming around the corner, he could see three figures backlit by an open door at a row house. A row at a row house, of course. One of them seemed to be menacing the other two. Not a good sign, and judging from the way one of them was getting all aggro, it looked like it was time to step in before things deteriorated into violence. He briefly considered telling Rose and Donna to keep their distance, but quickly discarded the notion. Not like either of them would actually listen to him. No one ever did. Atleast he had an idea of where they'd wander off to, since all the excitement was in front of them, plain as the nose on anyone's face.

Stepping out of the shadows, he smiled and cheerfully greeted them. "Hello."

There was a moment where they all looked at each other and no one spoke, before suddenly there were guns being pointed in his direction. Fortunately, they didn't seem to notice Rose or Donna. Had to be the shoddy human eyesight combined with insufficient levels of light. That or they weren't very observant. Which would make it a miracle or a fluke they'd remained undiscovered. He was going for a fluke, since he didn't believe in miracles either. Miracles defied the impossible, and he'd recently discovered that that word didn't mean what he thought it meant. Rose had taught him that.
Then again, he could be wrong. Nah, never. That would be a miracle in itself.

"Always with the weapons. First thing you lot go for," he complained, holding his hands up to indicate he was unarmad. He spoke loudly in case Rose hadn't been able to see the guns, trying to let her know the situation.

"Who the hell are you," grunted one, the youngest of the three. He was young; Rose's age perhaps, if not younger.

"I'm the Doctor," he said airily, remaining calm and ignoring the thought of two sets of fingers on triggers aimed in his direction.

"Bloody Torchwood, always meddling and never doing any good," the middle one said, the one who'd had the temper. He was heavyset, balding and looked the most overtly hostile. His aim was unwavering, even if his junior's wasn't.

"I'm not Torchwood, if that's what you're thinking," he said, starting to get an idea on the identity of the other two. He focused on the older gentleman that other than his gaunt and haggard appearance still carried a charismatic air to him. And he was unarmad. "I presume I'm speaking to Dougal Chambers himself then?"

That was when all hell broke loose. Shouting, threatening, all those silly displays of dominance. Funny, he'd never really believed in an actual hell. But, blimey, it didn't half turn up all around him. Running wild wherever he went, it seemed. Turn of phase or not, it was a bit inconvenient at times. But oh, it felt so good. It was oh, so unpredictable and oh, so joyously liberating. He felt truly alive and all the boredom, uncertainty, and disillusionment of the last few weeks didn't matter. Wasn't it always this way? The call of adventure. Going in not knowing, possibilities shining along the timelines? Of course, the timelines were mostly nonexistent unless he wanted a migraine fit to stop the world, but the thrill was still there. That hadn't changed.

The safeties were clicking off then, and the burly one was rudely shoving a gun in his ribs. Pushing him inside, they dragged him into the house. And the man he'd correctly surmised as Dougal Chambers was staring down at him as they forced him to his knees and pulled at his hair so the light would better reveal his features.

Squinting at the sudden influx of light, he said mildly, "An invitation would've worked. Mind you, I am a bit peckish, so the offer of a stray biscuit or two would've done wonders."
Chapter 22

Pete stifled the urge to sigh. Of course he knew the chances of the Doctor and Rose actually doing the sensible thing were nigh on the same chances as the average snowball's was in hell. Knowing that didn't dispel the urge to throttle the half alien. Really, zip tie him, throw him in a box with packing peanuts and he'd still manage to get himself into trouble. And Rose was just as bad sometimes, worse when they were together. Letting them walk out of the building went against his desire to keep them both out of danger and away from too much public scrutiny. He'd tried everything to help the half Time Lord adjust to a normal life, all in the hopes that Rose would settle down too. He'd had it all planned out. Rose taking more diplomatic and administrative duties instead of the more dangerous field work, maybe get her interested in greater involvement with Vitex, and plop the Doctor in some quiet lab until he got over his apparent death wish. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened as he'd planned. Not in the least.

Out of a sense of debt to the one who'd given him the chance for a family again while saving the universes, he'd done it. Given him direction and rules on living a semi normal life without attracting unwanted attention and trouble. Now he was realizing that attempting to contain a bored Time Lord was like trying to hold back the tide with an ice lolly. Finally, with seeing that pained expression on the Doctor's face earlier, and Rose getting ready to mutiny, he'd given up. No point in trying, really. Just sit back, keep a kettle on, and have a support and extraction team on standby at all times.

Suddenly, he understood why Jacks had begged him to keep them as safe as could be and away from danger as much as possible barring end of the world scenarios. Now he'd have to attempt explaining to his very stubborn and indomitable wife that she was just going to have to accept that they weren't going to do anyone's idea of normal, and just hope they could find a comfortable definition of the term for themselves.

As for this situation, timelines imploding and never ending destruction of the space time continuum sounded scary enough. That was, if it wasn't being grossly exaggerated by someone whose judgement was a bit faulty lately and concept of reality was flagging. Add in the other factors, and he was already cringing. Just keep them from getting sucked in too deep, and ending up trapped between the media and the extremists. Because in the end I'm not sure which one would be worse. On top of that, Hartley and the DI were giving him incredulous looks.

"Right," he said, making a decision and hoping that his actions wouldn't be too little, too late. "Let's get a response team on standby, and start monitoring their location from here. Odds are we'll be needing this within the next few hours. Better safe than sorry."

Hartley looked very disapproving and was quick to make his displeasure known. "I find your lax methods of handling this Smith rather worrisome."

You don't even know the half of it, mate, he thought wryly. You try dealing with him when he's all at sixes and sevens or try convincing him that at least appearing to blend in is safer than sticking out like an apple in a pickle barrel. "No point in fighting the inevitable. He's going to do as he wishes. All I can do is try to tone down the effects of whatever he decides to do, and hope my daughter can temper the worst of his impulses," he explained.

He could gracefully accept defeat when it was warranted. That didn't mean he was giving up entirely. Oh no. He still had the sonic screwdriver locked in his office safe, which would slow the Doctor down somewhat. Even if it was just long enough for cooler heads and people who weren't
Dougal Chambers was staring down at him with thinly veiled hostility and suspicion, but he seemed to recognize him in the light coming from a lamp in the corner. "I know you."

The front room of the row house they were in was still dusty from disuse. Obviously, they'd not had this particular hidey hole for long. That or the concept of cleaning was beyond them. Most of the previous occupants' possessions were still left where they'd put them, though the sofa was rattier than it likely had been then. There were telltale signs of the more recent inhabitants from the cigarette butts by the boarded over front windows, and a makeshift sleeping area glimpsed through the doorway into the room beyond. No signs of the tech, which he was guessing was down cellar or likewise out of where any old toff who banged on the door would see it directly. Gas lamps explained the lighting on a street of houses that were otherwise dark. All homey, like. Or would've been, without well, all of the whole secret hideout, dust, and people with weapons. Oh, and the loony. Couldn't forget that. Very important, that.

The Doctor pulled his eyes away from his curious perusal of the dusty room and focused on the man in front of him. He tried not to seem overly threatening or dangerous as he mildly said, "Oh? That's nice." The nagging sense that something about the whole situation was a bit off was worming its way through his consciousness as he continued, "Shame, I can't say the same about you. Regular man of mystery, you are."

The two toughs that had him held down, while acting as tough guys all over the galaxies did, their attention seemed equally divided between him and the possibility of further outside interference. He just hoped they wouldn't notice Rose and Donna out there, because they were too well armed and jumpier than he'd like. Cor, he really missed the pacifists of Gamma Delta Three, who'd merely take up picket signs and lecture you on the waywardness of your actions instead of going straight for the whole guns pointing and shouty bit. Humans. Always so stroppy and ready for violence when they got out of their comfort zones. A nice cuppa and a game of cricket would be so much better. And since they've not got that here, I'd even settle for a ping-pong match.

Chambers scoffed while the two men holding him gave him a shake, reprimanding him for being cheeky. He bit back the instinctive urge to respond with a clever arse remark and forced himself to remain passive. That gun in my still bruised ribs was going to add another to the tally I've already accounted for, he thought woefully. Still, this is all so very familiar. Comforting, that. While everything else is all so disorientating and new, I've got this to fall back on. The erstwhile meddler who's good at getting himself in a jam.

"I know very well who you are, John Smith. The man rumored to be half alien, operating under the auspices of Torchwood themselves. You're a walking conundrum, since logically, they should have you on a tighter leash, if not locked away somewhere."

Annoyed, he repeated his earlier words as he watched Dougal Chambers pacing. Contemplating his fate, most likely. Rassilon knew what they'd be planning. Not that it was likely to happen. Between Rose, Donna and his own cleverness, he'd get out of this somehow. "I'm not Torchwood."

There seemed no chance of getting the two goons to let down their guard, much less relax their hold on him. Really, did they have to keep pulling his hair? He was so not going to be happy if he ended inklined to snap decisions to prevail.
up finding a bald patch come morning. Feigned complacency is key to fooling the enemy into loss of vigilance. Keep them talking and they'll happily tell you all their plans in an expensive fit of megalomaniacal bragging. Strategy #1 for dealing with this type.

Chambers stopped in front of him, leaning down to look at him more closely. Like he was assessing the truthfulness of that statement. "No, but surely you've brought trouble on our heads. If Torchwood doesn't nab us, the activists will be along."

The urge to reply, "Don't call me Shirley," was stifled in time, but the rest still slipped out. "Oh, I'd imagine it was firing that Temporal Distortion Gun on a crowded street during full daylight that accomplished that," he said dryly. "Luckily, you refocused the energy beam and returned the monks before the distortion threshold was reached and the area got pulled into a massive time loop. I've seen those before. Believe me, it's not pretty."

That brought Chambers' restless pacing to a halt, as the man gave him a long stare. "I hardly think it would come to that. I've got it under control. Yesterday was a controlled experiment," he stated loftily, his confidence undaunted. "I'd not thought even the great Torchwood would have such in it's hidden inventories, considering its come from a world far from this."

He bit back a snarky comment on the arrogance of that statement. Controlled, my arse. Instead, he gave the man an innocent, pleading look when the younger of the two goons jostled him. Bloke must've sensed that he was not suitably impressed with Dougal Chambers' 'experiments'. Chambers relented finally, motioning to his guards to let him up. They complied reluctantly, one stepping back to keep watch on the outside though a gap in the boards over the window while the other kept the gun at ready. The chance of catching a stray bullet lessened slightly, the Doctor relaxed in relief. Perhaps he wanted a more civilized conversation. Easier to brag at someone who wasn't cowering at gunpoint, yeah?

Nodding his thanks to his captors, he said, "Much appreciated, really." He turned back to Chambers, fixing him with a disapproving look. "Believe me, if Torchwood had had one banging about it would have been dismantled long before now. I've confiscated things I'd rather not have someone playing with. World ending events, with or without an 'Oops' involved, tend to put a crimp on one's afternoon. Really, they do."

Chambers was unimpressed, but unwilling to give over convincing him. Always so keen to make everyone around them see the world the same way they do. Always trying for one more convert. He closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable rejoinder. They always had one, thinking themselves so clever.

"Forget the dangers, it's effect on the time stream is a wonder to behold. It could revolutionize the world around us. Think of the families who've lost loved ones- the ones lost before their time, the people who could be brought back!" Chambers exclaimed, his tone exultant, full of wonder and conviction.

Usually he was a fan of human curiosity and the exploration of the unknown, but this... this was too much. Gone too far, too fast, and recklessly, to boot. The idiots.

He opened his eyes to see the reaction to his next words, fixing Dougal Chambers with a coldly knowing look. "Revolutionize it? More like destroy it, and the rest of the cosmos. Everything has its time, everything dies. A time to mourn, as that Bible of yours says. But this, you're playing with fire. At this rate, we'll all end up burnt. You've no idea what you're messing with."

Chambers' derisive look of disdain didn't bother him. It was the same look he'd seen more often than not. So hard to be impressive these days. "You? You're nothing. No position anywhere, no power.
They say you were grown in some underground lab somewhere.” Chambers sneered at him, but he shrugged mildly at his comment. He’d heard the rumors himself. All in all, all he saw it as was a sign that someone was getting scared. Finally, someone might be thinking things through a bit.

"People say a lot of things. Most of it's shite."

Dougal walked close, staring up at him, eyes squinting as he tried reading his expression. "What would you know about loss? What have you mourned?"

*My planet. My people. Myself. More than you can imagine, little man.* "More than anyone should ever have to, which is why I'm not going to let you do this."

Dougal Chambers gave him sudden smile, a grandfatherly smile. One that let the wisps of blow-away white hair on his head really accentuate the sudden gleam of madness in his eyes, the sudden shift in tactics startling. "Think of it. We could rewrite time itself, make history as we want it to be. No more need for mourning, just rewind to happier times and start anew. The children that could grow up to live their lives; the couples who could grow old together as was meant to be -- so much that has been lost, saved."

He knew well what it was like, the temptation to rend the timelines apart. Even better, he knew what would happen when a human tried to change things. Rose had just wanted to save her dad. This nutter wanted to bring back everyone -- or at least claimed to.

Funny, until now, I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt on whether he's barking or not. Meh, just goes to show you never know until they're howling at the moon and sending rabid letters to the press, he thought in resignation. Really, Rose, now would be a brilliant time for a rescue. I'm not sure I'd even mind Torchwood's heavy handed style about now.

An idea on the why of this was starting to form. "We all have to say goodbye some time,” he said softly. "Doing this, using this technology, it'll end up destroying reality. Destroying everything for a few moments of happiness, pulling everyone into a massive paradox. But it's worse than that- time won't just go on flowing around the anomaly like a rock in a stream. It'll start rips and tears that grow until you're in a massive time loop. Looping on and on until the causality matrix shreds and it all starts collapsing on itself. Whoever you lost, they'd not want this. Not ever. Just give the device to me and I'll walk away from here. I'll say nothing about this to anyone and it'll be like you've never met me."

There it was. Dougal Chambers' one chance. One warning before he let it whatever happened next happen. Whether he took the offer or not was up to him.

"Damn.” That was Rose's immediate reaction when she saw the goons turn their attention on the Doctor. That, and holding Donna back when she saw his almost imperceptible gesture to stay out of sight.

Retreating to the shelter of a low wall, they watched for any further signs of activity. The space between the side yard and first of the row houses was littered with broken roof slates, broken glass, and other abandoned rubbish. A feral cat hissed at her from behind an overgrown hedge. Orange fur on end as it arched its back angrily, offended by her intrusion on its territory. *Sorry about this, mate.*
You can have it all to yourself once this is done, she thought grimly. Another wasteland in the heart of London. What used to be Hyde Park was even worse than this. At least there were no weevil reports around here. Just the moggies.

"I can't believe this." Donna started. "We've got to go rescue that numpty now. Really, and he says you're jeopardy prone? Pot, meet kettle. You're both black and he's an idiot."

Rose shook her head, frustrated herself. She knew things were likely to go wonky, but not quite this fast. *Focus on the positives, Tyler. Unless they've brained him one, he's still alive, judging from the lack of gunshots. No silencers on those weapons I saw, either. Unless they've got a spare battery pack, that rules out them zapping him back in time. Though something tells me, he'd have a grand old time, larking about with Boudicca and driving the Romans barmy. "No, we wait. I'll go around back and see what's the do. Then we'll go from there."

Donna groaned softly, burying her face in one hand. "Please tell me you're kidding. You are, right? All one big joke, aimed at keeping me up all hours in the middle of the slums."

"No, sorry."

"Why they don't keep people like you two on leashes, I'll never know. Warning signs posted before turning out on an unsuspecting population would be nice."

"What am I supposed to do?" Rose hissed. "They've got guns, we don't. I hardly think they'll hesitate to use them if we just blithely go asking if they'll give him back."

She was already crabwalking her way around to the side of the house, guessing that this wasn't likely to be a large operation. Donna hung back for a moment, hesitating before she finally followed. "Why I let you two talk me into these things, I'll never know," she grumped. "Don't tell me this was the original plan."

Rose ducked around a overturned wheelie bin, smiling to herself. "'Who needs plans? Takes the fun out of it. No anticipation at all,' he always says. Donna's got a point," she muttered. "Stay here. Need a lookout. I'll go ahead. It all goes south, scarper back to where you parked the car and call 999 and tell them it's a Torchwood emergency -- they'll transfer you to Operations Control."

Donna gave her a shaky nod, out of her depth, but not backing down. Rose gave her shoulder a squeeze, saying, "You're doing brilliant."

"Is it always like this?" the ginger asked in a low voice. "The manky alleys, dodgy neighborhoods, and sneaking about?"

Rose thought briefly before nodding. "Yeah," she grinned. "'Cept when it's on another planet, and then it's an exotic alien equivalent of an alley, or a space station, then you've got the ventilation shafts to clamber through. Then there's the past, then you just don't want to know what's in those alleys you're creeping through."

"Nutters. Absolute nutters," Donna sighed, waving Rose on. "And you call this fun. And I went along with it, after the first time around. I'm no better than you are, at that. Hope they do group discounts at the funny farm on those rooms with the padded walls."

Debating whether to send the alert code into Control via text, she pulled out her mobile in case it was necessary. Coming around the rear of the structures, she counted windows, remembering Chambers and his cronies had come out of the third door down. Half of the windows were broken but few were boarded over, weather shredded drapes blowing out through the casements here and there. That was
a positive sign. Faint voices coming through one window ahead were another. The familiarity of one was even more reassuring. He was alive, and doing what he did best.

At least they're not exactly champions of defence strategy planning, even if they're all paranoid, she noted. All the focus on the front, unless they've the silent alarms.

She cautiously peered over the sill, seeing the remnants of a kitchen on the other side, a doorway beyond opening into the front room. The walls in the kitchen looked to have once been a soft, comforting yellow before weather and neglect had turned them to an appalling shade of beige. Unfortunately, no signs of a conveniently unattended bit of destructive technology to be found. Other than the smashed electric kettle, the looters had been through that room and stripped or destroyed anything of possible value that could be easily carried. The back half of these buildings had fared the worst. The street patrols after the Cybus incident must've scared them off before they could get to the rest, because the front room looked untouched in comparison.

Past the collapsed and torn down sections of cupboards and shelving, she could see an old man with his back to her. Beyond that was the Doctor, hands up and his unassuming pose belying his obvious tension. She could read it in the tightness around his eyes and the brittleness of his smile. There was a man around her age holding a gun on him, but his attention was on the six foot tall interloper who was trying to talk them out of their plans.

Most of the conversion was muffled by walls, but she overheard Chambers' taunts. Then came the sudden shift to a tone of near cajoling and she almost hit the send button to call in backup then. Some of those belittling words were getting through- she saw him flinch at being called nothing. It was the barest of hints, but it was there if you knew him well enough. For once she hoped he could maintain the mask of indifference until they were back to safe territory and he could let it all out. If he'd trust her that far.

Chambers wasn't looking like he was going to give either, his and his pals' main concern seemed to be something or someone else (despite the mentions of Torchwood), and Donna was waving frantically, motioning at something on the street. Nerves on alert, she crept back to Donna.

"Look! That lot just pulled up."

A dark colored van had pulled up to the kerb at the corner, four figures getting out. It was too dark to see who they were, but judging from their behavior, they weren't official. The distance and gloom kept their features indistinguishable, but they made enough noise one would have to be stone deaf to no hear them approaching. Whoever they were, they were armed, and wanted everyone to know they were coming.

That was when she sent the text.
The atmosphere in the small row house was intense, stifling. One breath drawn through clenched teeth, then another. Chambers was still pacing, lost in thought as he told part of his story in an offhand way.

"Twenty years ago, my daughter, Mary, got sick. She died on her 16th birthday -- from cancer. I could've saved her, if I'd been allowed the chance. We'd had the equipment, the technology, but Lumic refused to divert the resources. Said it was too soon to reveal our plans to the world. More the fool I, I obeyed. He promised me the alternative treatments would work."

"She wouldn't want you to destroy the world just to bring her back," the Doctor said softly, voice mild. "I can't imagine anyone would."

Chambers rounded on him, eyes blazing with anger and bitterness. "Why should it matter if this sorry world is destroyed?"

The way the man's voice was rising as he became more upset and emotional, the Doctor was surprised he wasn't frothing at the mouth. He understood, in a way, but not why he'd try taking a risk like this. "I know what it's like, losing everything and everyone you hold dear, and seeing the one who's to blame every time you look in the bloody mirror," he said in a low voice. "It's the knowing you had no choice that really gets you. Eats at you, until all you can see is the darkness. Took me finding someone, a pink and yellow girl, to see there was still good out there. She saved me, told me when to stop; kept me from going too far. Sometimes, all you need is a hand to hold."

"It's not I who've gone too far, it's this whole damn world. The greed, the corruption, the political games going on and the struggles for power while most of the population is mostly concerned with what's on telly and who's got the scandal of the week. With the crime rate, the city is still half in shambles after nearly a decade, and now the alien hordes have started coming. It's like a bad science fiction feature from the telly! The stadium crash, the stars going out- now they've reappeared with no explanation on what caused it, much less what or who brought them back. This world is done for, it's all a matter of time. Unless I turn back the clock, take us back to simpler days before all this mess started. What else will I leave behind, with no children to carry on my name? With all my years of research destroyed, or hidden in some secret basement archives. People will remember and thank me for this, once I've rewound the clock to better days."

"People will remember you as the one who set off worse destruction than Lumic ever managed, not as their savior. Just stop this now, while you still can," the Doctor said flatly, patience wearing thin. He was commending himself on his self restraint, even as he was wondering if he was getting too old for this. Too tired for listening to the insanity, certainly. It had been a hell of a day. A long one, too.

"Please, just give the tech to me and walk away." The Doctor cocked his head to the side, assessing the others' body language. These men were on alert. Scared, in full fight or flight mode, but not acting like outright aggressors. Sure, they'd dragged him in here, held him at gunpoint, but going after someone like Miles Holburn seemed contrary to pattern. "Walk away, and I'll do everything in my power to see no one ever comes after you."

Chambers' tone was bitter, mocking. "Is that a threat? Dare you to come marching in here, and start ordering us about like your personal peons?"
He shook his head, feeling a desperate clench of nervous tension settle in his gut. It didn't look like he was winning anyone's trust in this. If anything, they were starting to eye him with more suspicion than previously; the younger guard coming closer to nudge him with his weapon again. Growing tension made him even consider the terrifying possibility of catching a bullet. Or worse, losing track of the Temporal Distortion Gun again. Now that he'd found it, or at least sussed out where it was likely to be, losing it again would be so much worse.

*If I don't pull this one off now, I'm not like to get another go at it. Pete's liable to lock me away in a "safe" location for being reckless this time around, because this is way beyond the parameters of those bloody rules of his,* he thought. *Send me home, tell me to stay out of trouble like a good little pet alien. But if I do...*

He was still holding on to that foolish, damnable folly known as 'hope'. Hope that things would come out all right. Hope that nothing would go pear-shaped. He just knew things were likely to go pear-shaped when his ears caught the first rumbles of an approaching motor. Weighing the likely outcomes for different courses of action, he chose to move to a position of trust. Gain their trust, then they'd be more likely to hand over the TD gun, surrender, and no one get hurt. Simple, really. Or, it sounded simple in his head when the idea sprang to mind. *Someone's coming,* he said softly, thinking it would be better than having them horribly surprised and turning on him.

"Nonsense. I don't hear anything," scoffed the man at the window, turning to focus his hostile glare on the Doctor. Despite the man's obvious doubts, he was more alert then with his weapon at ready. "Thinks he's got ears sharper than a person ought. Half alien or not, no one's got hearing that good. Next he'll be claiming a nose better than a hound's," came the disgusted mutter.

"Believe me, someone's coming," he stressed, backing away slightly before he realized what he was subconsciously doing. Hold fast, he told himself. Don't make them any more jumpier than they already are.

Chambers looked disgusted, but unsurprised. *Should have known you'd not come alone. One like you, they'd keep a trace on you. Not let you out of their sights for long."

"I doubt it's Torchwood already. They don't have a clue where any of us are, it has to be someone else," he said, thinking aloud. Things were already starting to accelerate beyond his control too quickly. He had hope it was Torchwood, but from the sound of the engine and it's leaking exhaust, it couldn't be. They took the maintenance of the motor pool seriously and conscientiously kept up with repairs on all of their equipment. But no one was listening to him, instead jumping to conclusions.

"He could've called in backup," accused the bloke with the gun on him, eyes gone hard with a disturbing eagerness flashing in their depths. "Could have a wire or something on him."

Chambers cursed softly. "Search him. Should've thought they'd be that canny. Should've thought of it before this."

The younger guard, spotty with youth searched him roughly, even as he protested. He winced when his suit jacket was yanked off unceremoniously and the pockets rummaged through. For once he was grateful he'd not had the sonic on him, or anything else that could be read as suspicious. "That vehicle -- it's not them. Believe me, they'd not pull an op like this. If it was, you'd not be hearing them coming."

Indeed, all of them could hear the sound now, only a street or so away. That only made the young man rougher, as Chambers looked on dispassionately. By now, his pockets had been emptied, and his shirt pulled up in the vain search for listening equipment. Sending a silent prayer for Rose and Donna's safety he said, "Please, this is someone else, not Torchwood. Earlier today, a man was
killed. Murdered by someone looking for you. I only tracked you from the effects from your first tests four days ago. Please."

The reminder of his words from short minutes before fell on deaf ears.

"Not even a mobile on him," muttered the guard, incredulously. "What sort of idiot comes barging into a place like this with just a ball of string?"

"Someone who means you no harm," he said firmly. "Plus, the rozzers took my yo-yo." He raised an eyebrow. "Think the mighty Torchwood would be so stupid as to send one of their agents in, unequipped and unarmed?" He pulled up the bottom of his shirt enough to expose the scar on his side, urgency pushing him to do something he wouldn't normally do. "See? No body armor or the like. Not now, and not the day I got this. I'm not bloody Torchwood."

The younger guard swallowed nervously, growing pale as he considered the extent of the original injury and the bruising around the area. He quickly averted his eyes, trying with a margin of success to pretend he hadn't seen. As young as he was, and as bad things had been in this parallel London, the boy hadn't had much personal experience with violence. Not enough to harden him to be able to pull that trigger now. If the Doctor had still been a complete unknown, an overt threat, possibly. In a fit of stupidity and fear, probably. Now... only the next few minutes would tell. The last two months hadn't been kind, especially the last four days, the Doctor thought with a slight grimace as he met the youth's eyes. Eyes flicking back to Chambers, he gauged the man's reaction. Stone cold, he thought. How much did you lose for you to turn to this? How much more than the daughter you've mentioned? But Dougal Chambers wasn't swayed. He'd been hiding in the shadows too long to trust anyone at their word, much less a near-stranger. Even if it was in vain, he wasn't going to give up yet.

"Please, I could save you."

"As if," Chambers said shortly. "We always knew this day would come, since Lumic and I first parted ways all those years ago. This world is too set in it's ways, too unwilling to accept new ideas."

"It doesn't have to come to this," the Doctor pleaded. He didn't have a definite plan, just the beginning of one. Out the back, meet up with Rose and Donna, get Pete to pull some strings and get protection for this lot. After disarming them and taking away their toys, he thought as he watched the old man pull the TD gun from behind the sofa. Of course. Most obvious place, he noted wryly as he cringed at the way the man gave the weapon a gentle caress. "All my dreams were pinned on this, the sad hopes of a daft old man who wanted to change the world," he said softly, before motioning for his henchmen to go out the back of the building.

"The sentiment is just great, commendable even. The method, however, is a bit naff," the Doctor muttered under his breath, glancing back toward the front windows. The sounds of heavy boots running was closing in, even as they were shoving him toward the window. Light from carelessly unhidden torches was flashing against the outside of the boards when he glanced back.

None of them hesitated when it came to getting out of there, not even Chambers, who had surprising agility for his age. They had seconds before they'd be trapped. All he could hope was that they'd not get turned around and find themselves in a blind alley. But oh, it was brilliant. Air burning his lungs as his feet pounded the ground, dodging debris along the way. A true adventure, mad scientist, the threat of death, unknown assailants after them -- just fantastic. Other than the part where he was trapped in between two groups of hostiles. Hostiles with guns, even. And his side, which was starting to protest all the activity. But he was trying to forget that. This was starting to spiral out of control. He'd not even managed to get ahold of the TD gun. Pear-shaped, indeed. There was a reason he hated that particular fruit. Reminded him of too many occasions. Like this one. Oh, this
Behind them he could hear someone kicking in the door of the row house. He could take off now, leave them to their fate and have the TD gun possibly end up in worse hands, or he could try to get them out of here alive and try reasoning with them when things weren't quite so dicey. Everything just seemed to speed up, like it would when his old abilities had still worked. There was yelling when their attackers found their quarry was fled, even more once one of them looked through the broken kitchen window. He could hear the cries of, "Get them," even as he turned to chivvy them along faster. A gunshot rang out, a bullet taking a chunk of brick out of the low wall beside them, and served as some extra incentive to really shake a leg. *Dodging bullets? Really? Blow this for a game of soldiers.* "With me!" he called back to Chambers and his cronies. "I can get you to safety."

For once, someone actually listened to him. Caught between armed attackers and the possibility of amnesty from Torchwood, it looked like they'd be sensible. The heavy set guard, a man not exactly built for running, was staying close to Chambers, firing an occasional round to keep their pursuers back. Only two of the other goons following, so the others must be back there searching for anything left behind, he thought. Behind him, he could hear more gunfire and other vehicles. Thank Rassilon, the cavalry's here, he thought. They'll keep the others distracted, keep anymore from following.

"Look, if they're Torchwood -- who are they fighting?" he asked the younger guard who was keeping pace with him, hiding a wince. The bruised ribs were really protesting now, what with all the running and climbing through window frames. OK, so maybe he had downplayed how much they were bothering him yesterday, but not like he'd actually planned on this, and bullets trumped bruises, no matter what time period you were in. Definitely hadn't planned this.

The distant flashing of emergency lights could be seen beyond the overgrown hedgerow they ran along, serving as a perfect beacon. *Right, here we go. Mission almost accomplished. Got Chambers and his crew, they've still got the device, and Torchwood is just over there. This might actually work,* he thought as he diverted toward the lights. Of course, he couldn't exactly go barreling straight in, not with armed gunmen behind. He'd have to lead them on a more circuitous route, and hope to lose them somewhere behind. Steering them toward a safe haven without getting shot or anyone else getting shot would be nice. Then again, he was willing to look the other way for once, he thought when he heard a cry from behind them immediately after Chambers' escort stopped and fired off a shot. Pacifism was one thing when you could cheat death. Without that little trick of superior biology to hand, he was reconsidering the whole thing. Dying might not be a guaranteed guarantee for tonight, but the dressing down for disregard for safety? Oh yes, that was assuredly in the cards -- definitely didn't need to be able to see the timelines clearly to figure that one out or to be a grade a genius.

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Rose was amazed when one of the field teams arrived just after she sent the text. None were agents she even knew. Must be the new recruits Dad mentioned, or the ones from Glasgow he was considering bringing in with that new plan for rotating placements, she mused as she watched them run into the fray. Three more Special Op vans pulled up along with several panda cars and a police van. Rose would've gone in to provide extra support if she'd had anything besides her mobile. Plus there was Donna to think about.

Donna was looking particularly out of her depth, and getting more so by the minute. Curiosity wasn't
quite winning out over shock, even with the cavalcade of official vehicles and armed protection.

*I swear he does this on purpose,* she thought. *Drags someone else who's untrained and not prepared for these sorts of situations, just to make sure I'm going to stay well out of the way. Cotton wool again, Doctor, cotton wool. Just be alright and safe. Please. Come home.*

The gunfire had already stopped and agents were clearing the scene for the investigators. More were scattering throughout the surrounding neighborhood, brushing her queries about the Doctor aside. No one would let her into the scene without clearance from HQ. It was all so frustrating. Donna had even started trying to get information out of them, starting to get a bit tetchy from concern, but no go.

When Pete arrived with Hartley in tow, he was looking frustrated and as tired as they all were. He conferred with one of the agents putting up temporary barriers before approaching. "What the hell happened?" he asked, without preamble. Suit rumpled from a long day and his tie long since tossed aside, he was well beyond patience now.

Rose went into professional agent mode, dispassionately making her report, while her feeling churned away inside. *Can't get all emotional now. Wait until it's all sorted out before reacting,* she reminded herself. "Located Chambers and his associates. Before there was any procedural plans in place, he walked in. They took him hostage, but he had the situation well in hand until these others showed up. Any information on their identities?"

"None. Got their photos sent back to HQ, Lane and Jason are running checks now. The Met's SOCA are coming in to run the full forensics. This one's going to be a joint investigation, with Holburn's murder tied up in this," Pete said gruffly. He didn't acknowledge her mention of the Doctor, just made an exasperated grimace.

Rubbing a hand over his face, he sighed wearily. "What were you two thinking?" he snapped, taking in her and Donna's bedraggled appearance. "Do you want to set your mother off and blaming me for letting you two get into trouble like this? Not even armed, no backup, and all after you were told to stay out of this and go home!"

"Sorry," Rose muttered.

Jackie had been after Pete to keep her and the Doctor away from the front lines since the Shoreditch incident. Maybe it was him getting so badly hurt, but her mum had been worse than ever about all the dangers of this life. The urgency of the Dimension Cannon and the stars going out had certainly worn off. Jackie didn't even know he was growing the coral, since last it had been mentioned, he'd been too uncertain to even try yet. That had been before Ferguson's night raid. Then again, maybe she'd not forgiven the Doctor his subterfuge in that whole debacle.

Pete looked angry and upset, but not like he was the bearer of bad news. Could she take hope from that? Either way, she'd wait until Pete's temper had blown over enough, and the medics were escorting the Doctor out.

Rose shrugged wordlessly, silently telling him what he'd probably sorted for himself. Obviously they'd been remotely monitoring things from HQ, even with the lack of CCTV in the area. Most likely, they'd tracked her mobile with a scanner while keeping a discrete distance in the van. Could've got here sooner, she thought. Like before he marched up to the blokes with the guns, and before the other blokes with more guns showed up.

Donna's fascinated staring broke away from the area now blocked off and turned on Pete. "Don't blame me. It was that bloody loony of hers. Like always," she huffed. Standing on tip toe, she craned her neck, trying to see beyond the vans. "Where is he?" she asked, daring to bring up the topic Rose
and Pete had been dancing around. "I'll give him the rough side of my tongue for this. Should've been asleep hours ago."

"Get in line for that one. We'll all be having a word with him." Groaning, Pete continued shortly, "Knew it was too much to ask that he'd slipped out, met up with you, and was keeping low behind one of those wheelie bins over there. Bloody hell." He turned away briefly, giving terse orders over the comms unit he pulled out of his pocket.

"He's not in there?" Rose was scared, but hopeful.

Pete turned back, looking grim. "Not a hair, or anyone but that lot. Just his suit jacket, and the bodies of several unidentified men, one was a suicide. Topped himself when he saw he wasn't getting away. All, we're guessing, were trying to look like us. Already dispatched teams from Canary Wharf scouring the city for him."

Rose was numb. Yeah, it was nice knowing he'd not been shot in that row house, but not knowing was worse in it's own way. And whoever had attacked that house had been determined enough to take themselves out, rather than risk interrogation. God, he was so going to be hearing about this later.

Pete put a reassuring arm around her shoulders, and even Donna hung close by for support. "We'll find him, I promise. They're on foot so they couldn't have gone far in this short a time."

"Earthers. Trying to pin this one on Torchwood, call it a misuse of authority and set the press on us," Rose guessed, thinking back over the confidential meetings.

Pete nodded. "That's the guess. It's why the Met's handling the IDs and the investigation. Hopefully we can round up one of Chambers' lot to give a witness statement, or the like. Now all we've got to do is find that silly prat who could find himself in trouble even in a locked cabinet."

Sounds of gunfire came from the street behind, then came a shout, and they all turned. A group of four people were coming up the street behind them. Rose recognized the Doctor, and the others that she'd glimpsed in front of the row house earlier. There he was, strolling along with his hands in pockets, like he was just out for a casual walkabout instead of extracting himself from a hostage situation and getting the hostage takers away from an ambush.

"He's got Chambers," someone said, pointing to the older man following the Doctor, and indeed it was. Chambers held a gun-like device close against his chest, eying them all suspiciously. His guards were still armed.

Pete had drawn his weapon before he realized, lowering it with a muttered curse. Other guns that had come out were lowered on a command from Pete, who gave the Doctor a look of relief combined with annoyance.

"Doctor," Rose said, relieved to see he was unharmed. He looked exhausted, but no worse for wear.

"Hello, Rose. Miss me?" The Doctor smiled cheekily, shrugging nonchalantly. "Look who I found. Told you I could pull it off."

"So I see," Pete said wryly. "Though usually recovery missions don't quite go like this." He turned his focus on Chambers, motioning for the agents behind him to holster their weapons. "Dougal Chambers? I'm prepared to offer you full immunity in exchange for return of Smith and the weapon."

Everyone was tense and alert, waiting for Chambers' response. It was a few moments that seemed to drag, especially for Rose. She was trying to gauge body language, not just her dad and Chambers,
but the Doctor as well.

Chambers eyed Pete, his men continuing to hold their weapons at ready, even if they weren’t aimed at anyone in particular. He shook his head slowly. "Why should I trust you?" He looked at the Doctor questioningly.

The Doctor nodded stiffly. "Do it, or walk; it's up to you," he said in a soft voice that barely carried enough for anyone else to hear. "Just give me the weapon, not them. Please. No one will come after you if you chose. Decide to stay and they'll probably try to hire you. They tried it with me, and I'm crazier than you are. I condemned myself for genocide and probably stranded myself on this bloody backwater planet for funsies."

Even Pete flinched at that softly spoken remark, even if the Doctor's tone was mild. He looked ready to object about the TD Gun, but closed his mouth then Rose put her hand out and touched her arm. It was painfully clear who was actually managing the negotiations and Rose sensed this was about more than just Dougal Chambers and his attempts to mess with the spacetime continuum.

Chambers, however, took no notice. He fixed Pete with a steely glare, speaking clearly in a voice that carried well, "I want protection. Full protection from those exclusionists. Can you guarantee that?"

Upon Pete's promise, there was a brief exchange of intense stares before Chambers handed the Temporal Distortion Gun to the Doctor, surprising them all. It was clear that the man knew he'd not see it again, and even more so that Pete wasn't exactly totally happy with this turn of events. Something that even the Doctor hadn't expected, but obviously had hoped for. The Doctor turned a glance passed between him and Pete, a silent agreement of sorts.

He's doing it. He's got up the gumption and this is his line in the sand. Please, just don't carry this too far. Don't run where I can't follow. At least the device would no longer be a threat, even if he's pulling away and closing himself off again, Rose thought. Please, not that. Not now. She didn't hesitate to follow the Doctor when he turned and walked away with it casually slung over his shoulder. Neither did Donna.

It was as heavy as he'd remembered it to be. Poly carbon steel, and a few other materials that wouldn't be discovered for a dozen centuries or more. Cold, deadly, and heavier than it looked. When Dougal had handed it to him after long moments of debating and hushed murmurs from Chambers' goons and the Torchwood agents alike, a heaviness lifted from him. It was a relief, but also a shift in dynamics that was acknowledged with a look between him and Pete. Pete had nodded wordlessly, an acquiescence, before he turned and walked away. This object would disappear, but not into an underground vault under Torchwood's purview. Retrieving it was the price paid for losing the restrictions.

He was off the leash for good now. Yeah, he'd still have rules, but they'd be self imposed ones like he'd always had in all his centuries. Rules that were slightly modified, based on promises he'd made. Promises he intended to keep.
Now, he was walking away. Who needed silly things like formal resignation letters? Not him, that's for sure. That was him saying he was done. Done and dusted. Just let him alone to sort out what he was going to do with his life. To hell with Torchwood and their protocols, and faffing about with that lot. If they'd done it their way, Chambers would be dead and who knew where this bloody thing would end up, he had thought when he felt the weight in his hands. Dangerous or not, it was his responsibility. A piece of the Time War he'd never thought to see again. Being so starkly reminded hurt, even more when he'd closed his eyes and could almost smell the rancid smoke around him like it had been when he'd stood before the Moment. Moments like this... there was always such a detachment that came with acceptance like this.

The rest of it, weell, that he wasn't too sure about. Hopefully, things weren't going to entirely go tits up on him. He'd got a faint impression of the way things could be in future just before he'd stepped out onto the pavements from between two abandoned semidetached. Nothing definite, nothing clear, just a gut feeling, an instinct. Hopefully it wasn't just his judgement clouded by damnable hope again. But things weren't resembling any sort of fruit now. A couple years ago, he'd have been grinning like a fool and almost ready to whistle. He wasn't quite far from that now, really. With this off the streets, it was one less thing to keep him awake at night worrying. One down, five thousand more concerns to go.

It was a bit of a shock, though, when Rose followed him, less so, Donna. Donna had to go back that way to fetch her auto. But their quiet footsteps behind him were a benediction, almost, a confirmation that he wasn't alone. Someone still believed in him, and that was enough. Give it time, keep pretending, and maybe he could believe too. Pete certainly did, that or he was just giving him a pass by not coming after him or protesting in the first place.

They all walked in silence until Rose spoke, "Well, that was a bit anticlimactic."
Blame this on listening to Nirvana while the characters in this story babbling away in my head. If you squint, you'll find the references.

Anyhoo, fluffy, angsty smut, anyone?

23

A thunderstorm was rolling over the city, lightning flashes lighting up the sky in the distance. The hour was late, but Rose wasn't asleep. Neither was the Doctor, she guessed. Probably still tinkering. Or brooding. She hoped not that. Donna had dropped them off at their old flat in Hackney at the Doctor's request. None of them had spoke much on the way there, but the air in the car hadn't been too uncomfortably tense. No, he'd been quiet but more relaxed than she'd have figured him to be. Donna had yawned and said the question and answer session could wait until a more reasonable hour, with no chance of dodging it, either. No one had argued that, since they were all pretty much knackered. Other than the Doctor. After setting the TD Gun aside on the sofa, he'd gone for his tool kit and started working on wiring again. At her inquiry, he'd merely said, "Just something to do while I think."

"That bad, eh?"

She'd been worried he was going to stay up brooding all night, but he'd given her an easy smile, shaking his head. "No, just too wired to sleep. Figured I'd try wearing myself out until I can. You don't have to stay up on my account. You humans need your rest."

She'd reminded him he wasn't immune from that necessity, but only teasingly. That was one of the things he still held dear, the not needing as much sleep as the rest of the population. It also irked him, needing more than before. But she let that slide. "Nuh-night, Doctor."

"Night, Rose."

There had been a faint comforting hum from the growing TARDIS then, making her heart twinge in sympathy that he couldn't hear it. That was something else that bothered him, though he tried to hide how much. Just a few offhand remarks about the metacrisis back two weeks ago when she'd first heard it. Since then, she'd purposely not mentioned it again, not wanting to point it out and upset him. Taking the hint, she'd gone into the small bedroom for a kip. They'd probably go back to the regular flat in the morning, she had thought as she took off her trainers. That is, if he's not bent on staying here. No telling what he was thinking then, and asking him right out wasn't going to work. It was almost like old times, with him staying up tinkering. The only difference was she'd not be surprised to find him sound asleep over whatever he'd been working on. That would have been totally expected, what with the way he'd just walked away from Torchwood. He'd probably be thinking about what he'd do from here on out, but not planning. Not that. He was still more the seat of his pants type of reactionary, if not even more so now. Whatever he'd gotten from Donna in the metacrisis, organizational skills and time management weren't part of it.
She awoke several hours later, oddly refreshed. All that time jumping across universes and working on the Dimension Cannon had inured her systems to running on less sleep. Hey, they invented coffee for a reason, hadn't they? How else was a girl to defend the earth when alien invasions and disasters didn't exactly work around the need for eight hours of sleep and three square meals a day?

Rubbing her eyes, she sat up. The flat was quiet, other than the TARDIS humming faintly in its corner in the other room. When she stepped out into the lounge area, it was an indistinct shape in the darkness. All the lights were off and she didn't see him at first. But there he was, sitting cross legged by the window, the Temporal Distortion Gun lying across his lap. She was surprised to see he'd not dismantled the thing yet, but only until she really looked at him.

He'd changed clothes at some point, the grungy blue suit trousers thrown over the back of the sofa and replaced with tracksuit bottoms. She remembered the police still had his jacket, probably collected it with the rest of the evidence at the row house. The striped shirt, however, remained, still looking worse for the wear now. Most of his face was in shadow, but when he turned his head and looked at her, she almost gasped in surprise. Despite the fringe hanging over his forehead, she thought his eyes were a steely blue for a brief moment. But no, it was just the way the glow from the street lamps outside combined with his expression. An expression that gave away how tired he was. Tired, and alone. But he wasn't. Not now. Not this him. The other, well she had to hope he'd found someone so he wouldn't be alone. His eyes searched hers before looking away. Ducking his head, she could see his throat bob as he swallowed.

Focusing on the weapon on his lap, he spoke without looking up, "After everything that happened, out of everything that was lost, the only things to survive the Time War is the sodding Daleks... and this," he said in a rough voice. "Oh, and me. Funny old thing, fate. The ones that least deserved it, survived while everyone else..." He closed his eyes against the onslaught of memories weighing him down. "I had no choice. Not then, and not on the Crucible. Had to... end it."

Rose approached him, and crouched down, knowing that there wasn't anything to be said, only the listening. Avoiding the mcgubbins he held, she scooted close until the side of her thigh touched his. Putting a hand out, she grabbed his and gave it a reassuring squeeze. His fingers wrapped around hers tightly in reflex. "You're not alone, not anymore. I'm here, and He's out there somewhere. Regenerated, you said."

She could see him thinking that through, see him struggling to believe. Don't let yourself drown in guilt, let it go. This was so much easier with all the distractions of travelling, she thought. For a moment, she'd have gladly slapped that other Him into His next regeneration for leaving him like this. Leaving her like this to pick up the pieces in a world where neither of them belonged. And it wasn't their faults, neither of them. One got to keep running while the other had to stop. Stop, when all he knew was the running.

He hesitated as he spoke next, "Remember I told you it was like letting go? Once, I said it was the urge to fall, down in that pit on Krop Tor. This is me, hanging on by the skin of my fingers, trying not to fall and wondering why the hell not." He gave a bitter laugh, the hint of a crooked smile and a flash of teeth in the gloom that was half feral. "Should've destroyed this hours ago. Somehow, I can't. Even though part of me wishes nothing more than to eradicate it from existence."

Rose nodded, understanding some of what he meant but wasn't saying. She was rediscovering her talent for deciphering Doctor speak. "It's a piece of home for you, your past, yeah? 'S why you can't let go. But you can, the past's a foreign country, like you said. Us, that's the future, if you let it."

His head came up then, eyes meeting hers again. All his shields and barriers were falling, like she'd never seen them do before. "But I have to," he said in a hushed, resolute voice. "Too much of a
threat, a danger. Even if I permanently disable it..."

"Still got the TARDIS, though. Still have her."

"Yeah," he said dryly. "There's that." He gave her a cautious, wondering look. She nodded in answer to his silent question, and decided to advance it further. "Come to bed?" she offered. "You can sort it out come morning."

"Yeah, I guess." He sighed, leaning the TD gun against the wall as he got up. One hand outstretched, he wavered between letting go and leaving it before his arm dropped to his side. He stared at it for a moment before he nodded to himself. "M just checking the locks first, then I'll be in," he said in a forced cheer.

At least he'd replaced the rickety little camp bed with one that was more sturdy, she thought as she undressed down to her knickers and t-shirt. The air was heavy and still in the room, with the heat of the day undissipated. Of course he'd not think to open a window. Quietly, she did so, letting in a slight breeze and the noise of the city. Sirens in the distance and the sound of traffic crept in.

"Rose?" He was there in the doorway, hesitating on the threshold.

She turned to face him. Eyes dark and unreadable, everything about him said he was ready to run despite the forced casualness to the way he leaned against the doorframe. Right, there was no going back from this, however it turned out. Maybe they'd have gotten here long before this, before fate stepped in. It always seemed like it had, his resolve crumbling even when he'd talked of withering away and dying. We're in the same boat now, she thought. Now's the only time we have, so seize the day. Let go of all those stodgy reservations, forget the past, open up to the possibilities. If left to his own devices, he'd forever be hanging on the cusp of want and desire, versus hesitation and denial. Someone had to make the first move, and it was going to have to be her. With that, she took the final steps. Lure him in, comfort him, teach him he doesn't have to run anymore. And if that doesn't work, he'll at least know he won't have to run alone unless he wants to. If he wants to jump, we'll jump together. Now, should she go for the straightforward route, or the seductive method? That was the biggest question of the moment.

Bloody hell, it was like a dream. One of those ones that left him waking up in an uncomfortable state of embarrassment, cursing human hormones. Almost tempted to pinch himself to see if it was real, he found himself breathless when Rose wordlessly pulled her top off with a gentle smile. And oh. Breasts. Human breasts. All pink and soft looking and-- Rassilon's garters, ROSE'S breasts. Oh, my giddy aunt, he was lost. The urge to jump, to fall -- they were the same. There they were, Rose's lovely, lovely breasts right before his very eyes. And here he was, about to shag Rose Tyler.

When she kissed him, he had to close his eyes. Seeing was too much. Too much when all of his remaining senses were overwhelmed. Her scent was all around him, arousal mixed with the hint of sweat from the overly warm night. Soft lips against his own, moving gently and oh, was that a tongue? Oh just brilliant! It had been years, centuries even, but this wasn't his first trip to the rodeo. Been around the block a time or two, he had, but never like this. Never with so little control over his autonomic nervous system. He was certainly, ahem, rising to the occasion, now wasn't he?

Truthfully, he had been since she'd pulled off her shirt. So many times, the idea, the fantasy had
popped into his mind, only to be clamped down on, stamped into submission behind the doors marked 'wildly inappropriate' and 'Verboten'. And now, all those excuses seemed so weak. The imaginings of his untamed subconscious mind since the metacrisis were nothing compared to this, and he still had his clothes on. No one in danger of burning to death from the time vortex, no psycho grafts, just her and him... and blimey! Hands! She'd noticed his state of dress in comparison to her own semi nudity and was seeking to rectify the situation.

He'd once had so many excuses. Too old -- one hell of an age gap, she'd once said. She should find someone less broken, more human. Someone who deserved her more. Or someone who could guarantee her the stars, not just the faint possibility. Someone who wasn't so rubbish at these kinds of things -- relationships all that. Someone who could do the whole poetry and candlelit dinner thing. With his luck, any attempts would result in immediate alien invasions or the Apocalypse.

He pulled away, eyes opening again and he was almost breathless from snogging her. He hurriedly pulled his shirt off, almost getting tangled in the sleeves. Who invented sleeves, anyhow? Totally daft things, especially when getting disrobed was of the utmost importance. The trousers were only held up by a drawstring and he paused. Centuries of restraint combined with his own insecurities were rearing their heads then. "Rose, are you sure about this? I mean, we don't have to do this."

Her face was flushed, eyes bright, and she nodded firmly. "I am. Never wanted anyone else, since I met you," she said, pulling her knickers off without ceremony.

Oh. Oh. That was a lot of Rose. More than even his amazingly impressive mind had been able to imagine. He swallowed in shock as his mind seemed to get stuck on one single track with, 'Hmm, the carpet definitely does not match the drapes.' The cacophony of excuses that had been running on repeat mode was suddenly forgotten, along with anything that didn't involve a very very nude Rose.

Pulling his eyes back up with difficulty, he managed to rally some of his reserve forces, even as the rest of his brain was trying to process things like curves, breasts, and nudity. Enough nudity in here to cause a neural inversion, if not catastrophic pituitary implosion. "You can't want me," he croaked, finding one last excuse holding in there with veracity. "'M dangerous."

"Danger's just the bits in between," she teased, pulling and releasing the drawstring, letting them drop. A moment where she studied his form, where all his insecurities started to come back, before her tongue touched smile appeared. Then she was grabbing his hand and pulling him toward the bed. She raised an eyebrow and pointedly looked down at his bits. Bits he'd not thought to be using like this, with her. Not in his wildest dreams. Weeell, maybe there, like the one last Tuesday, but not with the whole 'he's not you' thing on the beach in back of beyond, bloody Norway.

"Stop quoting me," he said, slightly annoyed, even as she was pulling him down for another kiss and pulling him down over her. He was braced on his hands over her, her proximity starting to short out his remaining defences and putting an embargo on the bits and bobs left to his resolve. She paused, giving him an annoyed and amused look. "You're over thinking this. You'll find your feet at the end of your legs, if we're gonna dance. And believe me, Doctor, I want to dance. With you."

"But.." Her finger on his lips stopped him.

"I've wanted this for a long time. Since some time after 'Run' and before Downing Street," she said with a reassuring grin. "I want you. Went striding from world to world to find you. You're still you. This is us, together. Don't run away on me now."

"I can't promise I won't run later. But if I do, I promise I'll always come back," he said softly. Decision made, he started snogging her again, while wondering when his lungs had become so inefficient. Blimey. How did these humans manage to do anything without a respiratory bypass?
Much less this.

If she noticed that his right hand was still cooler than the rest of him, or that his body temperature, while warmer than a Time Lord's, was still lower than her own, she didn't mention it. He wanted to explore, now that he'd given over, but she was impatient. Humans, always so impatient. Impatient because she was reaching down and lining him up even as she pulled him down between her thighs. Look where he'd found himself. It was warm, wet, and just impossible where she held him deep inside. Why again had he held himself back all these years, he wondered as he shifted forward more. Her leg came up to wrap around his hip, holding him close and putting paid to any chance of changing his mind. As if that was even possible now. Stilling himself, he looked into her eyes, letting her adjust and giving himself the opportunity to muster some control.

Rose must've seen how he was still wavering, even if it was well past the tipping point. She reached her hand up to touch his face, tracing his cheekbone as she said, "Generally, when people from Earth shag, they move a bit more than this and don't look like they're at their own funeral. Plus the deer in the headlamps expression isn't exactly your best look." She rocked her hips slightly, pulling him in even further.

"I'm not from earth," he retorted gently.

"When in Rome, Doctor, when in Rome," she said, moving again and sounding slightly more exasperated with him.

He might've managed a 'Mmmph,' but he wouldn't swear to it later. The old brain was starting to short out a bit, all the overwhelming sensations flooding his synapses. With that teasing encouragement he started to move with her slowly, carefully, watching her face in wonder. She really seemed to want this. Wanting him, even if he wasn't as impressive as he used to be. Half the man he used to be, but she still wanted him. He was actually doing it. Dancing. A million, trillion Time Lords would be spinning in their graves right now, and somehow he couldn't make himself care about all their stodgy rules about the purity of bloodlines. As if that mattered now. Hello, metacrisis, anyone?

Her other leg coming up around him and a breathy, "More," broke down his restraints and the race was on. She held him close, like she'd never let him go and he didn't think the combined forces of Ghengis Khan could've dragged him away. All that delicious friction, Rose making soft moans beneath him when a certain angle seemed to do more than tickle her fancy. He leaned down, putting his weight on his elbows to kiss her cheek, working his way down to her neck. Her mouth was next to his ear and she nipped at his earlobe gently. Nails running down his spine, she cried his name softly, "Doctor."

"Rose," he mumbled into her hair, all other speech beyond the inner monologue having fled to less exciting environs. "Rose."

Such a sight to behold. Rose's hair spread across the pillow in a sheet of golden strands, so very yellow. His pink and yellow girl with her eyes half closed in pleasure, and this was them -- doing this. If he could've believed in anything, he would have believed in this. Not just her, but them. Like this, doing the impossible. One so very human girl, his precious girl, and him. Together. Hands, lips and bodies moving together in that timeless dance and he was lost. So lost and it was bloody brilliant. Fan-flipping-tastic! Chasing the pleasure like this, it was like running. No, flying.

He could feel her inner walls clinching around him and remembering his basic anatomical studies, he reached down to caress where they were joined. That seemed to make her go wild, her hips backing beneath him and she was squeezing him tighter. She was tipping over the edge into pleasure, and all he could do was follow after with what seemed like supernovas going off behind his eyes.
Thought, memory, it didn't matter. Even the slick of sweat on his back that reminded him of his partial humanity didn't bother him for once. It was worth it, if all this fragility and sensitivity came part and parcel with it. No wonder the whole species was so obsessed with mating -- he could easily find himself joining in on the ticker tape parade to celebrate human sex. Though with all that exertion, he could see why they all popped off so soon. Breathing, now that would be good, he thought as he collapsed on her. Somehow, he found the energy to lever himself to the side, so he wouldn't crush her with his weight. He remained mindful of the narrowness of the bed, but just barely. He'd almost fallen off, and wouldn't that have been just wizard if he had. Would've been embarrassing as hell, most like. Apparently, his attempts to catch his breath was scaring Rose.

"Doctor?"

"Yeah?"

"You OK?"

"'M fantastic," he mumbled against her shoulder with a smile, pulling her closer and tucking an arm across her. "Fantastic."

Thank his lucky stars it was plenty warm, because he didn't have to wherewithal to try pulling the duvet from under them. That would've required the untangling of limbs and more energy and effort than he could presently summon. Sleep wouldn't be too far off now, considering the day he'd had. The day they'd all had. Somehow, he didn't think the dreams would be that much of a problem for once.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

If any part of this chapter brings to mind certain Rod Stewart songs, it was not intentional. I didn't even catch it until the final readthroughs.

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There was something heavy lying across her chest, pinning her down. Felt like an arm, almost. Batting at sleepily it didn't move it, though shoving it more forcefully elicited a sleepy grumbling moan. That snapped her out of sleep immediately. Opening her eyes, she was quickly reminded where she was and who exactly was wrapped around her. Because it was an arm. His arm. God, she'd shagged the Doctor.

Finally.

It would've all seemed just a dream, a fantasy driven by unfulfilled sexual tension if his still gloriously naked body wasn't half wrapped around hers. Still seemed pretty wild, him just letting go like that. He'd been nattering on in a language she'd never heard before through most of it, probably his own, and she wasn't even sure if he'd realized it. Not that she'd ever expected him to be quiet, with his gob, but he was at the end. Almost deathly so. Just gritted his teeth, closed his eyes and shook like was going to come apart in her arms, rearing back with one hand reaching toward her face before he went limp and it fell away as he collapsed over her. Not that she had been complaining, mind you. She'd been kinda floating on air at the moment, a bit wowed by the experience. But the reaching like that -- he could still be telepathic, and he'd never said.

Never said, and she'd never thought to ask. Though, he'd probably would've gotten uppity and said something snarky at the time. For all he talked, he'd never said much, even if this version of him did occasionally let something slip more than the other had. Others, that would be. Because he really was as different from the other Doctor as her first had been. Then again, maybe he wasn't and he was just letting her in close enough to see the real him. And they'd certainly gotten closer -- couldn't get much closer than they were last night.

Afterwards, he'd been so breathless, breathing like he'd run a marathon, all uphill, and not a sound otherwise until she'd panicked, thinking he was having a heart attack or something. Now his breathing was slow and even as he lay sprawled out as best he could on the small bed. A bigger bed, or relocating to the other flat was a definite plan. Better than the old bed, which probably wouldn't have survived that much activity.

Sitting up, she had to marvel, even as he pulled his arm back slightly, tucking it tightly against his side. It was almost unbelievable, but there he was, sound asleep, mouth partially open and he was snuffling into the pillow, looking peaceful for once. Rolled over onto his side, the morning sun caught the barest hint of ginger mixed in with the stubble on his unshaven face and highlighting the smattering of freckles across his cheek. He looked more relaxed then she'd ever seen him, any of him. She'd almost expected him to panic and bolt after he'd caught his breath. After all his inner conflicts and judgement caught up to him. Or even leave long before she woke up. He'd even said he couldn't promise not to run. But he hadn't.
Pausing to study him closer, since it wasn't often he wasn't the embodiment of manic energy, she finally saw the extent of the scarring left from the Shoreditch incident. It was nowhere near faded, made even more noticeable by the mottled bruising from the incident with the monks only... shit, only two days before. Somehow it seemed much longer than that, like a week, with all that had gone on. Harder still when she realized Ferguson and the Old Ones had only been a little over a month before. A month since he'd almost died. Died, and with no hope of regeneration, even if he'd probably been saved by the other Doctor regenerating and the transfer of Artron energy through some kind of feedback loop. Sometimes she wondered if they were still connected, if he knew what was going on, but she didn't feel comfortable asking. Apparently the weird way time passed while traveling with the Doctor still carried over without the TARDIS. Well, it was there, but she'd hardly count the lump of coral currently the size of a small filing cabinet as a factor currently.

He'd given little explanation then, and afterwards it seemed cruel to ask when he was still so touchy about it. Nearly getting killed had knocked the wind out of his sails, the reminder of mortality too much on top of everything else. After that, being back at the mansion, with the overdose of domestic, it was too much. Too... normal. Normal, when he was anything but.

We've all been expecting too much from him, pushing too far and too fast. He's always been the outsider looking in, she thought. Now he's stuck trying to pretend to be one of us. And with what we did last night, who's to say he won't go back to pretending? I mean, it's what we always did best. But this time, we crossed a line and there's no going back.

But first things first, she needed the loo. Extricating herself from the bed was easier than she expected. He was sleeping soundly enough that he barely stirred, just a mumbling noise that sounded like a complaint of some sorts. She grabbed a shirt he'd left lying around. Clean enough, it would do. Laundry and picking up weren't his strong suits. Colors and whites would get thrown in the wash together, if he was left to go at it by himself. As for the picking up, he still seemed to expect the TARDIS to deal with the messes. She sometimes wondered who he thought did all that, since it wasn't the TARDIS or the blooming fairies. Typical bloke, that.

It was well into the morning, probably going on noon. The sounds of the garage below drifted through the open bedroom window, if he was knackered enough to sleep that, he'd sleep through anything, she imagined. She knew he'd not been sleeping right lately, struggling to find a balance between this body's needs and the night terrors.

Rose made her way to the loo and quickly took care of her business. She was crossing the lounge, going back to the bedroom, planning a lie in until he awoke, when a movement caught her eye. There was a woman standing by the window. A woman in an old fashioned ball gown worn ragged. In their old flat. Next to the TD gun, of all things, and quite fascinated by it.

A glance at the door confirmed the locks were undisturbed, the chain and the deadbolt untouched by appearances. There were windows open in the bedroom, but no emergency ladder and she was sure she'd have noticed an intruder passing that close, even asleep. Not that that eliminated a transmat or a vortex manipulator, but she saw neither, and ball gowns didn't exactly come with pockets, did they?

On high alert, Rose sidled toward the doorway to the bedroom, ready to defend him before she demanded, "Who are you and how did you get in here?"

The woman turned and gave her a delighted smile, rushing forward to meet her. Rose pulled back, concerned and bracing herself for an attack. She was glancing at the growing coral, noticing it too was undisturbed, even as the woman spoke.

"Interesting choice of decor, but that's probably him -- always with the oddments scattered about that he's lugged off from somewhen. But hey, there's you," the woman spoke, sounding relieved.
"Someone who'll listen. I've tried with the Sprout, but he's worse than Thief was, is, will be."

Sensing an odd familiarity, and the lack of an immediate threat, Rose relaxed slightly and really wished her dressing gown was still at this flat. Meeting would be burglars like this just wasn't... just wasn't. "Who are you?"

The woman rolled her eyes and huffed. "OK, scrap that, you're as bad as he is, little Wolf. Really?" She opened her mouth and breathed deep, a sound as old as time itself and infinite as the universe coming from within.

One Rose had wondered if she'd ever hear again, pouring out and echoing somewhere between her mind and her ears. "No, you can't be. You're--" A disbelieving second glance at the future TARDIS in its corner and their visitor didn't help for an explanation that made any sense, either.

The woman smiled proudly, going on like Rose hadn't said anything. "There, I knew you'd get it. Clever human. His strays, always so much more open to the possibilities while he's all caught up in the certainties he thinks he knows."

"The TARDIS. But how..."

The woman seemed to preen a bit, pleased with herself and enjoying the impossibility of it all. Really, after everything she'd seen, Rose was about ready to eliminate that word entirely. What next, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy taking over Wembley stadium? "Little trick I picked up, will pick up, am picking up, in a different timeline, of course. His timeline, but not this him. Thief, not Sprout. This me and this him won't be running into that fiasco here. Still, such a handy way to say such a sad word."

"Sad?" No, this couldn't be. Not now. Not when things were starting to look up for them.

The woman smiled, nodding. "Yes. Just wanted to say, 'hello'. So -- hello!"

With that she started to fade, and Rose reached out a hand to stop her. There was one question she needed answered. "Wait! Just... why now? Why me and not him? He needs you, he's so lost.

The TARDIS paused, solidifying again and stood waiting patiently, head cocked to the side.

The words just seemed to tumble out then, all the things she'd wanted to ask these last two months, but without anyone who could or would answer. "I mean -- not hearing you, it's tearing him apart and you know him, he tries to hide it but he can't. I mean, why not him?"

"He has. But acted like he thought he was going barmy. Well, barmier. Never was quite normal -- it's why I stole him. He wanted to explore and see it all, while the others just wanted to stay home and keep everything exactly like it was, is, will be. Other him, really, but the more the merrier, I guess. Whole new universe to explore, more places he'll need to be somewhen. But on the other hand, there's never been a Time Lord-human metacrisis. Because there can't be. He shouldn't even exist. Not like that, anyhow. Such an impossible thing, echoing down the timelines like that. Had to be, for the Doctor-Donna to exist, but at a cost. Neither was meant to survive past their roles in a fixed point. Had to be, will be, is, if you see things from my perspective and believe me, I see everything."

Dead. He should've been dead. But why tell her this now? The universe couldn't be this cruel, could it?

But the TARDIS went on, eyes looking back in memory, a determined look on her face. "But I couldn't, can't, won't. We couldn't. I had to, have to, will do. My Thief saved Donna, and I, I saved him. Takes a lot of work, propping up that Sprout, maintaining a connection across time and the
Void like this between two selves and two of them." The TARDIS lady sighed. A great heaving sigh with a lot of frustration behind it. She began to pace as she spoke, circling Rose while watching her feet, eyes distant and unreadable. "Everything's all jumbled up inside him, energies still settling and that mind of his, ha! Think I got the formulas a touch wrong, but its not like there's a pamphlet on this sort of thing. So vast, but so completely wrong. Telepathic connections gone haywire, things like that."

Even Owen had said he was an odd mishmash of biology, from the medscan they'd finally done after he'd recovered from his injuries before. Vascular system that was a strange blend of human and something else. Extra ribs, unusual metabolism that was in overdrive, things like that. She knew she knew what she knew. Extra ribs had he'd left over from what he'd been before. All the things he'd left out and not mentioned beyond the "one heart" and growing old and never regenerating part. Did he know then, or not?

Not daring to say that word 'die' outright, Rose hesitated. "Energies? You mean like the regeneration energy he came out of? Wasn't the link severed when the other Him changed? What happened to the other Donna, the one from our universe... it's not going to happen to him, is it?"

The TARDIS halted, musing for a moment before nodding to herself. "Haven't you felt it, the difference? One hand -- it's not like the other."

Rose nodded. She had noticed, but dismissed it. Plenty of people had cold hands, and as for the other... well he did have a tendency to keep his hands in his pockets at times. All excuses now, rationalizations against seeing something else that was different. "Yeah, but what's that?"

"That's him. Descartes was more right than you lot imagined. He's blocking it, keeping things from finding a balance. Fighting himself. Fight yourself and you're bound to lose."

If he was blocking it, then he could unblock it with some help then. If he'd let her. Totally fixable, in that case. Hopefully. "How can I help, then?"

"Just... be there, hold his hand like before. Let him go, if you have to. You already found him once. So many times, him figuring out what sort of man he was. This time, he's got to do it himself. Wherever you go, there you are."

With that enigmatic statement, the lady just disappeared, like it was all a weird dream. No definite answers, and even more questions. Blimey. The TARDIS, appearing like an AI interface like that. While she knew the TARDIS was sentient, this was just amazing. And scary in it's own way. Was he in so much danger his ship would do something so unusual, so drastic to try helping him? All she could hope was that holding his hand and being there was enough, since she wasn't sure what else to do. Especially if he was going to pull away, shut himself off again.

Rising early, despite the late night, DI Gale Evans got ready for work while thinking over the previous night's events. By the time she was getting to her auto, her mind was made up. A phone call was going to be necessary if she wanted any explanations, since Pete Tyler had promptly clammed up when her boss had asked why he'd let that man walk away with the confiscated weapon like that. He'd just said, "Torchwood business," before instructing his agents to take Dougal Chambers and his
cronies into protective custody. If they'd already disappeared under aliases, never to be seen again, she wouldn't be surprised. The row house and the bodies of the four unknowns might be under the Met's heading of the investigation, but the rest -- well that was confidential. Capital letter 'c' confidential, at that.

Fumbling for her mobile, she punched in a number, jumping ahead to the important part without faffing about with useless greetings. "What the hell was he thinking?"
"Good morning to you, too, Sis. Yes, I slept perfectly well, despite getting in at half three," came the droll response.

Gail rolled her eyes. Should've known she'd not get away with it.

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry. It's just..." She made a frustrated noise in her throat, blaming all this on a situation gone far beyond the norm. So many twists and turns, so much unexpected. "Just, it's that one. Smith. His involvement in all this, the strange behavior and then, Pete Tyler just lets him walk away with something that could destroy us all like that."

Her sister sighed, muffling a yawn. Obviously she'd not fully woken yet herself. There was something to be said for being able to operate on autopilot and inhale enough caffeine to raise the dead.

"It's not like he had a choice, Gail. It was that or start something he either couldn't finish or wouldn't win. I'd say the man who led the war against the Cybermen and almost single handedly took over and reshaped Torchwood while selling us all health drinks knows to pick his battles."

Gail paused her impatient fidgeting at that, the hand that had been picking at the interior trim around her car door going still. "What do you mean? He's not just let some loony start his own bid for a planetary takeover, has he?"

Her sister laughed, started by that conclusion. "God, no. Not hardly, not him. If conquest ever occurred to the Doctor, we could only be so lucky, I suppose. Of course, we'd be living in some version of the utopia the hippies dreamed of, just with more bananas and things like Sundays, Mondays, Thursday afternoons and pears made illegal. But still -- no. That's not something to worry about."

"Why, then?"

"Do you know who brought down the Cybermen in the end? Who made sure they'd not be coming back after they'd disappeared?" her sister said, breathless.

Gail could guess at the answer, though that didn't seem to make any sense. "Smith."

"None other. Cost him more than you'll ever know and more than he'll ever say. This time around, he gave up more. Not someone you'd want to be pushing about. Leave that particular beehive alone. Find something else to poke at, Sis, you'll not get any more answers about him from me, because I honestly don't know anything further than that," came the crisp reply. "Just -- he's not Torchwood anymore, not that he really ever was, so you'll have to ask him if you get the chance. But good luck getting near him again, he's tricky like that."

"But what about Chambers?" Gail protested. "There's still four dead back at that row house without any identification on them yet, and all the witnesses have buggered off or been disappeared. What the hell am I supposed to do? I don't just wander around, asking questions for the hell of it! This is a police investigation, you know."
"Oh, I imagine someone will be in touch before long. There's teams trying to trace them and whoever funded them. If they're Earthers, this could be a part of something much bigger."

"So I'm supposed to just wait?!"

"What else is there to do? We're all waiting for something," came the arch reply. Just before her sister disconnected the line, she added teasingly, "It'll be good for you. Maybe you'll actually learn some patience. Just watch out for beehives if you're going to poke about."

Growling in frustration, Gail threw her phone into the passenger side seat. All of this made no sense. People didn't come from nowhere, make demands of powerful people like that, and just make everyone dance to their tune. Terrorism, extremist groups, secret weapons caches, midnight raids, those were things she could understand. They weren't her particular specialty, but she'd been on a few cases where they'd taken in a suspect after breaking down a door in the middle of the night.

Granted, those suspects were usually involved in drugs or murders, not all this bollocks about alien weaponry and time distortions. None of it was even logical. Not the people displaced in time, the clever nutters with answers that made no sense, or that time could be rewritten. Please! It couldn't be big balls of 'wibbly wobbly' stuff, either. Made not a bit of sense at all. And last night, getting him in that interview room -- she'd thought she'd get answers. Instead she got more questions. Lots more and now it looked like even Pete Tyler didn't have a handle on him anymore. What were the chances that someone actually did?
Chapter 26

Bright sun shining in his eyes stirred him from his sleep making him squeeze them tight and fumble for the duvet. Keeping his eyes shut, he stretched. A quiet ache had settled in his bones, but it wasn't bad. More a reminder that he was still alive. For once, he was almost content to stay in bed a bit longer, the temptation to continue his lie in strong. Sleep wasn't so bad when the night terrors didn't drive him to wakefulness. He felt loose limbed and more relaxed than he had since the war. A faint scent caught his nose, and he remembered why he'd slept so well. Blimey. They'd... yeah. Now she... where was she? Had this all been too much, too soon, and she'd changed her mind about him? Couldn't blame her if she had, but still....

Without wait he sat up, eyes open and squinting against the light as he looked around frantically. "Rose?"

Before he could put his feet over the side and stumble from the bed, she came sauntering into the room. All she appeared to be wearing was one of his discarded oxfords. Not that he really felt they suited him anymore, but sod it all, they looked fantastic on her. Fantastic enough to consider getting a few more for her to 'borrow'.

"Waking up, slugabed?" she teased, casually digging through the pile of laundry he'd piled up in the corner of the room. "Got any towels in this rubbish tip?" she threw over her shoulder.

Overall, he was more relieved than he could've said that she'd stayed, but still. All those lovely uncertainties were coming back with a vengeance. He put a hand up to rub his neck, noticing that Rose wasn't the only one in a state of undress, and feeling rather torn between pulling the blanket over himself and trying to act like this was an everyday occurrence outside his fantasies.

"Um, yeah. Should do," he said, hoping his voice wasn't too squeaky and telling himself that he absolutely was not feeling the heat of a blush creeping across his face. Half human or not, Time Lords did not blush. Or stammer. Or squeak in uncertainty. No. If one very dignified, manly Time Lord found himself flummoxed after crossing the boundaries of 'proper' behavior between oneself and a companion, they would swagger and act like he was in complete control of the situation. Oh, sod it. This was Rose, there weren't any other Time Lords in this dimension and all the rules and valued decorum could go hang. And the ball was completely in her court.

Rose straightened and turned, obviously having noticed his fidgeting. "Ants in your pants?" she asked with a raised brow.

"Nope, called the exterminator last week. The good kind, I mean. Absolutely no Daleks involved in any of it, just some carcinogenic chemicals designed to remove unwanted pests of the earthly invertebrate variety," he babbled, wondering what the proper etiquette for this was. Somehow, he didn't think doing a victory dance around the flat wouldn't be construed as tactless. Rude and not ginger he may be, and tact be as far from his description as it could possibly get, but he wanted this to go right.

She rolled her eyes, since apparently he was as lousy a Time Lord as Quences had always said and he was blushing while trying to look anywhere but at her. He tried not to seem too awkward as he got up, schooled his features into something he hoped was nonchalant, and leaned over to reach for his jimmie bottoms. Was she eying his bum? Was she thinking he was too thin? Wondering what the differences were now? Had he been too much of a disappointment the night before? Wait, what
about protection? She could be pregnant. Would he even be able to tell before it was obvious? He'd been a lousy father, slightly better as a grandfather and did he dare mucking up anymore lives? C'mon, parents were supposed to teach their kids how to live in this world and he was barely managing as it was. Yeah he was all for the whole seat of the pants, no planning thing, consequences be damned, but this...

"You're in a right state," she said, looking at him closely. It was almost an inspection, in his mind, but damned if he knew what she was looking for, or hoping to find and wasn't.

"Um, no? Just... busy day. Lots to do and time's a wasting," he denied with a smile to hide the incipient panic, pulling the clothing on and reaching for a t-shirt on the pile. Somehow the manky ones disappeared and returned clean, but couldn't make their way to the little wardrobe. The TARDIS was much better. Another thing he'd yet to adjust to.

"And now the panic sets in," Rose said with a hint of irony, stepping close.

Unable to deny it, he looked down at her, breathing her scent in. He was half marveling that she'd not run for the hills while he was sure to be rubbish at all this human relationship thing, and wondering if she was completely daft for not taking her chances to get away. She grinned up at him with that teasing tongue poking out before giving him an unexpected kiss. "Hello.

Kissing, now that was brilliant. A slow blooming smile was stealing across his face as he dared to think that maybe things were going to come out alright. "Hello," he replied softly, letting some of the nervous tension slip out of his shoulders. Yeah, she'd not tossed him to the curb yet, though gods only knew why. Domestic might still be terrifying, completely and maddeningly so, but this? He could live with this if it meant waking up to see Rose running about in just his shirt like it was normal.

"You want the shower first?" That time he managed to not sound completely pitiful.

Rose plucked a towel out of the pile and gave him an arch look. "Fine. Just, try gathering your wits while I'm in there, yeah? We've got things to talk about."

And there went all his hope, along with all the air in the room despite the open window. He swallowed nervously. Here it was, his doom. The moment when Rose Tyler came to her senses and chucked him to the curb. Had to be, he just knew it. "Right," he croaked breathlessly.

"Don't worry. It's nothing bad, I don't think. Just stuff," she said. "Important stuff."

She wasn't surprised he was awake when she walked back into the room. It didn't take him long to hide the momentary panic and less for it to descend into him feeling totally awkward. Right, on to the panicking. Unexpected, no. Disappointing, yes. In character for this version of the Doctor? Completely.

If he was awkward, he was adorable at it, but she gave him a reprieve as she slipped off to the shower. It was also a chance to figure out exactly what to say to him and how to mention the encounter just minutes before without him shutting her out. Push too hard and he'd either deflect it with snark or a joke, if he didn't outright ignore it.

When she came out, he was already dressed in jeans and the same t-shirt he'd thrown on what had a logo from some obscure band on it. He'd been to Oxfam again, she saw. She had to wonder if he'd
considered cutting all ties and going it alone before this. Or if he still was, for that matter.

"Not gonna shower?" she asked, finding that the nearest neutral subject. Why did things have to be so difficult, so awkward?

He paused a moment, biting his lip, then he shrugged, pretending to be distracted with examining the TARDIS coral for any new growth. But she could tell it was more of the same shyness. His tone was forced as he drawled, "Meh. Flannel's good and the sink's convenient. Didn't mess with the shower, did it?"

"I guess," she said doubtfully, keeping herself from sounding like she was judging him or anything. A shy Doctor -- that just wasn't right. If he kept on in this vein, he'd be rehashing the whole manic 'hopping for your life' thing after the first time he'd changed. And this time, they were well beyond that bit; it was more what had changed between them. Truth be told, awkward was slightly better than him going for his usual state of blissful denial. It meant he was acknowledging it, even if he was all het up at the mo. He didn't seem to be wallowing in regret, more at sixes and sevens with uncertainty. Just, what to do or say that wouldn't flat out spook him and send him running? Anything too domestic or involving feelings was likely to send him into a tail spin. Fine line to tread with this one. Push him too far and he either clammed up or lashed out. Could go either way.

Finally he appeared to muster a little courage, as he looked up at her from under his fringe. He'd not bothered to shave, something she'd noticed he had a tendency to do at times now. She wasn't sure if it was because he couldn't be bothered about his appearance, or he was trying on a new look. Maybe it was him trying to blend in, same with the denim trousers and band shirts or the leather jacket he often wore. Or like the TARDIS had suggested, it could be him trying to find out what sort of man he was now.

"So...." He paused, glancing down, taking a deep breath before he blurted out in a rush, "If it was that... I'm not Casanova. Still owe him a chicken, but I've not done the whole horizontal tango thing in a century or two, closer to three, but if you don't... I mean, you don't have to stay, if you don't want. I mean, who'd want someone like me? Complete arse, veritable git, and did I mention I'm a bit naff at this whole relationship thing?"

Rose knelt next to him, ruffling his hair with one hand, pushing it back from his forehead. "You are a complete numpty, you know that?"

He gulped, muscles quivering like he was ready to bolt. "I know. Sorry I'm not--"

Before he could go any further, she put a finger against his lips. "Hush, you. I'm not running, yeah? You were pretty spectacular, if you ask me," she admitted.

"Really?" He grinned. "I mean, of course I was. Done it a plenty, just... not lately and not with you. Or anyone else for that matter."

Not since the war, she gathered. "You can go hiring an advert proclaiming your sexual prowess in the papers later, yeah?" she said, trying to steer him onto the TARDIS topic. She nodded at the coral, reaching out to feel the low humming that was more felt than heard. "She's been calling for you."

The hint of fiery anger and hurt crept into his dark eyes at that. "Yeah, well." He stood, ready to turn away and dismiss the whole thing but Rose followed and put out a hand to stop him.

"She was standing here, large as life. Commented on the TD gun, you and your collections and called you 'Sprout'."
A look of disbelief and horror came over his face and he threw a glance at the TD gun, as if he was ready to assign blame in that direction.

"She said it was you, somehow, blocking it," Rose added gently, watching a hundred emotions flit across his face in the span of mere seconds.

He grabbed her arms gently, expression serious as he said with maddening patience, like she was a child or a halfwit, "Rose, it was all a dream, nothing more. Just some residue left over from some of my emotions when we... um, made love. Slightly psychic and well, kinda might've lost control there at the end. Proximity to me, I'd guess. Probably. Nothing more."

Rose sighed. Yeah, got it in one, TARDIS lady. He's even setting up bazaars and pyramids along his denial. Next he'll be adding boats and camels and people in funny hats. Blocking it indeed. "Doctor, I was wide awake and coming back from using the loo. No dreams, and not even in the same room as you at the time."

If anything, he started to look more worried as he leaned close to sniff at her. "Could be psychic pollen," he mused. "Can't tell, olfactory senses are a bit pants with the infusion of human DNA into my systems and no sonic to scan... Oooh! Could be the effects from the Dimension Canon, causing neurochemical imbalances. I said that was dangerous -- now you've gone completely mad, just like me."

"Doctor, shut up and stop being thick. I may be insane, but I figured that out back when some bloke with a police box came back and said, 'did I mention it also travels in time,' but that has absolutely nothing to do with this," she snapped, running out of patience. He did his impression of a highly offended goldfish that had been yanked from the water then, mouth opening and closing as he tried to form a protest. She jumped into the opening and spoke to forestall him, "She said you weren't even supposed to have survived the Crucible, but she changed things so you would."

All the outraged arrogance disappeared, and he deflated slightly. "Yeah," he admitted softly. "Didn't mean to, really. Complete accident."

Rose nodded, accepting this but surprised he'd answered. "If you hadn't, would you have... I mean, the other you, would you have..."

She stopped, not certain she could voice the question that had occurred to her when she was slathering on the discount shampoo in the shower. His reaction to the what the TARDIS said was already looking like he'd get irritable and not listen to anything. But this, this was something he might be surprised enough to answer true. Sometimes she could shock the truth out of him when he was being stubborn like this.

"Left you here?" he supplied softly, hesitantly. He closed his eyes and nodded, like he expected the axe to fall.

Pain bloomed hot, making her stomach churn. "Why?" she demanded, forgetting tact in the heat of the moment.

He opened his eyes, the faint hint of a rueful smile on his lips. "Because you terrified him. Still do, really. The only one who could tempt the last Lord of Time to lay it all down, to make a wanderer contemplate settling somewhere. I burned up a star to say goodbye. If something happened, if you..." He swallowed against the emotions, voice hoarse as he let down more barriers than he even had last night. He took a deep breath, releasing it with a sigh. "If you died, imagine what I would do then to make the universe pay."
Rose stared at him in open dismay, wondering if maybe she'd pushed the question a little too far. But then, she knew what he could be like. Quicksilver moods were normal for him, and the hints of something darker, they'd been there all along. The first encounter with Cassandra, what he would've done to the Dalek in that bunker if she'd not stopped him...

He raised a brow and smirked, some of the confidence creeping back into his stance. "Never said I was a nice man, did I? But I'd move heaven and hell for you, Rose. I love you, and that's what makes you so terrifying."

He didn't mean to sound scary or threatening, it was just an automatic reaction to feeling off balance. A defence mechanism. Too many admissions and too much uncertainty piled on top of the need to get some space. Get some room to breathe, to mindlessly tinker with something while he hashed out things. He pulled away, trying not to act like he was in full retreat, heading for the garage. Surely Edgar would have something that needed fixing...

"You don't scare me." Those words brought him to a halt. He turned and eyed her, silently querying her. Rose was looking at him defiantly, staring him down. "As I see it, you're running because you think you've said too much that you don't want anyone knowing and you're afraid I'm gonna give up on you."

He didn't know where to look, or what to say next. This was far out of his depth. Yeah, he'd been with a human or two long ago, back in the day, but the staying part, no. That whole regeneration was so muddled, worse than this one, and the way it ended... Couldn't take that whole lifetime as anything to base his reactions on and the urge to run, to flee was making his feet itch, even as he wanted nothing more than to lock the door and see how many times he could make her call his name like she had last night. He wanted to figure out what he was supposed to do next. Didn't want to disappoint her again, but he was terrified he was going to. Almost guaranteed, he thought. I mean, look at me. Even other me didn't want me and the TARDIS...

"I'm not running. Got a job, ya know. Garage and all, money to be made and all that," he said by way of excuse.

He was almost out the door, when her next words caught him completely by surprise, reminding him of something he'd ignored the first time around, "I'm not giving up, you know. She said it was you blocking the connection, not something wrong with you. Not something missing or lost along the way. It won't be like this forever."

Pete stepped out of the SUV, looked at the seedy neighborhood he was in and sighed. Motioning to his driver to stay, he assured the man he'd be fine doing this alone. He'd checked at the flat in Wapping first, since Jackie had sent him out with orders given over the breakfast table. "Go check on them and go unruffle Himself's feathers. Apologize, if you have to."

"For what," he'd asked. "He's the one that nearly got himself killed and has got himself square in the
middle of this and made enough waves to get the Met thinking he's involved worse than he is. Hartley wanted him summoned on suspicion of murder, and that was before I had to let him walk off with that, that thing."

Jackie had rolled her eyes at that, busy feeding Tony his cereal. "Boys and their egos. Just go round and have a word with him. Let me know so I can pop over and have a talking to him. I'm not going over half the city with Tony looking for them and Rose hasn't answered her mobile."

Ah yes. Love and concern with a healthy dose of plain old curiosity, done Jackie Tyler style. "They've not been around for tea this week. Invite them for tomorrow's," Jackie had suggested pointedly, pointing at him with a spoon over his son's protests.

Arguing was pointless. He'd since then gone by Sylvia and Wilf's and called Donna's just hoping against the odds that they'd ended up here. But no joy. Of course, it couldn't be easy, could it. Here he was in an area where he could feel the eyes watching him. One that until recently had had a bad reputation for violence. Now it had one that was brewing strange rumors of being a place you didn't exactly avoid, but you kept your mouth shut about anything you saw and sneaking about was impossible.

As Pete approached the garage, three very large men looked up warily from the MG they were working on. He recognized Jasper and Percy, but Edgar he'd not had the chance to meet in person. Not yet, anyhow.

"Must be serious, they sent the boss this time," Percy said in a sotto voice.

"Told you the whole sewer thing'd have consequences," Jasper muttered back, not bothering to try hiding his annoyance at the intrusion.

"The Doctor about?" Pete asked mildly, not intimidated in the least. Might be a rough crowd, but he'd worked beside far worse during the war with the Cybermen. And if it meant the Doctor wasn't completely antisocial and withdrawn, it was better than thinking he'd left Torchwood just because he didn't want to be around anyone.

Edgar eyed him steadily before setting aside a spanner and folding his arms. "Mayhaps. What would be your business if he were? It's not often the mighty Torchwood darkens our doors, 'cept when they're after him."

"Just wanted a word with him, nothing more." Pete tried not to notice a few gadgets hanging on the walls that the average John Q. Public wouldn't blink at, but he knew were in violation of a half dozen alien tech regulations. Some of which had probably been nicked from the archives. At least someone was getting the benefit of the Doctor's brilliance, he thought wryly. Though if that's what's in the open, what's he got hidden or do I even want to know?

Percy spoke up, "He's not been down yet. Might be needing a bit of... privacy, you might say."

That earned him glares from the others and he subsided, ducking back under the car's bonnet. Pete wasn't sure he wanted to try deciphering that comment, but he could guess at the vague meaning behind it.

"That's not a confirmation of anything," Edgar growled, leaning forward. "Can't have just anyone messing about, poking their noses what don't belong."

Pete understood the implications. He was out of Torchwood's purview, but that was no surprise. Even the police tried to avoid the area. So he found somewhere he could be a law unto himself
again, he mused. Have to give him credit for pulling it off so fast. "I've been protecting him too, you
know, if only in a vain attempt to save him from himself."

Edgar huffed, cocking his head to the side and frowning. "You got a dog?"

Pete shook his head. " Haven't the time for one anymore. Too many other concerns."

"Had me a Staffordshire terrier -- all sturdy and brave. Tie him out and he'd wear himself out to get
loose, leave him off it and he'd stay where you told him with nary a peep out of him."

Pete could appreciate the advice, having figured that out when it was getting clear it was time to give
over before the outright mutiny occurred. "You don't say," he said in amusement, straightening his
suit jacket. "This one's well and truly off the leash, so I wouldn't fuss about that much. Given over to
the inevitable truth."

Edgar met his eyes, looking for any sign of deception before he gave a nod. He glanced at Jasper
before walking away to resume the repairs on the auto. Jasper's eyes flicked upward as he said
reluctantly, "Second floor, door on the left. Don't make me regret this."

Pete smiled at irony. Apparently the Doctor had a self appointed bodyguard or two and some loyal
friends. He made a grimace wondering what the Doctor would say about all this. He was walking
away when he paused and turned back for a moment. "If anyone else comes around looking for
him... be careful. Could be trouble brewing."

"That a threat?" Jasper leaned forward, squinting.

"Just a caution. He's more valuable than you probably know, and there's those who'd do much to get
their hands on him if they knew what he was. I can't protect him if he won't let me, and there's things
stirring that raise some concerns."

Jasper scoffed. "What, people thinking that he's not from around these parts? There's nothing more
bleeding obvious than that."

Yes, it was obvious. Too obvious at times, and the rumors in the gossip rags didn't help. "Just keep a
mindful eye for anyone asking questions. Call me if things get too hot to handle. I'll tell him the
same, but you know how he is."

When Pete got to the right floor, the Doctor was at the door of the flat, hand on the knob and
shoulder braced against it like he was hanging on for dear life. Pete hesitated, wondering if this was
some impending disaster. "Doctor?" Startled eyes flashed up to meet his, before he got a cautious
smile of recognition.

"Hiya, Pete. How's life treating you, eh?"
Before he could pull off the perfect escape, Pete stepped over to effectively block his route in the narrow hallway. He didn't dare look back at Rose, knowing she was probably relieved. Damn, foiled again. It would be too much to hope this was merely a casual visit, wouldn't it? Summoning a bit of his dignity and deciding to pour on the charm, he smiled, trying to sound nonchalant. "Long time no see. What brings you round to this part of town?"

"Doctor," Pete said in greeting. "Time we had a little chat."

He paused, eying the man. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the edge of the open door, raising his chin slightly. "Yeah? Go on, then. Talk."

Pete sighed, wearing a pained expression. "Could we do this inside?"

"I see four perfectly good walls around us at the mo'," he said smoothly, wondering if he really wanted Rose to overhear this conversation. Pete coming here... couldn't be good.

"Not where the neighbors can gawk at us?" Pete hinted, tipping his head toward the door of the flat.

"Don't exactly see people queued up to goggle," he said archly, deciding to be stubborn.

"Doctor, you're being rude," Rose said from behind him, making him startle before he regained his composure.

At least she was dressed now, so Pete wouldn't necessarily guess they'd been... Well, people had been assuming that much the whole time they were travelling. Still, didn't want to go broadcasting it, even if he still felt a little giddy over the whole thing. Go telling everyone, he'd bound to end up getting slapped, or worse. She touched his arm, making him realize that she'd have followed him down to the garage. When had she ever let him get away with anything? She'd always managed to get him talking when he'd rather not and now... Blimey, did he really want to talk to Pete? What with where this convo was likely headed? Rassilon's braces, what he'd give for a working TARDIS right now. Fleeing into the next galaxy for a few months would be flipping brilliant.

"Fine," he acquiesced, stepping back and reluctantly allowing Pete to enter. Few people had been allowed into what was effectively his private workshop. Sure he occasionally crashed here for the night when he'd worked on the TARDIS late and time had passed without his knowledge, but he liked to think he lived at Rose's flat. Even if it was ultramodern and gave him the creeps with it's lack of personality, it was where Rose was. Closest thing to home in this universe, despite the occasional row and awkwardness. Then again, everything had been a bit awkward no matter where he was now. And this, this was his inner sanctum, or thereabouts.

Pete greeted Rose warmly, eyes darting around in curiosity. He stared apprehensively at the TD gun
leaning against the wall but his perusal quickly moved on before settling on the growing TARDIS in
the corner of the lounge. His eyes widened when he realized what he was looking at. "So it's true
then?" He pointed at the coral. "Someday you two'll be off to wander the universe again."

He glanced at Rose before shrugging noncommittally. "Should do," he said, fixing his eyes on his
trainers. Safer to study them than to have Rose read all the doubts in his eyes.

"How soon will it be ready?" Pete asked mildly, tone showing nothing more than polite curiosity that
seemed a bit forced.

Looking up, he tried to read his expression. It was harder now to suss out the layers of meaning in
people's words but he'd managed to mostly hide it under the guise of being oblivious. He'd used that
deception often enough over the centuries, except now it was real. "Oh, about a year or so, I'd
imagine. Why?" he asked bluntly.

Pete sighed. "You do realize there will be plenty of questions on why I let you leave with that--" he
pointed at the weapon, but didn't look, "and why it's not secured in the archives. Hartley has been
making noise already. Has done since you sauntered away with it last night."

"Meh, let 'em talk. You lot usually do have something to complain about," he said dismissively.
"Safer with me than somewhere some idiot can go mucking about with it like Chambers was."

Pete stepped toward him, looking frustrated. "It's not just Hartley and the Met who'll be making noise
before long. With all the rumors about the files Ferguson leaked, there's already an unhealthy interest
in you growing."

"Nothing I've not faced before," he replied evenly.

"Yes, but it's not just you you've got to worry about now, is it?" Pete said pointedly, looking at Rose. She
obviously caught his meaning.

"I'll be alright, Dad. Don't worry. Me and him, we've had people following us around before. Just
ask Mum about LINDA," Rose threw in, moving over to stand next to him. He looked down at her,
feeling grateful for this show of support.

Pete didn't seem convinced. "Those people, were they backed by a group of nutters? Nutters who
sent armed men into that row house to take out Chambers, after getting Miles Holburn?" Pete
pressed.

Now that, that was a little worrying, if it was true. "You've the proof, then?"

"Preliminary IDs came in on one -- Joe Stapleton, ex-SAS. Known associate of Eammon Isaacson
and leader of the suspected militant wing of the Earther movement," Pete gravely supplied. "Lost his
whole family to Cybus, fought in the war against the Cybermen until he was discharged early for
anger issues. Hadn't been able to keep a job for more than a month and was on the dole until
Issacson brought him into the fold. One of his low level cronies and one of the stand in bodyguards."

"Bit sloppy, innit? Showing your hand like that," he said, with a moue of distaste. "But, now you'll
be able to go round the lot of them up now, easy-peasy."

Pete shook his head regretfully. "Would if I could, but Issacson and Stapleton had a public falling out
a fortnight ago. Got sacked in the middle of a dinner to honor the Argentinian ambassador. With a
couple hundred witnesses looking on, I might add. It's how we ID'd him, from the security footage."

"Plausible deniability," Rose filled in, grudgingly admiring. She glanced at him. "Clever."
"Not clever. Oldest trick in the book, really," he scoffed. "Do it that way, make sure it looks like the right hand doesn't know what the left is up to, and Bob's your uncle. How to Do Your Own Conspiracy 101."

Pete raised an eyebrow, giving him an appraising look. "So how would you have run things?"

"I wouldn't," he said smoothly, with a confident smirk, putting his hands in his pockets. "Too bloody obvious, yeah? But if I was going for the messy effect, I'd create a distraction to keep people looking elsewhere, then go after what I really wanted."

"Good show," Pete said approvingly. "I'm sure you can figure out what or whom they're gunning for."

Rose was the one who spoke up, looking far more concerned than he particularly liked. "They're after him, aren't they? And out to discredit Torchwood while they're at it. Two birds with one stone."

Pete nodded. "And he's no help with anything. Bad enough I let him take that," he pointed at the TD gun with a frown, "home, I also see he's got half the Archives stashed away here."

"Oi, it's disabled already. Pulled the energy dispersion module just a bit ago," he protested. "And it's boring enough around here without contemplating doing the whole work, come home, watch telly and go to bed thing."

"Right," Pete said firmly. "And that's why there's crazies calling in death threats; a piece in a right-wing paper last week, calling for 'the alien threat to be firmly dealt with and not allowed to gad about Tescos with heiresses'; and your name in every gossip rag speculating whether or not you're really an alien and should be detained."

He perked up at that, managing not to blanch at the thought of being 'detained' anywhere. "Death threats? On little old me? Blimey, don't I feel special. Sounds a bit more focused than the last bunch of loonies who were tracking me," he said dismissively.

"He meant that as a warning," Rose snapped, looking brave but worried about him. Very worried. She turned to Pete, looking for more clarification. "Death threats?"

"Started this morning. All anonymous, called into our emergency line and the ones over at the Met's HQ. All untraceable as of yet, so it's not just your average Joe Bloggs getting all het up," Pete confirmed. "And now Issacson is making noise about having an independent agency, other than Torchwood in charge of the resident Alien refugee population. Submitted the paperwork at half nine this morning. Said we're not impartial."

Now that, that sounded serious. With this universe being so far ahead of the original one, technologically speaking, Torchwood should've been able to trace that with no effort. He pulled a breath in through his nose, steadying himself. "You say that like it's a bad thing," he sniffed.

"It is, you fool! The protocols and regulations you've been running roughshod over -- you've a Philoxian Disintergrator Ray hanging on the wall of a bloody garage!" Pete growled.

"It's been scaled back. Took out the acceleration amplifier and snatched the thermo couplings for my TARDIS. Without those, all it is is a very effective tool for removing rust off metal in a snap. Saves time on the bodywork," he protested.

"What about the spaceship you're building in a flat over a garage," Pete challenged. "God help us if anyone sees it, for one. For two, anyone could just walk in here and take it."
"I'd like to see them try. Isomorphic stun field around the whole thing. Anyone else but me or Rose touches it and they'll be out like a light." He was not going to try gauging Rose's reaction to that at the moment. Let that wait until later.

"You're missing the point, Doctor. You're taking risks and if you expect me to just let you do your own thing, you'd better promise me you're not going to do anything stupidly reckless in the meanwhile. So far, the TD gun's existence hasn't leaked beyond a handful, and we've managed to retcon the witnesses who saw the monks. Am I going to have to worry about this too, on top of everything else?"

He bridled at that, raising his chin and glaring. "Pete..." he began, getting ready to rail against the violation of those people's rights, not just his own. Bloody Torchwood. Even Rose looked disturbed by that part, proving he wasn't alone in the moral outrage department, there. And did he have to explain perception filters to everyone?

Pete glared back. "Would you rather another incident on the front pages? The second one in Shoreditch in as many months? Or add Hackney to that list?" He waved his arm at his surroundings in frustration. "God, all that brilliance, wasted on this."

"At least I'm not playing with people's lives, having the gall to go around deciding what they're allowed to remember," he snapped, purposely not thinking about his counterpart and the fate of the other Donna. That, he had to admit, had been necessary. This, however, was just plain wrong. "It's all far safer here, away from you lot."

"All of it was done to protect you," Pete insisted forcefully. "Since you obviously haven't a care for that yourself. A month ago you were on death's door. Last night you almost got caught between two groups of madmen, both bent on destroying everything around us. Like I said, reckless."

The retort to that one came easily. "If I'd done things according to the bloody protocols, Stapleton, while likely being very much alive, would have gotten the TD gun and handed it over to those loonies you're so het up about."

Rose stepped in between them, hands up to separate them if need be. "Stop, just stop. If you two can't get along... Doctor, didn't you say you had work to do?" He nodded stiffly, not taking his eyes away from Pete. "Good, then get to it. I'll stay here and straighten this mess up."

He was going to protest, opening his mouth with the expectancy for the words to come tumbling out, as they usually did. Rose had that determined focused look on her face, and he'd almost love to be a fly on the wall for this convo. But Mrs Murphy was bringing in her Beemer for a tune up and a new paint job, and he wanted to try out the new plasmid sprayer he'd rigged up out of a molecular trifold inversion phaser. If it worked as intended, one push of a lovely, big red threatening button -- still couldn't resist buttons like that -- and one blue Beemer would be red. That or a heaping pile of molten slag. But... he had hope. Silly that. And if Rose wanted to sort out Pete, far be it from he to tell her no.

This time, his words ended up not being so much a protest as they were an acceptance of the circumstances. He shrugged, lip curling in disgust at his own complacency as he turned away. Glancing back as he stepped through the door, he pointed a finger at Pete with a meaningful look while he spoke to Rose.

"Just make sure he doesn't go mucking about with anything. I've been working on that circuitry for over a week now and it's gonna be a bit longer, since someone took my sonic."
It was an hour or so later -- 65 minutes and 49 seconds, to be exact -- after Pete had left with nary a goodbye or an acknowledgement in his direction, that Rose came down to the garage. Edgar and Percy were still patiently scraping burned rubber off the cement floor while the Doctor had the modified phaser torn apart. They were not going to speak about the incident 29 minutes before, or why the exhaust fans were going full bore.

Wrinkling her nose at the smell of burning tyres, and waving away some of the lingering smoke away, she sat on a stool nearby. Noticing what was obviously a disaster in part, Rose settled for what she thought was a safe topic. "Where's Jasper?" She was all primped and ready to go, a light jacket tied around her waist in case of a sudden downpour. There were thunderstorms in the forecast all week, he recalled.

"Consoling Mrs Murphy," he replied with a wince, not looking up as he focused on the disassembled machinery. This was a fiddly bit, here. Really, the plasmic modulator shouldn't have let that much energy through.

"Oh. Thought I heard something. So it didn't work, then?"

She sounded sympathetic, at least. Not at all disappointed or upset as he'd feared she would be. Everything was so awkward now. He was so awkward now. Even jiggery pokery didn't work as well as it used to. He sighed, setting aside the pliers.

"Oh, it did. Worked a charm. Other than with the tyres still on. Apparently latex interacts with the molecular polarization process, and when combined with the paint..." He hung his head with a sigh, before scrunching up his face in bafflement at the exactitude and ingratitude of the average customer.

Really, people? No appreciation for genius, or his attempts to bring 53rd century technology to the people of earth with stolen artifacts and shoddy 21st century tools. The bloody minded Philistines. "Still don't know why she did her nut like that. We offered to replace her tyres without charge. And the rims, too. Even threw in a free jug of petrol. Not my fault it was effected too," he added glumly as Rose came over and gave him a hug.

"Poor thing. I suppose she'd a new outfit?" she guessed, leaning her head against his shoulder.

He nodded, holding her close. "Don't see why she was so upset. Looking like that, I clearly did her a favor. Worst thing I've seen someone wear since... well since I was less sartorially savvy." Rose looked at his now grease, paint, and melted rubber covered jeans and gave him a cheeky smile. He smiled back, just glad she'd not gone off back to Torchwood with Pete. "Being a bit grotty doesn't count," he insisted with mock seriousness. "It doesn't when it was well earned and oh, but I earned it. Would've been two days at this otherwise."

"It'll be a week before we get shut of the pong," Edgar complained, looking up where he was diligently working with a paint scraper.

"Can we please use the regular spray gun the next time around?" Percy asked hopefully.

"I told you, one final tweak with my sonic and what hey, safe as houses," he protested, rolling his eyes. More people resistant to change. Why were they all so stubborn? "Just someone had to be all stodgy and boring-like on me, and went and confiscated it."

Edgar looked at Rose pleadingly, jerking his head toward the door. "Why don't you take him off somewheres and keep him entertained for a couple of days? Get a burger and chips, go to the cinema, anything. Just keep him out of mischief for the now," he hinted.
Well, wasn't that wizard. Did no one want him around? Edgar hadn't said much earlier, but he figured the man had been speechless at his brilliance. He had been brilliant, just hadn't counted on the regulator failing midway. And it was just some bloody tyres. Not like the worst had actually happened. She still had a car and blue and red went together well... didn't it? He'd looked positively spiffy last time he wore his blue suit and the red chucks. Now her car could look just a bit flashier than just plain red. And the mottled look, that was going to be the next big fashion craze...

Glaring ineffectually, he let Rose drag him out of the garage. He didn't even bother protesting, either. She had her mobile out, probably calling a cab, he thought. As they waited, he nudged her with a shoulder. "Where to now?" he hazarded with a cautious smile, trying to ignore the sidearm she was wearing on her hip. That was an argument for another day.

"Well, you really could use a shower and a change of clothes," she said, looking him over.

He looked down, ruefully agreeing at her point. Forgoing showers didn't work so well with this body, not with all these silly, human sweat glands. Total rubbish, they were.

"And then, dunno... Grab a bite to eat? Order takeaway, watch some telly? Could just lounge about and be lazy for the day. Just be us, with no distractions? Maybe even talk, before you run for the hills."

He nodded fitfully, happy she hadn't laid into him and some of the awkwardness between them had dissipated. Other than the threat of talking. That was worrisome. How domestic was that?! Them, talking. Oh, getting out of bed was starting to seem like a massive error in judgement on his part. They'd been brilliant together in bed, and now all the ramifications and difficult bits were reasserting themselves. Things like talking. Bollocks.

"No more explosions," she cautioned him with a grin as the cab pulled up next to the kerb.

"Oi! It didn't explode. It was just a big whooshing hissing... Anyway, absolutely no pieces of anything at all went flying through the air. None. Not an iota or a smidgen of airborne stuff to be seen. Other when Mrs Murphy chucked her handbag at Percy's head, but still, nothing at all."
Chapter 28

Rose caught the Doctor's almost furtive glances towards the Webley Pete had pressed into her hands before he left. Of course she noticed. What surprised her was the lack of even a single comment or disapproving remark about the pistol. Honestly, she'd rather not carry a weapon, but with the warning about death threats and all that, she wasn't going to chance it. Better safe than sorry. Just before the cab arrived he ran back upstairs to their old flat, coming back with a wrapped bundle. "Dismantled it further," he explained, glancing about before giving her a shy smile. "Couldn't leave it, you know. Even if..."

Rose nodded, understanding completely. Even she'd feel better, knowing where it was. Not that she particularly wanted it in their regular flat in Wapping, instead of locked away in some secure vault somewhere.

The ride back to Wapping was sorta quiet, but it was an easy almost quiet. Well, she was quiet, anyway. She kept an eye on their surroundings, looking for anything suspicious, while he fidgeted and pestered the driver about whether he liked his job. It was still strange, having him here with her. They'd been apart longer than they'd ever traveled together, she realized. And they'd both changed. Even after last night, she wondered if he'd still stay. Wondered if the domestics and an ordinary human life would be enough to hold him, if his issues weren't sorted out in future. Not that it mattered to her, if they didn't get the chance to be out among the stars. There were still adventures to be found here on earth, and plenty of places on the planet they could travel. She just worried that wouldn't be enough for him. He was going completely barmy as it was.

"I could become a cabbie, y'know," he said suddenly, as they exited the vehicle near the kerb in front of their building. He didn't seem to notice how fast the driver sped out of there, hardly even waiting for her to hand over the fare. "Go driving people about, show 'em the city."

Rose nodded to the doorman in greeting, ignoring his last comment, knowing he probably wouldn't do anything of the sort. She doubted he'd pass the licensing exams. He'd end up arguing with the instructors over whether one lane or the other had been destroyed in the Great Fire in 1666. Or worse, take credit for starting them by accident somehow and end up sectioned as a lunatic.

"Hello, Norman."

"Afternoon, Miss Tyler, Doctor." The doorman was steadfastly ignoring the bundle the Doctor was carrying under his arm, his grease and melted rubber covered clothes, and the gun at her hip. Several other Torchwood employees lived in the building as well. Weapons weren't exactly an uncommon sight here and after the years of curfews and the wars with the Cybermen, most of the other residents found it a comfort. As for the Doctor- Norman the Doorman and the rest of the building were adjusting to his presence slowly. Very slowly. Probably would go much better once Norman managed to forgive him for the affair with the Atavarians that led to the broken windows. Norman had once taken great pride in how clean the lobby windows had always been and how they sparkled. Sadly, you just couldn't get the same results with the temporary boarding up in their place, no matter how much you polished the wood.

When they were in the lift and beyond other ears that might be listening in, she answered. "I don't think you'd make a good cab driver. The one time dad let you take the car and you gave mum a lift to the grocers, you ended up in Swindon."
He was leaning against the wall of the lift and straightened, giving her an offended sniff. "The butcher in Swindon is named Alonzo, much more interesting name than Bob. Plus, Bob is rude, very rude. Won't even talk to me, just ignores me half the time."

Rose just sighed. Maybe if he hadn't gotten in an argument with Bob the butcher over the pear glaze for the hams the first time he'd met him, or gone accusing the man of some dastardly plot against humanity and Time Lords in general... Another occasion he was lucky to not end up in the loony bin. Her mum had been ready to kill him by then. "I think it was the three speed violations and the parking fines with Tony along in the backseat that sealed the deal, really."

The lift dinged when it got to the fifth floor. Even then, he wasn't giving up. "The posted speed limits fail to take into account some beings have better reflexes than others. I've got better reaction speeds than you lot, so a speed of 85 mph is nothing, whereas your mother... ah, her behind the wheel of anything so much as dodgem car is just terrifying," he said, shuddering. "They were safe as houses," he added with a confident smile that wavered a bit when she didn't immediately reply.

"Come on, you," she said instead. "I'll make us a cuppa while you get cleaned up." He brightened at that, giving her a sunny smile as he headed off for the loo as soon as she unlocked the door.

Looking around, she sighed. The plant in the kitchen window had finally given its last gasping effort, woefully turning crispy and brown. Making tea was a familiar enough routine that it didn't even require conscious thought. Fill kettle at the tap. Plug in kettle. Search the cupboards for any biscuits that hadn't fallen prey to his midnight munching, put them on a saucer, and place them on the table. Grab two mugs and add the milk and sugar- extra milk and three sugars for his, just a dash of both for hers. Finish waiting for the water to heat, then pour. Simple, really.

She took a moment to just breathe, letting everything from the last 24 hours sink in. Pete wasn't in the least bit chuffed at all and wanted them to move to a more secure location or even better, back to the mansion. She had balked at that. For one thing, not only would trying to pour treacle up a banister be easier than getting the Doctor to go along with that idea, it would be a disaster in terms of their changing relationship. He'd already panicked once since they'd crossed the one line they'd never had before and caused him to be testier than usual with Pete. God, if he even saw her mum before she could calm him down... that didn't even bear thinking.

Plus, Sally Henderson lived in the building, and so with other agents in the building, she judged it one of the safest in the area. Well, safe barring the Doctor trying to tweak the performance of the heating or cooling systems, open trade negotiations with alien species from the roof, and the like.

No, they were going to work on their awkwardness on their own -- without anyone else butting in, thank you very much. Half the fun in that particular journey was going to be the getting there. Even if they never got the new TARDIS to go anywhere, she knew one way he could still make her see stars. And while they were at it, maybe they could both learn the whole 'normal' thing together.

Hence, why she'd told Pete to put her down on an indeterminate leave of absence. Perhaps when things had calmed down, she'd go back to Torchwood. She didn't know. Too much was still up in the air. Up in the air when they were, once again, in an ultramodern flat that was the epitome of mundane. It was almost unbelievable, even now. In a way it didn't seem right that the stuff of legends should be plunked down in a boring flat in Wapping, even if it was posh enough to rate a doorman.

Somehow, making tea seemed to have taken longer than usual. Must've lost track of the time; that, or he'd barely even gotten wet in the brief span he'd jumped under the shower spray. It seemed like mere moments before he was sitting at the table, hunched over in a chair, plucking at the knot on one of his trainers. The other shoe rested on the floor, already untied. He'd merely thrown on another t-shirt and jeans, with an unbuttoned oxford pulled on over the t-shirt. His hair was a still wet version
of its usual mussed style, without the gel. It was almost like he'd not even bothered with a comb.

"That was quick."

He glanced up from under his fringe, tongue tucked in the corner of his mouth in earnest concentration. "'S been nearly an hour, Rose. Not like I was completing some monumental task." He paused, raising his head to grin disarmingly. "Plus, I heard the biscuit wrapper. Couldn't miss that."

They sat down to drink their tea and nibble their biscuits in companionable silence, before Rose thought to bring the subject up. "So... that TD gun. Could it really put the whole planet in a time lock?"

He paused, biscuit halfway to his mouth, eyes unreadable. After a long moment, he nodded, ducking his head. Damp hair shadowed his face as he took a swallow of his tea. "Not as it is currently, no. Bit more modifications needed, a De-Mat Gun's parts, and here's hoping one of those doesn't pop up in future. But, yeah. Why?"

"It's why its different from the other stuff you've got lying about in Hackney," she checked, certain she was right. "You're hanging on to it so much closer than the rest."

He nodded stiffly. "If they're gonna come looking for it -- and I wouldn't be surprised if someone did -- better they not find Her," he said, meaning the TARDIS coral. "Plus, if there's more of the bobbins out there, just waiting for some twit to go mucking about with it and rain destruction down on us all, that might be the only clue in tracking it down. Energy traces or a signature, something of the like might help."

"Do you think there's more out there?" she asked, hoping for another candid answer. He could be very open at times, more than he'd ever been, provided it wasn't something that struck too close to those damnable barricades of his. And since last night, he'd been more open than ever. She just hoped this new, awkward shyness didn't hold him back, or get him to start panicking again.

"I hope not. Still, wouldn't be too surprised. Not with everything else that seems to have fallen through the walls between worlds." He sighed. "Explains why he bothered giving me the coral. Though, if I can't... well, the joke's on all of us, innit?" The quiet hints of buried anger were still there, despite his rambling, musing tone of voice. That, and the trace of sarcasm; his newest defense mechanism.

"It doesn't matter, you know. The little things, the changes. They'll all come out in the wash," she said softly, reaching a hand across the table to take his. He looked up at her, eyes uncertain as he gave her a cautious smile. But he wasn't pulling away. No snarky comments, or outright denials. He was just looking at her like she was his last hope and the only thing keeping him earthed. It was almost terrifying, having him look at her like that. He had looked at her like that before when they had been traveling out among the stars, when he didn't think she was looking. Then she remembered something she'd said to him long ago, when he had been lost in guilt thinking he'd gotten her trapped far from home and her own time, even. "We've got each other, now. You and me, against the world. And stuck with you, that's not so bad."

It was mid afternoon before Gail Evans could escape her desk and all its bumph. Incident reports to
file, forensics reports to read, everything seemed to have turned up on her blotter. When a complaint about shoddy service at a garage turned up, she jumped at the chance. Especially since it was that garage. The one owned by a certain Edgar Butler. She had a route in. With any luck, the mysterious Mr Smith would still be around and available to answer some questions without Torchwood or her bosses getting in the way.

The streets here were narrow, and busy enough. Most of the people were in a hurry, with few stopping to linger. A few cars that looked abandoned were left by the kerb, graffiti was on half the buildings, and a general air of suspicion toward outsiders was prominent. Hope rapidly began fading at the site of the neighborhood and it's residents. While she'd been in Hackney two days before, she'd not had the occasion to turn down this particular street. Unfortunately, the fates were not smiling on her and luck was definitely not on her side. Instead, she was met by three sullen looking biker types at the garage. All of them pretended not to know who she was looking for.

"Look, I'm not here about the incident earlier with Mrs Murphy's BMW," she sighed, trying to ignore the singe marks and the lingering smell of burning.

"Don't know what you're talking about," the largest said obstinately. "Don't know nothing about no Smith bloke. Barking up the wrong tree, you are. He's not around here." Gritting her teeth and pasting a false smile on, she tried again, but with the same exact results from one of the others who'd been shyly studying his boots like all the answers to life could be found on their scuffed surfaces.

With no luck there, Gail tried with the rest of the neighborhood. She took a different tack with a Muslim woman in a head scarf, hurrying by with several children in tow, each carrying a bag of groceries. The woman showed no recognition of the name either.

"Maybe he uses a different name, then. I'm sure you've seen him around. I've seen him around here. He's about six feet tall, bit on the thin side, talks a lot..."

That got a reaction, and a wide smile. Just before the suspicious look came back. "Why do you want him? He's harmless. All greasy half the time, doesn't eat enough. Always comes around, blagging an hour or two on the computer."

That sounded interesting. "Computer?"

"Always with the public records. Too much of a history fetish. Should've been a uni professor, that one. Not banging about under a car bonnet with that lot all day," the woman said with a sniff, before starting to move on.

Seeing her only source of information leaving, Gail called after her. "Do you know where he lives?"

"Not around here, I don't imagine," the woman said faintly before disappearing into the building abutting the garage.

"Damn," she muttered to herself, looking around one last time before getting back into her car. "The little bugger is good. Too good."

Without any outright evidence of any crime, she couldn't do anything further here. The complaint lodged by Mrs Murphy had already been classed as a civil complaint, not criminal and not their direct purview, since the woman had admitted right out that it had been a mistake. Though, judging from the various gadgets she'd noticed scattered around that garage, Torchwood would probably take great interest, if they didn't already know and weren't just turning a blind eye.

Pulling away from the kerb, she dialed her sister's mobile number again, forcing on a thin veneer of
calm. She would stay calm, cool, and collected. "Sally, how was your day?" she asked brightly, before hurrying to the important part. "Where the hell did you say those two lived?"

Her sister's exasperated chuckle came with an sigh after. "Well, that's an improvement, I'll give you that. Still trying to track him down, I see. Didn't I tell you to leave off?"

"There's been death threats, now. Hardly think it's wise just leaving him unprotected, especially if he's called it quits. Probably gotten the sack at the garage, if I guess correctly."

"What?"

Apparently that hadn't filtered back through to Torchwood yet. Gail gladly filled her sister in.

"And he's not in Hackney now? Neither of them?" Sally breathed, shocked but quickly regaining her focus.

"Near as I could tell, no. But then, the neighbors aren't exactly what you'd call forthcoming. He must fit in like a charm, that one. You lot got a protection detail on him and the Tyler heiress?"

Sally's muffled curse came over the line just as Gail slowed the car by a zebra crossing for a girl pushing a pram. Traffic was lighter than normal, she noticed as she drove towards Shoreditch. The area effected by the previous month's events was still behind barriers, but there were signs of demolitions and repairs along the area she was driving past.

"Explains why the Director came back in such a temper, and why there's a rumor that Rose tendered her resignation this morning. I'd imagine that might not be true, but Mr Tyler did sign out a sidearm from the inventory and it's not been returned," Sally said when she returned to the line.

Gail wasn't as reticent as her sister. "Bloody hell. Don't tell me that nutter's now armed."

Sally laughed outright at that. "God, no. That'd be the day. He won't touch 'em. But mind you, I've heard he's deadly on a cricket pitch, whatever that is. Apparently it's some sport they've got on whatever planet he's from, though Rose knows what it is. They both tried explaining. Could just be a story, for all I know. He was going on about it one day when he was still coming in."

"And now there's people calling in, wanting him wiped off this planet," Gail said soberly, swerving around a turning motorist. "Odd duck or not, I can hardly see why anyone would want him dead."

She could hear her sister suck in a deep breath and pause before answering. "Have you ever dealt with someone that one minute could be laughing at a joke with you, and the next is giving you a look like he's just seen exactly what clothes they'll bury you in? Or better yet, go from a mere pussycat and all smiles and bright eyes to suddenly giving you a look that makes you wonder what exactly you let in the door?"

Recalling that moment back at the station, unbelievably four days before, she nodded. Remembering this was a phone conversation and not a face to face visit, she replied, "Yes."

"That says it all. He scares some people. Usually he's this happy little mite. A bit shouty sometimes, and sarcastic as all get out. Mostly a loudmouthed genius that belongs in a lab somewhere running experiments like the stereotypical mad scientist. But sometimes he just... isn't that. And that's what does it. Scare people to bits when he turns like that. Wasn't like that much before the Shoreditch incident."

"Really messed him up, did it? Beyond the obvious physical injuries," Gail murmured, spotting a coffee shop and parking. A latte and some scones sounded good right about now. Maybe a bacon
sarnie. She'd worked right through lunch, and if she could wiggle a location out of her sister... well, she always did her best thinking on a full stomach.

"It was bad, sis. You didn't see it like we did, behind the barricades like you were. You didn't have to fight your way out through those things that used to be the people that lived in that neighborhood. He was the one walking into the middle of it after he'd made us all get out of there. Something there rattled him, or maybe it was the almost getting killed, but now he's running scared half the time. From what, I don't know, really."

"If he can walk into that mess and survive, I don't think I want to know," Gail added, already thinking. Maybe the monks and that weapon Chambers had had were just the start of it. The tip of the iceberg, so to speak. He'd said he'd handle the situation, back when she'd first shown him the CCTV footage. God, only four days ago, was it? Felt like an eternity since then. "How'd he ever recover that fast?"

"You know the rumors. Believe me, some of the things I've heard around the bubbler in the caff here are even wilder. Don't even ask. You'd think I'd lost it," her sister replied, forestalling the obvious follow up question. "Plus, if you add in how smart he is and the nose he's got for trouble -- if you were up to something, you'd want him out of the way. And with the current atmosphere getting the way it is, the rumors don't help. Those rumors, plus the files Ferguson leaked, plus Shoreditch -- that's what's fueling this."

"Think it's someone who knows him?" Gail could hear her sister's held breath as she waited for an answer. "Or is it just the fall out from before?"

"It's got to be that, but I'll check into it. Director Tyler's already has a team investigating, trying to trace the phone calls. Some of our best, at that. No luck yet, but we'll get it. It'd be faster, no doubt, with the Doctor helping, since he's a whiz with the computers, but alas! No joy there," she complained. "I don't imagine we could get him in here with a bribe of all the Jammie Dodgers in England about now. As for him, occasionally unnerving, rude and stubborn as he is, he's incredibly hard not to like. Once you know him, that is. Even if you want to give him a smack half the time."

Gail sighed. She'd gathered that already. "So, can you tell me how to find him?"

"You just never give up, do you?"

Gail smiled. She was already halfway to a win, she knew it. "Nope."

The smell of the dead filled his nose, even as the flaming wreckage of Dalek ships were still crashing down from the smoke darkened sky. Around him a hundred thousand timelines were being snuffed out; every minute, every second they'd end and turn on themselves, coming back as Chronovores in endless time loops as the fabric of reality ran amok. Even the normal laws of physics were breaking down, as the air had a strange density, so he could almost feel the very molecules of air parting to allow him passage. All the hair on the back of his neck was beginning to rise in reaction to the latent static electricity in the air.

The whole world was poised to tear itself apart at the seams, and all he wanted was to get up that hill.
That one last endless hill, so he could see the city one last time. But it was so far, and he was almost out of time. They all were. He closed his eyes, shielding his face with an arm clothed in singed velvet as the first bright flash of the explosion lit the horizon. A second more, and he'd have been blinded. That might've been preferable, if someone hadn't had to at least bear witness to Elysium falling. And indeed, it was too late. Far too late -- all the people down below were gone. He was too late to stop it, to try saving them. Run out of time. The Time Lord out of time, as usual. Through it all, everything remained silent as the grave, other than a low rumbling, his labored breathing and the pounding of his hearts...

The Doctor woke with a start before remembering where he was. Guiltily, he checked -- Rose was still sleeping by his side, undisturbed. Sighing in relief, he rolled closer to her, slipping an arm around her sleeping form carefully. He closed his eyes and held her close, listening to the gentle sound of her rhythmic breathing. This was good. Peaceful. Life, not death. No war, here. It wasn't Elysium.

He wasn't sure what time it was, and couldn't care less at the moment. Faulty time sense be damned, he wanted his rest too much to try bringing that into focus. They'd had a brilliant evening. Hadn't worried about the future too much, ordered in, watched telly -- all those normal human things people on this backwards planet did. All those little things like death threats, gossip rags, and that busybody MP could just wait in queue for another day. They'd even made love again -- really, that made even watching the Oort Cloud and binomial dimensional algorithms seem so, so overrated, by far. With wonderful, fantastic distractions like sex with Rose Tyler, ol' Davros could've lugged the planet off again and he'd not have noticed.

Oooh. Probably why all that had been frowned upon in his society, with the noninterference policies. But then, all that loss of control, feeling like all of existence was spiraling down to one ickle, ickle focus point... and what it was then to hear her gasp his name like that! Those poised and dignified Chancellors and Cardinals had never known the like. Would've stunned them no end, if they had. He'd never, ever known the like, learning that letting go could be sooo... good. Not like this, at any rate. Wouldn't have, if fate hadn't gotten in the way and given him this chance. Though, he had to wonder. If more Time Lords had gotten laid, would the events that led to the Time War have even happened? Then again, considering King Priam and that lot at Troy, could've been worse.

He could hear the pattering sound of rain against the glass of the window behind him as the forecasted storm finally broke. A sudden flash lit the room, the rumble of thunder that followed brought back memories of the dream that woke him. That little bit of reality had bled through, his ears trying to alert him to the happenings around him, even as he was doing his nightly revisit of hell. Well, if not hell exactly, the closest thing to it. The pit on Krop Tor was nothing in comparison to being surrounded by all that death, destruction, and fractured time...

But for a moment there, in that horrible dream, he'd felt it. Two hearts beating in synch, the turn of the world beneath his feet without having to try for it, being whole again. It was strange, how quickly the familiarity was fading away. So long as a mere wanderer in the fourth dimension, and now half between that and a plodder on the slow path. That little difference between experiencing the old norm and the new was startling, even though he doubted he'd ever get used to this entirely. Even if some things made it worth it in the end, like being with her.

He almost considered waking Rose to ask her if humans always felt like this, felt the separation between 'self' and self and suddenly found themselves wondering how they'd gotten to where they were without noticing the changes along the way. Then again, he couldn't think of too many people, and definitely no humans, who'd found themselves beside themselves- and not in the proverbial sense. With that, he reconsidered, leaving Rose undisturbed.

He decided to just lay there, watching her sleep while she radiated calm and warmth, just like the old
days. The realization gave him instant comfort. He decided he could wait a few hours, until she woke naturally. She deserved her time of peace, putting up with him. Wasn't always the easiest at times, he knew. Also, if she didn't think he was completely daft before, waking her would not only convince her of the same, and she'd probably be a bit tetchy, too. He smiled to himself and gave her nose a barely felt kiss. Quite right, too.
Chapter 29

Pete cursed when Jake came into his office with a put upon look and announced that Chambers wanted to see the Doctor. "What? Why?"

It had been a week since he'd had the confrontation with the Doctor in Hackney and there'd been nary a peep from the flat in Wapping. So far, only Jackie had heard from Rose on the phone and all she'd said was that Rose had seemed fine, just evasive when it came to any mention of the Doctor.

"Said it was for his ears only, that he wanted to see 'the hybrid' one last time, face to face." Jake used air quotations while wearing a look of disgust at the term. "Chambers' words, not mine."

Pete cursed again, pushing the papers on his desk aside. "He's heard the rumors, then?"

Jake nodded grimly, with a humorless smirk. "Who hasn't? Without Ferguson's throwing the spanner in that particular works, his identity would still be a state secret."

"Great, which means I now have to convince him to come in when he's still miffed at me," Pete grumbled. "That'll be a laugh, since the pillock doesn't listen to a damn thing I say, and probably won't even bother shifting from whatever the hell he's doing."

Most of Torchwood knew about the difficulties with the Doctor in the last month. Right now, everyone was wondering what he was doing with the TD Gun.

Jake gave Pete an inquiring look. "I thought you had an agreement with him, keep him under control so he'd not do anything to attract more attention? So people would start forgetting him or get distracted by the next celebrity scandal?"

Pete laughed outright at that, sounding regretful and quietly frustrated. "He is the celebrity scandal, or hadn't you noticed? You remember what Rose said he was like before all this, and how he was when you met him before, the perpetual wanderer? Well, give it a few months or a year at most, and he'll be off again."

"Can hardly see how, he's not even got a driving license at this point," Jake pointed out wryly as he remembered.

Pete sighed, wishing that things could be so simple, wincing even as he thought of what he'd seen in Hackney two days before with grudging admiration. The technology that the Doctor had squirreled away, modified, and otherwise pocketed put Torchwood's own R&D department to shame, not that he liked admitting that. "You'd never believe it, Jake, but he's doing it. Building a ship and God knows what else down there. Doesn't look like much now, but with the defenses he's got around it..." Pete shook his head, still amazed. "He's going to run, I just know it. Honestly, we've all been expecting it. Half the time I wonder why I just don't get him an unlimited boarding pass on a zeppelin line, tell him 'bon voyage' and get it over with. But then I think, what if he doesn't come back, or he turns up dead in an alley somewhere? He trusts too easily, provided you're not Torchwood, but if I push him any more..." He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts, before continuing with a frown. "I mean, Rose is the only thing that's held him here this long, and it's like herding bloody cats!"

Jake understood immediately. No one had expected her to come back from the other universe. "She'll go with him, too, most like. They'd be together, then."
Pete looked away, looking wistful. "Never thought I'd have a family. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't. Almost lost Rose and Jackie when Rose was trying to find him. Given what the circumstances were, I never had the time to even consider it. Now he's here, and I've got to worry he'll get himself and Rose killed or that we'd never see them again."

"He knows about Stapleton and the threats?"

"Couldn't be less bothered if he tried. Acted like it was some kind of commendation or a badge of honor, instead of being concerned that he's in the cross hairs of every xenophobe on the planet."

"Probably seen worse," Jake offered with a shrug.

Pete slammed a hand on his desk in frustration, gritting his teeth. "That's what the git said then! What happens if someone attempts an assassination? Or Issacson manages to unite the backbenchers or manages to get the moderates running the party to listen? Public opinion is wavering. Or say he and Rose sort things out and in a few years start a family. I can't see raising kids in a climate of doubt and suspicion like that."

"And if he's got his ship..."

"I'd rather they'd have the option to settle down if they wanted to, before he merrily burns all the bridges behind him."

"More like set explosives and blow them to smithereens." Jake looked amused. "C'mon, Boss. You can't see them staying put for long, can you? Both of them would go stir crazy, and he'd probably cause someone to completely lose it before long just from the stress of it. I mean, he's great in a crisis, or small doses, but still. Look at you, you've not been this stressed out since the stars disappeared. You look like hell, mate."

There was an amused grunt before Pete rubbed the bridge of his nose, frowning deeply as his thoughts became more sober. It was only half eleven; too early for a drink, even if even thinking about the Doctor made his fingers itch for the bottle. He groaned. "Can you imagine trying to explain it to Jacks? 'Oh no, sweetheart, a ship that could be anywhere in time or space is perfectly fine for raising the grand babies in. I'm sure they'll have a decent pushchair that's fit for running from the angry alien hordes.' That'll be a laugh." Pete snorted humorlessly, picturing it with something akin to horror writ across his face. "I don't half fancy that conversation, I don't. She'd have my hide, then go after the Doctor for that one. Larks about with not a thought that what happens today will have a direct effect on the future." He heaved a sigh. "Suppose I'll get on with it, call Rose and hope she can manage to convince him to come in."

Rose was enjoying having a lie-in when her mobile rang. Blindly fumbling around the top of her nightstand, she smiled at the sleepy grumble from the other side of the bed. "Hello?" she answered drowsily, not even checking the screen to see who it was. She listened, then groaned, pushing her hair out of her face. "Yeah. Can do. Give us an hour."

Disconnecting the line, she huffed, sitting up. The Doctor was still buried under the duvet, only a leg poking out over the edge of the mattress. She got up and headed to the loo, knowing that her getting out of bed was the easiest way to rouse him from the bed. It was amusing, considering all the teasing
he'd given her about wasting a third of her life sleeping, even as short a time ago as last week. Since they'd taken their relationship to a whole new level, that had all changed. Not that there'd been much sleep involved, she thought to herself with satisfaction as she turned on the shower.

It had been pretty much seven days of bliss since they'd gotten back from Hackney and talked a bit. They'd not even left the flat, living on ice lollies and takeaway while the delivery boy with the food was the only other person either of them saw. Except for the call from Pete, they'd probably not have stirred from their cozy lair for a few days yet. Rose counted it a small miracle she'd managed to convince her mother not to pop in for a visit without having to tell her why exactly. Though, from the teasing hints and comments, Jackie had sussed the reason already. Mums were clever that way, and hers wasn't easy to fool.

Coffee would work better to wake her, but for now the shower would have to do. Hopefully they'd have time to grab a cup at the cafe down the street before they went into Torchwood. The warm water and curls of steam were invigorating, chasing away the last vestiges of sleep almost as well as the caffeine would've done. She was in the middle of rinsing the shampoo from her hair when a pair of arms came around her waist as the Doctor slipped into the shower with her. He drew her back against his chest gently and pressed a kiss against her neck, making her squirm at the feeling of his morning stubble. "Doctor..." she gasped in surprise when she felt something that felt like a tongue against her skin. Was he licking her?

Feeling him grin against her, while his hands eagerly started to wander over her body, she reluctantly gathered her resolve and forced herself not to lean into his embrace any more than she already was. He was fully aroused, which made it all the more difficult to push him away. He'd been quick to lose most of his hesitancy in the bedroom, even if she still could sense him holding back slightly. Why he did and what his reasons were she didn't know, but knew that pushing him for an answer was likely to get him to clam up again.

"Can't... got to go into the Wharf this morning, both of us." He pulled back and Rose looked up at him. He had an unreadable expression, body tense as he cocked his head questioningly, his fringe dripping water in his eyes. "Why?" he asked, not even blinking the water away. His voice was even, almost too even. She hoped she wouldn't have work too hard to convince him. Pete had sounded pretty desperate on the phone, like he'd not have rung if he'd not had to. "Pete said Chambers wants to see you," she added, seeing him nod slowly in response. "Sounded like he had something to tell you." When he looked like he was going to automatically refuse, Rose added a "please, Doctor." He scowled at that, rolling his eyes in distaste as he reached around her to grab the bar of soap from the shelf. "Fine." With brusque efficiency he soaped up, ducking under the shower spray when Rose stepped back to apply the conditioner.

They dressed quickly, while he was still muttering something under his breath that she suspected was his native language. When she gave him an inquiring look, he just raised a brow and put on a disarming smile that disappeared back into a look of annoyance once he thought she wasn't looking. "Don't worry, later we can get back to what you had planned before I interrupted you with the bad news," she told him before reached out a hand for his as they left the building.

"Yeah, provided this isn't just a harbinger of doom, or Pete's got some new sadistic plan for me involving some silly little human ritual involving boredom, social niceties and shopping," he said sourly as they walked down the pavements hand in hand.

It wasn't a particularly long walk to One Canada Square from their building, hence why there were quite a few other Torchwood employees in the other flats. Most of them would already be on shift, or have gotten home from their overnight duties by this time.
Rose raised an eyebrow, somehow unsurprised at him. He'd been rather agreeable about going into Torchwood, hadn't even blinked when she buckled on the holster and had calmly handed her her jacket to put on so it wouldn't be so noticeable to the people on the streets. Of course, he'd also not bothered to shave or wear anything fancier than faded jeans and an unbuttoned oxford, in a rather passive aggressive show of rebellion. Not that she'd dressed in formal business attire herself, but he was pushing the limit. He'd not even tied his trainers. "Who knows, could be something interesting," she said, hoping to cheer him up.

"Right," he drawled out slowly. "In which case, Pete'll be putting a sitter on me to keep me away from it." He gave her a considering look, shrugging lightly. "Oh well. No rest for the wicked, they say. Back at it, eh?"

"C'mon, let's stop for a coffee. You'll be sorted and ready to face the day." Rose decided to ignore his snort of disbelief as they used the zebra crossing.

Sally Henderson knew exactly where to go looking when she'd not heard from nor seen her sister. Finding her under an umbrella at an outdoor café, latte and in hand, she sat down in the chair opposite. Picking idly at the plastic table cloth that covered the little table, Sally glanced across the street, where her sister was still attentively watching, before remarking, "If I didn't know any better I'd think you were stalking someone. Oh wait, you are, and right outside my own building to boot."

With no response other than a distracted 'shush', she sighed in frustration, rolling her eyes. "Gail, what is it about him that you can't let it go?"

Gail gave her an irritated look, sliding her sunglasses down enough to coolly regard her sister over them as she set down her latte. "You just don't get it, do you?"

"What's to get? The Holburn murder was solved, it wasn't him. He'd no involvement, and the interaction that day was coincidental. And the glasses aren't fooling anyone. You're still obviously a copper- haven't you noticed the vacant tables around you in an otherwise busy establishment?"

"You really don't get it at all, Sally! God, you work at Torchwood, for Christ's sake, defending the earth from that lot. Doesn't it bother you there's one of them who's all in cozy with the Tylers? He's capable of anything!" Gail snapped in frustrated anger, as she set her binoculars down beside her cup. It was obvious her stakeout was temporarily interrupted. "You say he's harmless, but I know otherwise. The Shoreditch Incident, for one thing, and the altercation last week. Beats three men for insulting his girl, and then walks away scot-free. Provocation or not, still. Now he's got that gadget that even he says could destroy everything, and you're not worried? Have you seen him when he's not putting on a show for whoever is watching?"

Sally groaned. "Gail, no one would've even known who or what he is if it wasn't for Ferguson. The UN has several thousand resident aliens registered worldwide, most of them are either in disguise or not in a position where anyone's going to notice. The few you've seen or are known of are rare. As for the human population on this planet, forget about those rare occasions like the Tzargas in Bulgaria, or the crash landing in the football pitch last year, remember when the stars were going out?"

Gail snorted, sipping at her latte. Setting it down on the enameled top, she gave her sister a sour look. "Don't tell me it wasn't just pollution in the atmosphere, the same pollution that's causing global
warming and added the extra tax on the petrol."

Sally chuckled humorlessly. She was violating so many protocols, it wasn't funny, but something had to be done. "Oh no, the conspiracy nutters in their garden sheds had it right the whole time. There were aliens involved on both sides of the matter. Two Terileptils with Torchwood's R&D department and Rose Tyler built a Dimension Cannon, all to get to a parallel world to summon help and warn the only one they thought could help. Him."

"Ssh," Gail hissed, suddenly alert.

Sally followed her sister's gaze and immediately wanted to groan. Just as she had dreaded, there was Rose Tyler and the Doctor, getting coffees like any normal person would. Rose was her usual confident self, while he was keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings. Not that Rose was being oblivious, but he was being obvious in his general distrust. Almost like he expected an ambush. As her luck would have it, he didn't fail to notice either of them, giving her a hard look when he recognized her and her companion.

"Be good," she said in an undertone to Gail, when Rose spotted them and headed over. It was impossible to miss the way Rose had to practically drag along behind her, or the tension as he clutched the cup she'd handed to him just moments before. There was already the start of a staring contest between him and her sister.

"Hi," Rose said cheerfully, looking at Gail curiously before giving Sally a concerned look. "Hope you're not in trouble."

"Nope," Sally said with an embarrassed smile, kicking her sister surreptitiously under the table. "Just catching up with my big sis."

"Oh, that's rich," Sally heard the Doctor mutter under his breath before Rose elbowed him blithely. Rose covered it with a hasty "Just heading into the Wharf" while she shot the Doctor a quick glare. "You on shift today?"

"Later, I am. Night duty roster has my name on it for the next week. I'll be heading back for a kip by the by," Sally said distractedly, eyeing her sister nervously. She wouldn't put it past Gail to start questioning him right there in the middle of the café's outdoor seating area. Fortunately, Rose seemed to catch the vibes, or they were sufficiently in a hurry to not linger past a few more hurried pleasantries.

Rose was almost glad for the run in with Sally and the DI. That was something she'd not expected. Sure, she vaguely remembered Sally previously mentioning a sister she went on holiday with occasionally (not that any of them actually went on many holidays that didn't involve dealing with some sort of incident involving the strange) but that it was Gail was a bit of a surprise. At least it had the Doctor distracted enough that he was friendly enough with Pete, if a bit distracted.

Pete met them in the lobby, wearing a troubled frown. "Just worked the arrangements to get Chambers safe passage to a secure and anonymous location, when he insisted on a meet," he explained, eyes flicking to look at the Doctor cautiously.

"Any idea what it's about?" Rose asked, while the Doctor seemed almost lost in thought. He was
looking anywhere but at them and she wondered if he knew more than he was saying.

Pete looked grim as he shook his head. "He wouldn't say."

Rose huffed, following along when Pete led them to one the same set of rooms where the police had tried questioning the Doctor just a week before. Cringing, she looked for any reaction from him, but if he even noticed, he was hiding it very well. She guessed the chances were pretty much evens on that one.

With a curt nod, Pete pointed to the interview room door. For a moment the Doctor hung back, hand on the knob. He swallowed thickly, before looking back at Rose with a raised brow. She gave him a thumbs up, silently wishing him luck. Rose waited until he gave her a reassuring half smile, telling her he wasn't anticipating anything, before she followed Pete to the observation room beyond.

She missed whatever had been exchanged for greetings, hearing only, "I'm not Torchwood," from the Doctor. "Really, I'm not. Blighters keep trying to get me to; won't leave me alone." He gave the mirrored glass separating the two rooms a meaningful look.

Rose tuned out the words being exchanged, focusing instead on watching the Doctor and Chambers. Both were watching each other carefully. Of course Chambers wouldn't trust Torchwood, wouldn't want anything to do with them. Saw them as the powers that be, bent on regulating the availability of tech. Then again, if you considered the confiscation of his sonic, the Doctor probably agreed with him on that point, even if he had grabbed the TD gun before anyone else got their hands on it.

"I trust you, Rose, Pete to some degree, and while I like most of them well enough, I trust no one else at that Torchwood," he'd said once. "Less nefarious than the lot back home or no, I wouldn't put it past one of that lot in R&D blow up the planet by accident, mucking about with something they shouldn't, even if the goal is ending world hunger. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, and you don't want to know how many worlds have died from an 'Oops'." He wasn't looking anymore reassured now than he was then. "Then work with us, make sure no one bollocks things up," she'd replied, pleading. "Teach us."

Instead of getting him intrigued with the chance to show off, he'd merely snorted in disgust. "No, thank you. Too many damn rules. Cramps my style, it does." And that was it, end of conversation. There was no changing his mind after that. That was the day he'd walked out of Torchwood and returned to Edgar's garage. That had been almost a month and a half ago; and here now he was, once again back in the middle of Torchwood business, thanks to Dougal Chambers.

Mind whirling with the possibility of all the implications, he turned slowly to face Dougal Chambers. Bryn had refused to say where he'd obtained the TD Gun -- much less when- and as tight lipped as he was, he doubted the old man knew any more than he did. Well, could always be surprised, but that would be a real shocker. Most like this wouldn't be much beyond a gambit for more information on the weapon's origins. But who knew. Anything could come out of this. Torchwood had obviously been taking good care of him, since the man was better fed and clothed since he'd seen him last. It was also the same room, same table with two hard chairs as he'd been in a week before. Funny how he'd not been paying attention when they were following Pete through the corridors.
"Blimey, the place must be agreeing with you," he remarked casually in place of a normal greeting, flicking his eyes toward the mirrored glass. He'd lay stakes on this whole exchange being monitored. For that reason, he'd not be getting too comfortable in here.

Dougal Chambers eyed him carefully, a mocking smile accompanying his words. "And here you are, jumping right to attention at Torchwood's beck and call, despite the things that've been whispered these last two months in the back alleys and side streets where the general population dare not go."

Sighing, he ran a hand through his hair, leaning back against the door. Not like he'd really had much choice on coming here, but damned if he'd turn into a bloody social butterfly for this lot. "I'm not bloody Torchwood," he said carefully, tired of having to repeat those words. He gave Chambers a challenging look, daring him to argue. "They might think they've got me, but I'll be the judge of that. Some things were just a bit... convenient at the time."

"So you say, but they still let you take my device and walk away," Chambers replied evenly, almost baiting in his words and tone as he leaned forward. The man was watching him with an almost scientific curiosity. "That's a lot of freedom for one such as you."

"Call it as you like, but it's not like they've much of a choice. I'm a bit unstoppable, once I've set my mind to something." He tipped his head back, staring down his nose at Chambers. "So what's this, then? Lousy excuse for a meet and greet, innit? Could've found somewhere where the walls has got fewer eyes and ears. Wouldn't be half so much of a bother if we'd done it by the post."

There was a tense moment while Chambers was carefully choosing his words while the Doctor watched him close. Barmy or not, the man couldn't think he'd a chance at getting the Temporal Distortion Gun back, could he? Finally, the old man spoke.

"There's rumors on the streets, amongst members of certain clandestine communities," Chambers said softly, keeping each word hushed and distinct, but low enough so any recording equipment embedded in the walls would have difficulty picking it up. "There's some, as you know, who make their trade in the buying and selling of certain," he paused, waving a hand vaguely. He continued only when the Doctor nodded his understanding, "Certain forbidden things."

The Doctor made a face, all too aware. Bryn Holburn was the least of them, with his backdoor trade in Hyper-Vodka. Miles had been rumored to sell a few bits and bobs of overpriced extraterrestrial junk. "Tell me something I don't know," he said wryly, smirking at the mirrored glass. Cheap shot or not, Torchwood missed most of what went on in some of the less salubrious quarters. "'S not exactly a secret. Only ones who's not cottoned on so far is the ones who's job it is to stop all that. Not much attention when its on the quiet and it's mostly harmless shite."

Chambers gave him a tight grin, eyes lighting in satisfaction. Perhaps he did know more. "But lately, there's been a stirring in those low places. Traders from afar suddenly packing up and leaving, rumors of objects in secure locations suddenly disappearing, people getting killed in their place of business."

Crossing his arms over his chest, the Doctor stifled the urge to sigh. "You know, I like a bit of cryptic convo as much as the next bloke, I kid you not, but could you put that into plainer terms, mate? I've only got the one life, and I'd bloody well not as like to spend the half of it nattering on with the likes of you."

"The weapon -- you've got it?"

The Doctor nodded tersely, wondering what Chambers was getting at. He was sure there was a point to this, but he was getting rather impatient waiting for it.
"Is it secured?"

Raising a brow, he let out a humorless chuckle at the man's audacity. "Not like you've the right to be asking, but yeah, it is. Why?"

Chambers leaned forward in his seat, pointing a finger for emphasis. "It wasn't purely for philosophical reasons that I was attacked. Those others -- they came looking, just as you did. But you, you immediately knew what it was. I saw you check to see if it was armed. It took months for me to sort out that much. Months, when the stars were going out and the populace was being spoonfed lies by the media and every government outlet around the world."

Waving that away, the Doctor shrugged. "I'd sussed that one just fine, thank you. Bit of a genius, me," he replied sarcastically. He'd gathered from the damage to the weapon and the fact it was unlikely anyone in this universe knew it's full potential that it had been here long before the damage to Bryn's warehouse had happened. "Though, I'll give you credit. Had me a tad confused at first. Didn't see Bryn as being one to get that far into those things. Mayhaps, with what happened to his brother, he'll have learned his lesson and keep to the more conventional side of things, yeah?"

Chambers glared, eyes narrowing in anger at the gibe. "Show some respect," he growled. "I know what you are."

The Doctor bit his cheek to keep from laughing at that. Silly human, if he only knew. "Right, sorry about that. I tend to be a bit rude," he said, pretending to be chastened before suddenly straightening and approaching the table. Putting his hands on the surface, he leaned over and said with a forced casual tone, "Though, after a millennium or so of seeing the same mistakes over and over again and seeing worlds destroyed from people mucking about with things they don't understand, it tends to get me a bit upset when someone tries it again."

He grinned in cold satisfaction when Chambers flinched at the look in his eyes. Time to stop gadding about and get down to it. "Now," he continued in a low voice that anyone more than a foot away wouldn't have heard, "just tell me where it came from. Who brought it here?"

Chambers shook his head slowly, eyes never looking away from the Doctor's. "Bryn had said it came with a lot of goods, found buried in the rubble in Shoreditch. There's been things said of artifacts that suddenly turned up during those dark times. Including rumors of another device, similar enough to the one you have to call them twins."

Pulling back in surprise and horror, he stared at the old man. If he'd had any certainty to the strength of his remaining abilities, he'd have been tempted to use a more direct method of discerning the truth of that. Trying to sound calm and hoping his voice didn't squeak as much as it did to his own ears, he managed a "What?!"

Slowly sinking into the chair opposite Chambers, he blinked at this revelation. Dalek Caan had made it into and out of the time lock, could something else...? No, couldn't be that, it was impossible. If it was in the rubble, then it was tied to Ferguson and the Great Old Ones. Could've fallen through with them, or one of the innumerable rifts that had opened up when the walls between worlds were falling. Or even when the Cybermen punched a hole into the Void long before. Who knew what was lost in the void. He already knew there'd been atleast one prison ship with Daleks. He'd have to go scrounge up a pair of 3D glasses and check for Void stuff. A few tweaks to one of the Torchwood scanners or better yet, getting his damn sonic back and...

He barely came back from his reverie in time to catch the rest of what Chambers said.

"There's also talk of a bounty on your head. Interest from those whose studies tend toward the
biological sciences, versus the mechanical leanings of my own interests. You'd do well to have a
care, since even I can see the stories are true," the man finished, before he pushed his chair back and
stood. With a nod of silent farewell, he tapped lightly at the door signalling the end of the meeting.

Barely noticing when Chambers left the room with an escort of two Torchwood agents, the Doctor
stayed. Sitting there with his head down and thinking over the whole conversation, he was dimly
aware when Pete and Rose entered the room. Neither of them pressed him for any answers, but they
must've heard most of the last part. When he glanced up, both were watching him grimly but no one
spoke, which was good. He couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't sound like a madman's
ravings or a blatant lie.
Forcing himself to focus on his surroundings, he looked up. Both Pete and Rose were watching him with open concern. Slipping a carefree smile on his face to hide his own thoughts was as familiar as two hearts and the Time Vortex had once been. Knowing that too much cheerfulness would trigger suspicion, especially where they'd have heard most if not all of that conversation, he pulled on a veneer of arrogance over his uncertainties. Pretending to have a handle on things was old hat, too.

"What is it with all the nutters in this universe? Blimey, what a barmpot," he said, rolling his eyes, knowing that both Pete and Rose would have done the maths enough to come up with similar conclusions. "Still, wouldn't hurt to run a scan for any energy signatures that shouldn't be popping up."

Giving him a look that communicated far more than words could've, Pete nodded before he left the room. It gave them some privacy, he supposed. Privacy for Rose to start asking questions. She, however, was still watching him with a bit of uncertainty. "What did he mean, Doctor. Is there another one of those gizmos out there somewhere?"

He raised an eyebrow, shrugging, thoughts he was still successfully keeping hidden whirling a thousand miles an hour. "Meh, the likelihood is slim to none, but who knows."

"So, there could be another Temporal Distortion gun that some mad scientist is experimenting with or it's locked away in some collector's basement?"

*If the universe could only be that kind, he thought. Most like it was the oh, so similar and oh, deadly De-Mat gun, with his shite luck. Checking for a cluster of mysterious disappearances might be a start. Good project for that barmy DI, keep her a bit distracted. Mayhaps she'd run along and investigate that, instead of stalking him for funsies. "Rose, d'you really put that much credence in the words of a man who wanted to undo the fabric of reality just to rewrite the world the way he wanted?"

"There's those what's done crazier things than that," she said pointedly, squinting at him. "And the rest, those people out to get you and all that?"

He let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. *Bloody hell, she had to pick up on that part, didn't she?* Putting on a facade of nonchalance, he bobbed his head uncertainly. "No surprise when you stop to think about it, is it? Nothing we'd not heard about already. Still, rather refreshing when it's only a few people on one ickle little tiny planet that's got it in for me, versus half the Universe. Rather relaxing, I might add."

Looking more worried than before, Rose peered at him, scrutinizing his face for answers. "You're not just slagging me off with some easy answer while you're really panicking, are you?"

Sighing in frustration, he put on an expression of earnest determination. "Really, I'm not," he lied, thinking that if she really knew what he was thinking she'd be more than worried and upset. Things were starting to look like he might have to do something he really didn't want to. But then, what else could he have expected? His life had always been about making the hard choices that no one else could. "Believe me, I've lived through far worse than this before. And I've got you, haven't I? Better with two?"
Blimey, with what he was thinking... he could tell Pete, get some extra help there, but no. It would be best to have their reactions as authentic as possible if the worst case scenario came up. If there was something to Chambers' warnings, best to do something about it from where no one would expect it. It wouldn't half kill him to do it, but still, if she was safe, that's all that really mattered. If there was a credible threat, anyone looking for him would be going after her and her family. He'd erased traces of himself from the internet before, back in Universe Prime. Doing the same with all the records here, with far less history, would be a cinch. People disappeared under new identities all the time, disappearing with none should be easier. And the sham wouldn't be for long, just enough to make people forget so they'd stop looking. Bollocks. He almost spoke up, then. Almost told her everything he feared right then and there, but managed to stop himself. No, let him get the plans in motion first before he went and spilled the beans on just a possible outcome. No sense getting her all het up over something that might not happen.

Rose smiled, seemingly fooled. "You know it. Let's get out of here, yeah?"

"Best thing I've heard all day," he agreed, glad he'd kept schtum. If he was lucky, things wouldn't progress that far.

They were about to leave the room when Pete returned, looking resolute and determined. He gave Rose a tight smile. "Can I borrow him for a moment?" Turning back to the Doctor, he gave him one of those looks he was really starting to dread.

Inwardly groaning, he flashed a smile at Rose. "Be along in a mo'," he said, before cheekily adding in a sotto voice, "Don't look now, I'm about to get grilled."

"Play nice, you two," Rose warned before walking away. "I had meant to ask Jason something before we left."

He watched her go, distracted, as he wondered what she was going to ask Jason on Comms about. Pete cleared his throat, jerking his head toward the room behind the Doctor. "Shall we?"

Sighing, he stepped back reluctantly. "If we must."

It was a tense moment in that claustrophobic and drab room while Pete carefully regarded him, looking slightly bemused. "You know, you're the last one I expected to go for the whole casual look."

A raised chin and a guarded look as he wondered the subtext of this conversation was the only external reaction he let show, besides his flat admission of, "People change."

"You always seemed so... unchangeable, despite what Rose and Jackie said about you before," Pete remarked lightly.

That was amusing, to say the least. "Whole new world, innit?"

Pete smiled at that, putting his hands in his pockets in a relaxed manner. "Gonna go back to the usual ensemble at some point? Suit and all?"

"Never said there was anything usual about me," he said, crossing his arms over his chest and cocking his head to the side, staring steadily at the man in front of him. He didn't say one way or the other, since he wasn't certain on that question either. Suits just didn't feel like him anymore. Too hard to keep clean at the garage and the dry cleaning bill could've kept a small country afloat for a year or two. "Considering I knew you when you were dead, Pete Tyler, you fussing over my sartorial choices and all my other decisions is a bit... daft, to say the least."
Pete sighed, looking slightly worn. "You know, I never wanted us to be at odds like this."

"You're the one who thought he could lord it over the last Lord of Time," he retorted dryly, almost managing to sound amused at the folly of it.

"I just want you safe, and the thing is, you're not and you aren't what you were. Not any more," Pete replied, eyes unwavering. Bold man, that. Had to give him credit, 'cos Rassilon, the man had a set of brass ones. Big brass ones. Humans, never could fault them on their temerity and courage. Most of the time, he even admired it. Just not when they were trying to force their own ideas on him.

"I'm still me," he snapped. "I'm still Him, just a few minor biological changes and that's it, just some lousy bleeding biology. Look, I've been good enough to play along with this whole charade for over a month. It all stops today." Something in his eyes must've convinced Pete there was no winning this one, because he nodded shortly in acceptance. Rocking back on his heels slightly, he looked serious but showed no sign of further objections. The Doctor was wary, even as he lowered his arms to take a more relaxed posture.

"And the threats?" Pete asked softly. "What're you going to do to keep Rose safe, can you even do that?"

If the man was going to be candid in his concerns, the least he could do was be just as honest. "As best I can."

Pete pressed further. "Can you give her a normal life?"

That was extremely amusing; naive, too. He had to laugh. "When did you ever get the idea by any of your world's parameters of normal that I was ever anything of the like? You're a funny man," he said, clapping the man on the shoulder with a grin. "If the ol' Torchwood gig doesn't pan out for ya, you can always try for a career in comedy."

Pete wasn't giving over, though. "Doctor," he said, looking a bit stern.

"Oh, fine, have it your way," he sighed, sarcastically putting up a hand in imitation of the boy scouts oath. "I pledge to bring her around for Christmas and a certain set number of those foolish yearly occasions you lot take for an excuse to make yourselves miserable with an overdose of domestics," he grumbled in annoyance and pulled away. He heaved a put upon sigh. "I endured one Christmas with Jackie, I suppose I can live through another. Still, I've got a warning just under five months ahead, this time. Plenty of time to mentally prepare myself, as such. Last go around, I didn't."

Pete smiled in amusement. "Right, I'll tell her you said that, too." Sobering, he barely paused enough to give the Doctor time to even come up with a suitable reaction for his next question. "As for family, I won't pretend to know all the mechanics of a biological whatsit, but... children?"

"Oh yes, there it was: the million quid question. Rubbing his neck uneasily as he thought of an answer, he wondered about that himself. "Dunno, never thought about it, really," he said slowly, musingly, terrified of the answer.

Pete looked surprised for a moment before he recovered his own composure. "Surely you've got some sort of plans. It's what people do when they plan to live their lives together."

"Is it?" He raised a questioning eyebrow. "That's more you lot's style, procreating like rabbits, spreading your genetics across the stars. You humans even last to the very end of it all, long after the earth is dust and rocks floating about in space, so I have to give you that one."

"And you?"
"Why bother considering something that's probably impossible by all likelihood?" he replied softly, looking away. One thing Rose hadn't even asked, and what he'd tried to avoid thinking about. With his own mishmash of genetics -- Time Lords hadn't been the most fertile bunch after Pythia, and with that little bit of humanity on thrown in on top.... all he could think of were mules and ligers and the like.

Pete gave him a sympathetic look, asking softly, "Does Rose know?"

Eyes snapping back, he glared, clenching his fists defensively. Sod all if the man didn't know exactly where to poke and how far to push until he got what he wanted out of him. Once upon a time, he'd been on the other end, being the cause instead of always being the effected. "It's not exactly been a topic as of late," he snorted, tone sharp and patience evaporating by the millisecond. Damn him. Just, damn him. "We only just..." Cursing his sudden tendency for blushing, he kept going, annoyed by the whole conversation and his own reactions to it. "'S not like we were planning to go popping out a whole litter of Time Tots, starting next week. But don't worry, when I get out of here, I'll ask Rose how she feels about establishing a whole new species from scratch. Put that on my list of topics for never, no how, and not happening. Now stop nosing around, Pete."

He turned to push past the man, when Pete caught his arm. Glancing down at the offending hand, he was about to make a sarcastic remark when Pete pulled the sonic out of his jacket pocket. That was an unexpected surprise. When he reached for it, Pete held on to it tightly, frowning. "Pete--"

"No, you listen," Pete interrupted, lips tightening. "God knows I'm an idiot for even considering this, courting disaster as I am by giving this back to you, but if what Chambers said and all the death threats ARE credible, what then? What will you do?"

He straightened, letting a breath out through his nose slowly as he pulled himself to his full height, eyes hard. Forcing a humorless grin, he kept his response measured. "Whatever I have to, Pete. You know that much."

Pete studied him for a moment before releasing the sonic screwdriver. Whatever he'd been looking for, whatever level of sincerity he'd sought, he was obviously satisfied enough or clever enough to let it all go. As he slipped it into his back pocket of his jeans, the Doctor gave him a silent look of gratitude before he finally pushed past him.

The corridor was empty, but when he stepped into the milieu of bustling Torchwood agents, delivery boys with parcels and the assorted boffins from R&D who'd escaped their underground labs, he didn't see Rose at first. It was a relief when his searching eyes finally spotted her bright blonde hair. Inwardly relaxing a fraction, he wandered over to one of the columns just beyond the security checkpoint, affecting a casual pose as he leaned there waiting. If push came to shove, he'd do what he had to, but he couldn't help but hope for a smidgen of mercy from the cruelty of reality.

As for him actually thinking through contingency plans -- well, the utter rubbishness of that aside, he didn't exactly have a choice, now did he? Usually he was all for going by the seat of his pants, so much more fun that way. But what had been fun before.... Had to adapt now, no cheating death, or jumping in the TARDIS to escape when things went all squiffy. Inevitably things would go a bit wonky at some point, possibly soon; such was life. And with no do overs, no Matrix to upload his memories and knowledge into... Cor, that was a thought. Time to consider the afterlife, or even the possibility of one. He'd met many who'd claimed to be gods, but none he could actually believe in. Bit hard, when their followers tended to go about persecuting all those that didn't believe, in their own mistaken belief that lack of such belief automatically made the bearer of such skepticism wrong. And oh the travesty, add one ickle, tiddly meta-crisis and he was suddenly contemplating religion.
and credulity. How the mighty had fallen and wasn't that just wizard.

But, the walk back to their flat was relatively normal, a constant flow of light, amiable banter between them as they meandered through the crowds on the busy London streets. Both of them kept an eye out for trouble, but most people were too busy going about their business to really even notice them. He was doing his best to not seem worried, while Rose was doing the same. When he noticed DI Evans following them, he felt magnanimous enough to wave cheerily at her.

"Baiting the coppers?" Rose asked him, shaking her head, elbowing him. "Bit cheeky, that."

"It's her own fault for getting her knickers in a twist. Here I am, just walking down a public street, minding my own business, not bothering anyone. If she's gonna be following us, the least I can do is say hello." He reached for her hand, giving her a grin as he kept a wary eye on their surroundings.

"Right, and there's you wondering why she's so interested in everything we do."

"It's not like she even wandered too far from the coffee shop, is it? She's not exactly put herself to too much trouble, and it's better than the blokes from the gossip rags."

"True. Plus, if anything does happen, she'll be a help," Rose added. "Like our own personal one woman security detail."

"Yeah, but who does she think she's protecting -- us or them," he muttered under his breath, nodding at the passersby and narrowing his eyes as he watched the police officer. Of course she'd have the bollocks to boldly settle herself in plain view of their building's entrance at that bloody cafe. Cheeky woman, that DI. Nothing but determined.

Later, he would wonder about that question again. It had all been going so well; no beyond that, it had been so bloody brilliant. And then it all went wrong. Maybe it was a long forgotten biological imperative from the dark times, combined with the sudden loss of control he'd come to associate with that little bit of human DNA; or perhaps it was just another quirk of the metacrisis come to bear. Either way, he was shaken to the core. Everything was telling him to run, to flee; while at the same time he couldn't. This time he'd gone too far, too fast, and he didn't know what to do, other than the obvious. Get help, and do it directly. Was calling 999 out of the question or no? He didn't know; wasn't quite sure if this was well beyond the purview of these barbaric, ignorant 21st century medical professionals.

It had been a lovely evening in, it truly had; just the two of them, throwing together a hasty meal of bangers and mash for tea, some cuddling on the sofa in front of the telly, which inevitably led to snogging. That, in turn, led to a sudden disappearance of clothes and an extreme state of nudity. Nudity, right there in the lounge, on the sofa, in front of EastEnders being shown onscreen. It was just fantastic.

Despite their earlier haste to get disrobed, Rose had given him a teasing look with her tongue between her teeth, before setting to driving him mad with the aforementioned tongue. And teeth! Blimey, there were teeth. All combining for an occasion he'd not like to forget, even if it hadn't....

Well, she'd held him down, and he'd been oh so willing to stay there all night long, for an eternity even, just as long as she continued what she was doing and let him return the favor after. Something he'd fully planned to do, but Rose had other ideas. When he knew he couldn't handle another
moment more of her incessant teasing, he'd grabbed her hips and adroitly flipped them. Unfortunately, they'd landed on the area run in front of the sofa, but no worries there; half the cushions were on the floor already, so they had a soft landing. A soft landing that precipitously resulted in him landing right between those lovely thighs, right where he'd intended. Before he could pay back the debt in kind, Rose had wrapped her legs around him, trapping him firmly and pulling him down to meet her fully.

"Now," she'd demanded in a voice that brooked no debate. And who was he to deny that brilliant girl anything? That was when he found out he wasn't in anymore control than before, not even with her under him and gasping his name with every thrust. Maybe it was the wet heat surrounding him, the way her hips rolled to meet his, or maybe it was when she turned to where his head was buried in her hair and licked him. Licked his ear, and snapped what little control he had left.

She licked his ear, and everything went wild after that. He certainly didn't notice his right hand, the one he'd once lost on a spaceship over a London in a different universe, pull away from where he held her hip. Pulled away and brushed her temples, just as his orgasm hit. The sudden mental connection that flared up barely even caught his attention, since he was then trying to remember how to breathe. Air, air was good. Air was brilliant. Muscle control was really wonky at the mo' and oh, my giddy aunt, Rose was unconscious. Thoroughly and completely, unconscious.

Which brought him to now, where he was crouched beside her on the floor, frantically trying to wake her and getting no result, other than a growing panic. Rassilon's garters, there was a reason they'd never fraternized with other species like this. Ye gods and the little fishes, what had he done? Without permission, and if he'd hurt her....

"Rose?"

No response. Breathing was easy, if a bit slow. Heart rate was slightly elevated, but steady.

"Rose!"

He couldn't find his sonic at first, but finally remembered it was in the pocket of his jeans. Then once he did have it and scanned her, it didn't tell him anything he didn't already know. It didn't even tell him if there was any damage to her mind, though he knew it couldn't be anything but abnormal, with the brain wave patterns that were on the readouts. Hellfire and damnation.

After a few minutes, she started coming around, hands reaching up to hold her head with a grimace of pain. Her face was screwed up in pain and she didn't even try opening her eyes as she mumbled, "My head--"

"Oh, thank my stars, you're alright," he breathed out, dropping to his knees beside her.

"It hurts," she complained again. "Why? What happened?"

"Don't worry, you'll be fine, love," he murmured as he picked her up gently, hoping it wasn't untrue. Settling her into their bed, he smoothed the blanket over her; she was already starting to fall asleep.

"Don't go." Her voice was hoarse.

"I won't. I'll be right here." He swallowed, pulling away once she drifted off again. Remembering how freaked out she'd been about the TARDIS being in her head, he didn't even want to think about how she'd react to this.

Shakily standing, he pulled at his hair while trying what the hell to do. Call emergency? The police? Jackie? Oh hell no. Would she even remember? No, he had to tell her, somehow. But how was he
supposed to explain this to anyone, much less her? Forget the dangers from the rest of the world, mad scientists and xenophobic loonies; the worst threat was here, in this flat with her. It always had been.
Jackie didn't know what to think when her mobile rang. All she knew was, at this hour and with that name popping up on the caller ID, it was probably a disaster in the making, or near enough. Here it was, half ten, she'd just gotten comfortably settled in bed with the telly on, and that bloody lunatic was calling at this hour. Typical, that.

"Doctor, for someone who calls himself a lord of bloody Time, you've got no sense of it," she hissed, glancing over to see if Pete had awakened.

Fortunately, no, but when the muppet on the other end of the line started babbling away at full volume, she grudgingly got out of bed and moved away so she wouldn't bother her husband. That's when she finally realized what the Doctor was saying, and all thoughts of letting Pete remain undisturbed vanished. Already rushing around, first grabbing her dressing gown, then hunting for tracksuit bottoms to pull on under her nightie, she yelled, "Pete! Car, now. Tell Mabel she'll have to keep an ear out for Tony waking up."

"The hell--" Pete mumbled, bleary eyed and still half asleep. "Did the Comms hub call?"

Jackie was already halfway out the door, trying with little success to stuff her feet into trainers while running. "Forget your damned Torchwood, something's wrong with Rose!"

Pete was almost fully alert, if still in a bit of a quandary, by the time they got to the garage, jumping in the Mercedes and throwing it into reverse, almost clipping the bottom of the still-rising garage door on the way out, before he even thought to look for some clarification. "Where are they? Hackney or-"

"Wapping," Jackie supplied, reaching into the pocket of her dressing gown for her mobile. She kept dialing, worried. "Oh God, Pete, she's not answering."

"Did he say what was going on?"

"I don't know! He was nattering away all shouty like, couldn't understand half of what he was saying." She was still trying to reach her daughter by phone, muttering under her breath.

"You mean I'm in a car, in my pants, criminally speeding in the middle of the damned night, and for all you know he could be calling because he's out of jam and Rose won't let him go to the shop to buy more?" Pete was incredulous, and sounding rather upset. "Call him back, Jacks."

"I'm trying, he's not bloody answering his either!" she snapped back, voice sharp with worry. "I knew we shouldn't have let them move out together on their own so soon." She blinked then, just finally noticing that Pete hadn't even taken the time to pull on trousers and she'd not even bothered with putting her hair up. Touching her face, she briefly hoped no one would notice her, gadding about in her night cream. The paps would have a field day with this if they knew. If this turned out to be a false alarm, she'd bloody well kill that skinny half alien.

"You let her run around the other universe with him in that bloody ship of his," Pete pointed out, wondering if he should call in a team for backup.

"It's not like I could bloody well stop her," she returned. But no, she didn't think she'd ever heard him sound quite that upset. Not even the other him, back on that manky ship with those murdering
Pepperpots or when this him was all depressed and gloomy after the other him had first left them here. No, this had to be something big, something majorly wrong. But what could've happened, she wondered as she tried remembering what he'd actually said. "Not even when he'd accidentally brought her back a year late, or when he sent her back home to me, thinking he was going to die. He always did keep that promise, so if he's that upset..."

She didn't finish her thoughts out loud, but Pete caught the gist of it. He reached a hand across the seat to squeeze her hand, suddenly less annoyed and more concerned. Looking over at him, she whispered, eyes distant with fear and worry, "All really I caught was the words 'she wouldn't wake up' and 'it's all my fault', Pete. What could have happened to them? Someone had to have done this, but who could've hurt them?"

"Dunno, love," Pete sighed, wondering the same himself.

When they got to the building, the doorman opened the door mutely, tactfully ignoring the way Pete had left the car haphazardly parked, with one front tyre on the kerb. The lift was agonizingly slow in the light of their anxieties, the building almost surreal in its normal quiet and calm. Even the muted lighting and tasteful decor was somehow made ominous by the horrors they imagined. But no, not a peep from the flat, not even when Jackie used her own set of keys to unlock the door.

Pete hung back, mobile at his ear as he called Jake and his team and put the med team on alert to be on standby for immediate transport, if necessary. It wouldn't hurt to be prepared, whatever was going on. Hopefully, it would turn out to be nothing.

A light was on in the kitchenette, but the rest of the flat was dark, other than the glow from the clock on the little shelf above the telly, and the telltale light coming from down the little hallway to the bedrooms. She barely noticed the discarded clothes and scattered cushions on the floor of the lounge area, focused instead on finding Rose and that daft alien. The door to Rose's bedroom was open, leaving the view of her daughter's unconscious form laid out on the bed, hastily wrapped in the duvet.

"Rose!"

Not a scratch was on her as she lay pale and still, hair spread about her head in a golden halo, Rose didn't stir in the least when Jackie sat on the bed and cradled her head. It was obvious Rose wasn't wearing a stitch of clothes under the blanket, but that was the least of Jackie's concerns while she tried waking her, getting more frantic by the moment and seeing no obvious explanation for her condition. Eyes only for her daughter, Jackie barely noticed the room's other occupant until he stopped pacing and began babbling. She'd actually managed to forget him, in the shock of it all.

When Rose's breathing changed again, settling deeper and signalling her consciousness was sinking lower within, the panic returned with a vengeance. "Rose?" he called softly, kneeling down beside the bed to shake her gently. Louder, when she didn't respond. Guilt and terror alike came crashing in, as he tried thinking what he should do. "Rose, please, please wake up. I'm sorry, I- I didn't mean to.

He should've known it was a bad idea, that it was too dangerous when he wasn't sure of his own control. Yeah, he'd given up hope on any remaining telepathic abilities, but he should've damn well
known things would be all muddled. The old and the new, all jumbled together in a mess of human hormones and ancient, half forgotten instincts from his own people that had constantly collided with each other since his creation. Should've known it was dangerous, since what had his other self said on that beach? Forget too dangerous to be alone. Try too dangerous to be around anyone else, either. He'd done it without thinking and now.... Rose.

Him, always jumping in without considering the consequences. Always. What if there was a remnant of Bad Wolf left inside her? There was that message on Shen Shan....

"Please, love, wake up. Please."

Crying like an adolescent of ninety wasn't going to help, though buggered if he knew what would. If his TARDIS was ready to go, the infirmary would've helped, or barring that, there were hospitals with entire wards dedicated to this sort of thing. If only, ha! For want of a nail, and all that.... He could try brushing against her mind with his, see if that would help, but he feared that would only make it worse. Plus he'd already done it once without permission, doing that a second time would be even more unforgivable. Emergency services didn't exactly have any experience with this sort of thing. Torchwood -- probably not, but how to even begin explaining this one? Still, he had to do something. Wait, her mother. She'd probably want Jackie. Oh. Jackie. Bollocks. She's going to kill me. Quite right, too.

"Rose? Love? It's me, wake up."

Clothes. Couldn't have anyone see her like this, all naked and all that. She'd be so upset if she knew. Where were her clothes? Oh. Scattered around the lounge and how the bloody hell do these go on? Qualification for an engineering degree, just figuring out that thing. And the snaps! And they said temporal mechanics was complicated, ha! Never tried sorting out 21st century women's undergarments, had they? He'd forgotten how difficult it was to put someone who was that deeply unconscious into a pair of jimjams and finding something else would require him to be further away from her than he liked. What if she woke up? She could be scared, or in pain. Blankets! That would work as a temporary measure, right? No one would be seeing her in full dishabille, then.

Now, call Jackie. Mobile? Where'd he leave his? He could use Rose's, but that wouldn't be right. Probably scare Jackie even more, too. Couldn't have that. Panic wouldn't do anyone any good. Keep calm, just remember that. Keep calm. Find her mobile number, it's in there somewhere; Rose added it just in case of emergencies. Press the send button- it's ringing through, so keep calm. Calm, cool, and collected. You can do this, Theta. One little convo on the mobile, get her mother here, and then you can get the richly deserved punishments after she's safe. Be calm, old boy. And it's not working! Bloody human hormones, can't suppress emotional responses enough to regain the necessary distance.

Sodding biological meta-crisis. Bloody flipping hell.

When he looked up from his nervous pacing, long after sorting out the mobile, (time had gone a bit wonky, there) he found he wasn't alone with Rose anymore. Jackie was there, finally. Rose would be far safer, now. He rushed to explain when she looked up, but words were currently failing. So much to say, so much to explain, and no idea how to start.

"What hap -- Oh, for the love of God, put some clothes on," she snapped, averting her eyes.

"Right. Uh, oh, er," he stammered, blushing furiously. Embarrassed at having forgotten something so basic as his own clothes, he moved to the dresser, rummaging for anything to hand. A movement in the doorway and he froze, holding a pair of pajama bottoms over himself. Seeing Pete standing there, he swallowed thickly. Yup, he was dead. Dead, buried, and tossed in a shallow grave off the side of
the A1, even if Pete looked more concerned than wrathful.

"What happened, Doctor?" Pete held his mobile in one hand, obviously having just gotten off the line.

Torchwood was probably on its way already. He supposed he would get used to being locked away in some secret prison underground eventually. They'd keep his precious girl safely away from the likes of him, wouldn't they? It was the least they could do. He just hoped they'd wait until he was dead before they started the dissections.

Sure enough, minutes later a crew of the Torchwood medics arrived, dressed in their standard protective gear. All gung-ho, like they were expecting to find an alien invasion with mass casualties. They were businesslike in the manner they adroitly shuttled Jackie away from the bed, hurriedly checking Rose over for injury before putting an oxygen mask on her as a precaution.

They had all the fancy medical scanners built from salvaged alien tech, all the anachronistic things he'd have confiscated if this had been the other Torchwood. Half this stuff he could've cobbled together from the bits and bobs in the flat over the garage; would've had far better in his own sickbay, if he'd still had it.

"Did someone hurt her? Give her drugs? Bad food from that dodgy place down the street? Did she fall down and hit her head..." Jackie started nattering in a flurry of concern and looming close, before Pete raised a hand to stop her rapid fire questions.

"Jackie, hush. Let him get a word in edgewise, so he can explain." Something passed between them, some sort of understanding before Pete turned, looking at him expectantly.

Rubbing the back of his neck and tugging at his ear lobe, he tried thinking of an explanation that wouldn't sound too salacious or embarrassing. As if that was even possible. This whole debacle was a nightmare, even if no damage was done and Rose miraculously forgave him. He glanced away.

Jackie had already breezed off, barging her way back through the medical team to get to Rose again. She seemed to have more luck than anyone else, because Rose had groaned and swatted at her mother.

"Rose?" He could hardly believe it. He'd been able to wake her once before, but then she'd slipped back into unconsciousness.

"She's coming around," one of them said. "We'll be taking her in for observation overnight, no matter. Run tests. Still, her pupils are equal and reactive, vital signs are good."

"No history of fainting, diabetes, or blood pressure problems," added another, seemingly familiar with Rose's medical history. Then again, they should be, if they were Torchwood. "Similar signs to a concussion, without any signs of trauma."

"Rose?" He wanted to go to her when he heard her blearily complain of a headache and being sleepy again, but held himself back, all else forgotten.

"Doctor, focus," Pete said, bringing his attention away from the bed again. "They said she's going to be fine."

"Um, we were -- then we, and I -- uh, and we did that, and then she -- and then I-" he stammered, wondering how exactly to say it. "Oh, it was an accident!"

Everyone looked up, startled at his admission, even the cluster of busy medics. So much suspicion and condemnation in those gazes, he thought. Speechless at all the eyes turned on him, he swallowed
nervously before Pete grabbed his arm and pulled him from the room.

"What happened?" Pete asked again, once they were in the next room. Coincidentally, it was the room he'd slept in alone, before he and Rose had embarked on this folly of indiscretions and raging hormones.

"Um--"

"Maybe it'll be easier for you to talk, without Jacks listening in, eh?" Pete gave him an understanding look, one of reassurance. One he didn't deserve. "Look, I think I can sort out you two were having a bit of fun," he said, looking both amused and slightly uncomfortable with the topic. "Not that anyone is really surprised if you were. Did it... get too rough?"

Why was Pete being so nice? He didn't deserve that. Not at all. Why wasn't there shouting and accusations?

"No," he said, shaking his head miserably, still a bit flummoxed. How on earth did you explain this sort of thing? "I accidentally..." another nervous swallow, "made full contact with her." Pete looked confused and even more bemused than before. Before the inevitable comment came, he jumped in to explain. "I'm a bit... psychic, telepathic... and oh, hell. Just lock me away now."

"No one's locking anyone away yet, Doctor. You said it was an accident."

"It was, but still--"

"Is Rose OK?"

"Should be, but--"

"Is this something normal for your people?" Pete interrupted again, pressing on with determination.

"Nothing about this is even close to normal," he retorted angrily.

"Then it'll be alright, then, won't it? Just need to be more be more careful in future."

"No, it won't." He glared, clenching his fists and turning away to start pacing again. "It doesn't make it any better, doesn't make it right. There's laws against this, laws! And I just broke them all. There were laws against all this, too. Fraternizing with lower species was forbidden. Too many dangers, they said. They were right, too."

"Is Rose going to be alright?" Asking the question again, Pete straightened, looking at him with concern.

"Should do, but it's not safe. I'm not safe." He honestly didn't know. If the connection had lasted longer without him in any sort of control, without restraint... It didn't even bear thinking about.

"Why not?"

"Because I did it without her permission," he admitted, voice heavy. He turned away, inwardly cursing himself. He found a shirt and pulled it on, not caring what it looked like. His battered leather jacket, sleeve still torn from the adventure in the sewer, had been casually tossed over the door to the closet.

Pete shook his head, obviously trying to catch up. The man seemed to have adjusted rather quickly to the concept, even if he was still ignorant of the full implications. Instead of showing fear, or rightful
concern, he cocked his head, crossing his arms over his chest and looking at him with interest. "What if you asked permission, next time?"

He turned to give Pete a disdainful look, before turning away again. Completely missed the entire point, hadn't he? Doing it once was bad enough, risking it a second time would be even worse. He stormed into the little bathroom, stopping when he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Already, human aging seemed to be catching up with him. Especially after the last twenty four hours, or even worse, the last seventy days since the Crucible.

"I know you," Pete said softly, coming up behind him, startling him in his proximity. "If you're going to run, at least wait until she's awake. Give her the chance to decide how to take this, whether to get angry, before you disappear. You owe her an explanation if you are going to do that, you know. You owe her that much."

Rose woke with a splitting headache, a slight ringing in her ears, and an annoying beeping sound nearby. "Doctor, stop playing with your mobile at this hour," she muttered, rolling away, considering getting up to find a paracetamol. It really was a doozy of a headache, settling in just behind her eyes and pounding between her ears. No pain besides the headache, so no chance that she'd gotten hurt on a now-forgotten mission, or a smash up on the motorway. Not that that was likely, with how rarely she even drove in the city. Had they gone for a night out at the pub? If it was a hangover, it must've been a hell of a bash, because she couldn't remember any sort of party that she'd been to in ages. Not since before the Dimension Canon. And why was he still messing about with his mobile?

"Oh, thank heavens, she's awake," was what alerted her to the fact that she wasn't at home, in her own bed. Where she should be.

"Mum? What the hell happened?" Sitting up and opening her eyes didn't improve things any, as the sterile white room with a heart rate monitor and several anxious looking people swam into focus. Her mum was leaning over her, she seemed to be in a hospital bed, and there was a nurse offering her a pill. "For your headache," the woman said, handing her a glass of water as well.

Accepting it gratefully, she swallowed and leaned back against the pillows, trying to remember what had happened. "What happened?" she asked again, after the room stopped spinning. She distractedly noticed someone had put her in a Johnnie, making her wonder where her clothes were.

"You gave us all a scare, Rose! You passed out in the flat, had to call the medics. That pillock flipped and called me, instead. Got your poor dad out of bed, even." Jackie was still there, looking relieved. "Do you remember anything?"

"Not really," she mumbled, pushing her hair out of her face with a groan.

"Are you sure about that, sweetheart?"

"Yes, mum, I am." Frustrated at the way her mother was hovering and no one telling her why, she tried focusing her memories a bit. She could remember watching telly on the sofa with the Doctor, just before things had gotten interesting. Last thing she remembered was him, arms bracing him over her, eyes dark with desire and love. That explained where her clothes went, she reckoned. There
were more embarrassing things that could happen, but she really couldn't think of anything at the moment. If something had gone wrong, he'd certainly have panicked, went into full fits of guilt and then... He could be anywhere by now, if he'd decided to run. "Where is he, mum?"

Jackie eyebrows rose. "Didn't take long for that to come up, did it?" she huffed, but didn't seem too upset. "Oh well, he's the best one to explain all that went on."

He'd promised not to, but still. Old habits died hard, especially for him, and he was a great one for making other people's decisions for them. Who knew what he'd do if something like this spooked him? "He didn't take off, did he?" she asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Don't worry, I'll go get him," Jackie said soothingly, seeing her worry and reaching out to pat her hand. "He was sitting out in the waiting area with Pete just a minute ago. Wouldn't stop fidgeting, so the nurse sent him out there to calm down."

When she heard the raised voices from down the corridor and her mum didn't come back immediately, she knew something was wrong. But she was surprised when he appeared in the doorway, pale with exhaustion and so hesitant that he merely shuffled forward to stand a few feet from the door when she called his name.

"Oh, Rose, thank stars you're alright. I'm so, so sorry," he began, eyes pleading. He hung back, as if he was afraid to touch her.

"It's alright. Whatever happened, I'm fine now," she said, reaching a hand out for him. "What did happen?"

"You don't remember?" His expression was a mix of hope and worry.

"Not really." She rolled her eyes, wondering when someone would finally answer her question and stop asking her if she could remember anything. "We were shagging and next thing I know, I'm waking up here and everyone asking me that."

He came closer, slumping down in the chair at her bedside. He wouldn't meet her eyes as he said all in a rush, "I forgot it could happen -- didn't mean to, I didn't. It just sorta happened. Kinda just... possibly stepped inside your mind for a second."

With that much rambling, he had to be even more upset than she'd even thought, so she reached over to put a hand over his mouth. "Deep breath in and... breathe, Doctor. Focus, that's it, breathe," she said patiently, feeling the headache start to ebb slightly. Now that she thought about it, it had started going away once he'd gotten there. She held her hand there to give him a moment to gather his wits. As a bonus, it meant he was quiet enough that she could think about everything.

He calmed down a bit, giving her a look of impatience and annoyance combined. Annoyance was
good. Annoyance meant he was back to being his usual slightly overbearing and arrogant self, instead of an emotional wreck blathering on. As cute as it normally was, right now it was more aggravating than anything. God forbid he should panic more. Once she was sure he'd not be off like a shot with more nearly incoherent babbling, she asked, "So how much did you see?" before she pulled her hand away to let him answer.

He licked his lips, looking slightly miffed and diffident. "Didn't see anything," he muttered, crossing his arms over his chest defensively. "Bit distracted, what with everything else going on."

Rose watched him, seeing the tips of his ears turning red. "Is it something you need?" she asked cautiously, not sure how to approach it without him panicking again. He could be so prickly at times, hard to read, and who knew what sex was like for aliens? Even with human DNA thrown in, he was still not from earth; he still wasn't human. For all she knew, holding hands was considered shagging on some planets. As for his long lost world, he'd never said much, just enough for her to know that intimacy was probably frowned on. He looked up, raw, uncertain and hesitant. She watched the internal debate play out across his features before he answered.

"I don't know, really." He sighed, looking away, scrubbing a hand across his face. "I just don't know anymore, with all that's changed. I didn't even think, it was just an automatic response. Lost control, and..."

"So, knocked your socks off and drove you wild, yeah? Brings a new meaning to mind blowing sex, doesn't it?" Rose teased, understanding the meaning behind what he wasn't saying. Her mum and Pete had probably had to almost tie him down to keep from running before this, but now if she could convince him things really were alright...

"Rose!" He looked scandalized, the mask that usually hid his feelings slipping enough to reveal some of the fear he'd mostly hidden behind anger. "You could've gotten hurt. Who knows what could've happened! Could've--"

"But it didn't, yeah? I'm fine." He looked ready to protest, but she repeated herself. "I'm fine. Now what time is it?"

"Half three," he said reluctantly.

"Any chance they'll let me go home before the doctor is in in the morning?" she asked hopefully.

He shook his head. "Probably not. You should rest, after all that going on tonight."

"Good, then hop up," she said, patting the bed beside her. When he opened his mouth for the inevitable protest, she fixed him with a steely glare. "How'm I supposed to get any rest when I'm all alone in this strange bed?"

She scooted over a bit, letting him enough room to settle beside her. Letting out a yawn, she settled herself against his chest, and sighing when he cautiously slipped an arm around her. Feeling how stiffly he held himself, she murmured, "I hate hospitals."

At that, he relaxed slightly, lips against her hair as he muttered, "Worst one yet, too. Not even a little shop, and there's Torchwood agents all over the place."

His complaint sounded more good natured than heartfelt, making her smile as she fell asleep. "I love you."
Pete waited until Owen was alone in his office, doing paperwork on the few other patients on Torchwood's medical wing. There weren't any life or death cases, just someone from R&D with moderate burns from a lab accident and a new recruit who'd dislocated their hip on a training run. All were sleeping at this late hour, something they all could envy. The medic looked up, tired and irritable at being called in at this hour.

"How is she?" Pete asked without preamble, knowing the doctor would know exactly who he was referring to.

"Full CT scan, blood tests, all showed no damage. No real medical explanation for the headache, other than what I've inferred from what you reported of the incident," Owen said, leaning back in his chair.

"And?"

"What else do you want?" Owen grumped, rubbing at his eyes. "I've got a pillow with my name on it. I was well acquainted until someone rang me up 'round midnight."

Pete stared at him until Owen looked slightly embarrassed. Pete didn't lean on formalities, but he'd only go so far. "Cut the snark. We're all out of sorts tonight, so don't go thinking yours is a special case. Just tell me how much of a danger she was in."

Owen looked up at the ceiling, not even bothering to look contrite. "Hypothetically or realistically?"

"Owen," Pete warned, dropping his hand to glower at the man.

"I'm being honest!" Owen protested. He reached behind him for a file folder and threw it on the desk. "That's it. The complete knowledge on the physiology and psychology of that man upstairs with your daughter."

Pete looked at the slim folder in apprehension, picking it up, to be more surprised at finding only a few pages of notes scrawled out in nearly illegible handwriting. "Your own notes and observations?"

Owen nodded tersely. "Most of which I wrote down from my own memory after having to put him back together in that bunker. I've never seen the likes of what's inside that one. You can say he's part human all you like, but I'll never believe it. Not on the inside."

Pete flipped through the file again, searching. "I thought you'd done blood tests, genetic workups."

Owen laughed bitterly, a wry smirk on his face. "All came back inconclusive, or the machine said the samples were contaminated. And this," he waved a hand about, meaning the night's events, "this just convinces me even more. We're supposed to be defending the earth from that lot, not bringing
'em home with us."

Pete's jaw tightened in anger, seeing things from a different perspective. He now knew why the Doctor had been so anxious to avoid this place, after things had seemingly started out so well. "He saved this world at least three times, once since he got here. If you can't show some gratitude," Pete sputtered, leaning over Owen threateningly.

Unfazed, Owen stared back levelly. "Breezing in and saving the day is whole different thing from staying," he said softly. "Even he knows that, and would tell you if you asked him."

Pete turned on his heel, fed up and feeling disgusted. Noticing the file still in his hand, he paused in the doorway. Without looking back, he asked over his shoulder, "Is this the only copy of the file?"

"Hardly enough there to call it that," came the reply.

"Good," Pete said with a curt nod. He strode away stiffly. This was one chunk of paperwork he had a feeling he'd be making disappear in future. And that future suddenly didn't seem too far off.
Chapter 32

Jackie went for a cuppa after ordering the Doctor to go in to see Rose. Honestly, she wondered how her daughter put up with him, all hot and cold like he was. One minute he'd be an arrogant little git, acting like he knew better than everyone else in creation, the next he wouldn't even dare say boo to a ghost. Bless him, he'd not even noticed his t-shirt was inside out and backwards. Poor daft fool. Mad as a hatter, but she didn't doubt he loved her Rose, not for a minute. Whether he'd do something daft was an entirely different concern. That, she wasn't sure she could trust him on.

Pete had disappeared, saying he had to talk to someone about something, but that was no never mind. When she came back, a nice cup of earl grey in hand, she looked in on the pair of them. Rose was sleeping comfortably, wrapped in the Doctor's arms, while he was lying there, still awake, and looking even more paranoid and uncomfortable than before. She turned away, hoping he wouldn't notice her, but he did. Finding a chair in the privacy of the waiting area, she sat down and waited, knowing it wouldn't be long before he arrived. It wasn't. He slipped into the room, looking like the ghost of Christmas past, all pale and half dead looking. "Stress'll kill you, ya know," she said helpfully, sipping at her tea with an arch look.

He plopped down in the chair beside her wearily, letting his head flop back to thump gently against the wall. "Tell me about it. If I'd not... changed, think I'd have regenerated by now," he sighed. His eyes rolled over to meet hers, expression wan but resolute. "I can't do this, Jackie. I can't."

She pursed her lips, giving him her best Tyler glare. "You can, and you will." She wasn't taking any excuses.

"I could have hurt her," he said, matter of fact, voice flat. "Could've destroyed her mind, for all I know."

Jackie pulled away slightly, eying him. She'd always known he could be dangerous, but to hurt her Rose? Never. "Have you done that to someone before?"

He studied the toes of his trainers, suddenly looking far older than he should for his features. "No, but I've killed and caused more deaths than you can imagine. What's to say I won't..."

Jackie suppressed a gasp. Rose had said his people, his whole world was gone but this, this was different, somehow. "Why?"

He glanced up sharply, looking confused. "Why what?"

Rolling her eyes, she sighed. Typical bloke, thicker than porridge half the time. "Never was cause you wanted to, was it? Like the time at Downing Street, with all the missiles. S' not like you'd a choice, and I didn't see anyone else with any better ideas."

He sighed, leaning forward to cover his face in his hands. His voice was barely a whisper. Leaning forward with straining ears, she barely caught his words. "It doesn't make it any better. Doesn't make it right." He dropped his hands, looking up at her, eyes fierce. "I just wanted her to be safe, and here, I'm..." He sputtered off into a heavy silence, before continuing, "You were there, when Davros was telling him what He's done to the people around him. We're the same, he and I. Both of us, more dangerous than you can possibly imagine."

"Hush, you," Jackie said, rolling her eyes. "Don't see you as being any more of a threat than anyone
else, despite you being odder than most. As for that Davros fella, ignore him. You weren't the one holding us all hostage, disintegrating those poor people, and planning on destroying everything, was it?"

"Not for lack of trying with all my incompetence," he muttered darkly. "You don't even want to know how close you lot have come over the years."

Jackie fixed him with a glare, not letting him divert the conversation. "The things you've done, it was like them pepperpots, weren't it? Getting rid of them was the best thing for everyone."

Eyes still burning, he looked away, obviously trying to stifle the memories. "Look what that particular idea got me," he muttered under his breath.

Jackie again restrained the urge to smack him one. If she did, he'd be off like a shot or getting defensive, and the entire point she was getting at would get lost in the shouting. And she knew this version of him well enough to know he could definitely hold his own in a shouting match. "Does Rose know?"

He nodded his head, surprisingly.

Jackie went on, not giving up on forcing him to talk. She could tell he was ready to clam up again. "And earlier, what happened, did you tell her what happened?"

"Yeah." Voice cracking slightly, he laughed without any humor. "She doesn't even know enough to be scared, Jackie. That's the worst part."

"Would you hurt her?" Jackie asked, eyes narrowed, watching for signs of evasion. "On purpose, I mean."

Chin raised, his head snapped around. "No," he nearly spat out. "You know that."

"Then why are you shaking in your boots, you idiot? Rose is smart enough to know when she's in danger."

"She runs TO danger, not away from it, Jackie. One of the bravest humans I've ever seen. Could've died more times than even I can count, but backing down? Nope, that's not in her nature." He stood up abruptly, back stiff and straight as a broomstick.

"Raised my girl better than that," Jackie said with a proud sniff. "And you, gonna be shown up by a mere human girl?"

Bridling at her coy remark, he raised an eyebrow, saying sardonically, "Coward any day, me," before looking away, shoulders slumping.

"Don't you dare leave her," Jackie said softly, but fiercely, "no matter how much of a coward you really are. You'll hurt her worse than you know. It just about killed her, when she got trapped here before. And you, both of you, leaving her here on the beach with this you," she paused, wondering if there were too many yous involved in that sentence. "She's just finally wrapped her head around what you did for her, staying here with her like you did. Don't throw it away."

He turned away, not moving for the longest time. Finally, after a long pause, he nodded, not looking back at her. "Yeah, I'll just -- go back in. She'll wake up and if she doesn't find me..." The words hung in the air as he shuffled off, leaving Jackie to hope she'd gotten through to him.

_Daft alien_, she thought.
Jackie rolled her eyes as she calmly went back to sipping her cuppa, mulling over the events of the whole blasted, chaotic night. She was starting to nod off when Pete came back. At his worn appearance, she froze, expecting the worst, but then he smiled slightly. She rose and went to him, legs a little unsteady with her own lack of sleep.

"They said she'll be fine, Jacks. All the tests, normal. Just a blip, apparently. No worse than a concussion," he said as he enfolded her in his arms. "You should go home, get some rest. Tony'll be up in a few hours, and you know how difficult he can be for Mabel, when she's all by herself."

"But what about you?" She squinted up at him suspiciously.

Pete laughed shakily. "Don't imagine I could sleep, even if I tried, and you know how it is. I showed up, and now there's a half dozen people clamoring for my oversight on something, even at this hour. I'll have a car brought round for you."

Jackie nodded reluctantly, hanging back until he said, "Just catch a couple hours of sleep, then come back in the morning. She doesn't need you to watch her sleep."

"And him?"

Pete sighed. "If I have to sit on him, or chain him to her hospital bed, I will. Now go home, get some rest, and see to Tony, before he gets old enough to get caught up in this mess."

Jackie nodded. "Should stop at their flat, grab Rose some clothes. Don't want her being seen by anyone, leaving hospital in a johnnie. What would people think?"

"Good idea, Jacks. Wouldn't want them seeing you in your nightie, either. We'd all do better with a change of clothes. I was just lucky I had a spare suit in my office," he added with a frown.

DI Evans was just about to leave, when she noticed the commotion going on in front of the building across the street. She recognized Pete and Jackie Tyler and briefly considered citing them for egregious parking errors, but decided to err on the side of caution. As far as she knew, Pete Tyler wouldn't flamboyantly disregard parking safety unless there was a reason, and she was betting it was a damn good reason, too.

The café had closed not long before, staying open late enough to pander to the crowds wandering back home from the pub, in search of caffeine to sober them up. With that, she'd retreated to her vehicle, wearily going over her notes. Until Pete had shown up, there'd been nothing of account since the pair had wandered back in the late afternoon. Downright boring, it had been. Until now.

Barely able to restrain the urge to jump out and follow, her patience was rewarded when a black, unmarked van showed up. Recognizing the uniform body armor and the medical bags, she sucked in a breath. "How now. Got something here, we have," she murmured to herself, adjusting the focus on her binoculars. "What in bloody hell's going on now?"

Watching them wheel in a gurney, she squinted, wondering what exactly had happened. A little while later, the medics came back down, bringing with them a recumbent woman that she
immediately identified as Rose Tyler. Even more interesting was the older blonde, she knew to be Jackie Tyler, was hovering along, right beside her daughter. But it was seeing Pete Tyler, following after them, mere moments after the van had pulled away from the kerb, and him half dragging the Doctor along behind him, that got her curiosity into overdrive. "Now this, this is by no means normal," she told herself, as she watched the Mercedes drive off.

For a moment, she debated, before finally following. Then came a long night of sitting, parked outside of the Torchwood facility, watching field agents come and go, the morning crew of researchers and scientists wandering in come morning, and then the arrival of the news vans. Hmm, the paps were out in force, so someone else had to have seen something. Not surprising, with the press' sudden fascination with the pair. Maybe someone here knew something?

She was in the crowd, trying to find out if anyone knew anything, when an unmarked hire car pulled up out front of the side entrance that marked Torchwood's medical wing. Shortly after, her targets appeared in the doors; Rose looking tired and worn out, the Doctor looking no better. She'd have been all set for a flutter, if the bookies had been taking bets on it, but there was no mistaking the guilt, hidden behind the way he warily kept his body between Rose and the cameras. There was annoyance and frustration in his voice when he responded to all the shouted questions with, "No comment. Run along, nothing to see." The car sped off rather quickly as soon as they were inside, the journos barely getting out of the way in time.

Curiouser and curiouser. Flashing her badge, she managed to fight her way to the doors, spotting Pete Tyler standing in the lobby, talking to an assistant.

"We'll have to release some kind of statement to the press, I suppose, but how the bloody hell did the wankers catch wind of this?" she heard, just before she ducked into an alcove with potted plants scattered about. Probably meant to lighten the atmosphere of the area, she noted briefly. Right.

Probably not a good time to ask questions, she thought, glancing back, before discarding the notion. In for a penny, in for a pound. Squaring her shoulders, Gail stepped forth.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Pete accused, spotting her almost immediately. "You're the one who set that rabble on the trail." He motioned toward the entrance, where the throngs of reporters still loomed.

Raising a brow in the face of his glare, Gail ignored the looks thrown her way by a couple of lingering nurses and the assistant. "Not hardly, when I was wondering the same thing, myself."

Pete didn't accept her statement, face darkening as he pointed a finger. "Be that as it may, back off. Just back off, I tell you, because there's nothing to figure out here; no grand mystery to be uncovered and solved. They've got enough complications as it is, without you sticking your nose in and running an off-books investigation," he snapped before stalking away.

Right, that went as well as I'd imagined, she thought as she gave a small embarrassed smile to the Torchwood personnel watching her. Shit. Maybe Sally was right, find another beehive to kick, just not this one. It's been twenty eight hours since I last had any sleep, and I've wasted my days off on following him around.

She was nearly ready to give up, but something -- probably a gut instinct -- told her that this wasn't over. Not by far.
Rose had been advised to take a day of bed rest and to take it easy for a few more after, and if the headache got worse, or any more symptoms popped up, to come in immediately. Bed rest didn't sound too bad, since she was still unbelievably tired. None of it would have been too much to put up with, except where he was involved. And that was the kicker, wasn't it?

The headaches came and went for the first day or two, more of an annoyance than anything worth really mentioning. They were just sort of there, from time to time. The Doctor always seemed to know, looking up from whatever he was tinkering on and coming over to where she'd been curled on the sofa reading.

"Rose?" he'd asked cautiously.

"I'm fine," she'd told him, setting the magazine aside. "Too much reading. Should rest, yeah?" He'd nodded, looking like he wanted to say something, before swallowing and giving her a half-hearted smile. She'd put a hand out to touch his face and said softly, "I'm fine, really. Just really tired."

And that was the entire activity of the first two days out of hospital. Him hovering guiltily, ready to take her back to the A&E over the slightest sneeze, and her getting tired of it and stifling the urge to throttle him.

They spent the next few days holed up in their flat, waiting for the media circus to calm down or for their attention to shift to the next celebrity scandal. Pete had made that lovely suggestion, for them to give the chance for the hubbub to die down again, while Vitex and Torchwood's PR teams came up with a plausible and boring explanation. For as far as "food poisoning" covered a lot, people obviously weren't done speculating. Some were even using it as an excuse to question the safety of the produce section and the food supply in general.

As for what had actually happened, she'd had plenty of time to think about it. The whole idea of having him in her head didn't bother her too much, not after the TARDIS had been in there before, and after all, it was him. If he said it was an accident, she could accept that. If he'd done it on purpose, without thinking to ask, then she'd have been angered. The problem was, he couldn't seem to accept it himself, and she could feel him distancing himself from her, even if he was staying close by, physically. It was almost like he thought she was made of spun glass, like she'd shatter at the merest breath of wind. For the first couple of days, his over attentiveness was quite endearing, even if she practically had to force him to even get within a foot of her. After that, it really wasn't.

In the middle of the night she'd wake, and the bed next to her would be cold and empty. Often, she'd find him sitting on the balcony, in his jimjams, staring out over the city. A flash of uncertainty and guilt would show, quickly hidden, before he plastered on a silly half grin. When she'd ask, or try to draw him out, he'd blink at her with an exaggerated innocence. Every time he did, she wanted to call him on it, wanted to grab him by the collar and shake him until she could get him to let go, stop worrying. But then, she'd see that brief flash of fear in his eyes, or the glazed look when she tried reassuring him she was alright, and she'd stop. She'd stop and wonder if there really was more that wasn't being said, a reason why he was afraid of himself and her. And he was a great one for avoiding the things that really did need saying, wasn't he? Then the morning would dawn, bright and sunny, and all those niggling worries that came in the night would vanish, chased away by people stopping in to say hello, carefully coordinated trips to the shops, and her mum stopping by with Tony. It was easy to forget your troubles when you were playing legos with a four year old, wasn't it?
The excessive heat had broken in the storms of the last week, a hint of chill in the air transferring to the concrete under his bum. It came to him, sitting in the shadows, watching the traffic below and the lights on the landing gear of the zeppelins overhead: a niggling thought in the back of his mind that had troubled him, bringing back what Dougal Chambers had said. He'd mentioned having the TD Gun for a month or more; Bryn had said a week before, over a fortnight ago. Therefore, someone was telling porkies and he didn't know who.

All that to think about, on top of worrying about Rose. It had been five days since the incident and while she wasn't tired or suffering the slightest twinge of a headache, he was still worried. Being cooped up inside was driving them both barmy, especially since he really couldn't think of what to say. Couldn't think of what to do, when he was trying to assess how much of his mental control he still had. Doing that was nigh on impossible with her constantly telling him it wasn't his fault. Laughable, that. Whose fault was it, then, hmm? Certainly wasn't hers, not when he was the one that was apparently still slightly psychic. Well, slightly, if compared to another Time Lord. On the human scale, well, they wouldn't even know how to compare it.

It was one thing to pick up 'vibes' from the greengrocer; a whole different kettle of fish when you were talking about accidentally forcing your consciousness into someone else's head. One was a parlour trick; the other, a crime punishable by death on a few dozen planets, accidental or otherwise.

What scared him the most wasn't the minuscule threat of being brought before the Shadow Proclamation -- if they even existed in this universe. No, what scared him was the fact that for one, brief, shining moment, he had had no control over anything, much less himself, and he hadn't even noticed- or cared, until it was too late. The old memories of pulling all of time and space out of Rose with a kiss had almost faded before that, brought fresh, once again, by the lingering traces of Vortex energy in her mind. And it was still calling him, like a siren's call, that terrifying urge to try it again and damn the consequences.

Right. Definitely not good. And no way to explain, not without sounding like a complete lunatic or worse, a psychopath. Trying to explain the dangers didn't quite work, when he was still unsure of what they were and an objective, scientific detachment was unachievable. He'd given up on the telepathy, thinking it lost, along with most of his superior biology. What a way to find out otherwise.

, he thought sourly. Oh, right. I did, and see how well that worked. Five days in, and I'm no wiser than I was, haven't sorted anything at all out, and Rose still doesn't understand why I am terrified to touch her. Throw in the fact that I'm gonna have to go poking around in things others would rather were left well alone, I'm gonna have a whole shed load of unhappy people before long. Oh, and one really nosy copper, that won't let well enough alone, either. Just wizard.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

In which things go decidedly pear-shaped.

32

Rose woke up, heart sinking a little when she found the other side of the bed empty and the linens cold. Huffing a little as she sat up, she looked around blearily, eyes still hazy with sleep. A light breeze was blowing the curtains gently, letting in the faint sounds of distant traffic in the city around them. Glancing at the clock, she climbed out of bed, already guessing where the Doctor would be at half two in the morning. Sure enough, there he was, back against the glass of the door to the balcony, hunched over and as still as she'd ever seen him. This wouldn't be the first time she'd found him out there, and probably not the last, either.

For a moment, Rose thought he might've fallen asleep out there, but then his head turned, his eyes meeting hers in the darkness. Anyone else, she'd have doubted they'd have seen her in the gloom, but not him. For all he struggled to read anything without squinting, his night vision had remained seemingly intact since the meta-crisis. Far better than a human's would be, anyway. "Doctor?" she said softly, biting her lip as she wondered if this really was a good idea.

He blinked slowly, eyes unfocused slightly, just watching her for a moment that seemed to stretch for an eternity. Briefly, she wondered if he was mucking about with the passage of time, or if he still could, but then he straightened, brow furrowed in concern and voice husky as he went into his customary rambling. "Shouldn't you be sleeping, Rose? Of vital importance, getting your rest, especially --" Like the gradual winding down of an antique clock, he paused, waving a hand to cover his sudden lack of words.

"Are you alright?" she asked, breezing past his suggestion, wondering if he'd had yet another nightmare. Nightmares woke him off and on, still. Less so, since they'd started sharing a bed. Insomnia, now that was new, and from the shadows under his eyes, he'd not slept at all.

"I'm always alright," he replied dismissively, nearly automatic. Typical behavior, for him. Why wasn't she in the least bit surprised at that, either? "You should go back to bed."

"Woke up alone. It'd be easier to sleep if you didn't keep wandering off in the middle of the night," she said pointedly but gently. She was a touch narked at the way he brushed off her concerns with such a pat phrase, but managed to hide it.

"I'm not tired," he murmured lightly, a blatant lie. He gave her one of those daft, toothy smiles. "You go on without me."

"Doctor, please. Come with?" she said hopefully, pushing back a section of hair that had fallen in her eyes. Annoyance flared up immediately, sharp and warm in her gut when she saw his face go studiously blank. Since he couldn't pull off the being oblivious bit, he was going to try for being distant and unapproachable. This time, it wasn't going to work. Either he told her what was eating him, instead of holding it all in, and stop trying to keep her in cotton wool, or there were going to be words between them soon. Very soon, most likely. Because, knowing him, the mollycoddling was...
not going to stop, not unless she spoke up. Time to put away the kid gloves. "You're not doing this, Doctor. Not now, and not again."

"Rose." He heaved a sigh, climbing to his feet and standing in the doorway, one arm braced against the frame, like he was holding himself back. With his height, he almost seemed to loom over her, like he was trying to make himself more impressive, more imposing. "You don't understand--"

He was visibly running through the possible ways to continue that sentence, but ended up merely shrugging ineffectually, mostly to himself, as he gave her a pleading look. He was silently pleading for her to just let it go, to comply like a good little human, and that stung as much as his continued avoidance. It stung worse than she'd thought it could, after the incident on a spaceship, clockwork droids and Madame du Pompadour. He had been so near, yet so damn far since the hospital and she was tired of it; tired of being pushed away.

"What don't I understand? What is it you're too much of a bloody coward to tell me? That you're going to panic over everything, and turn self flagellation into an art form that would leave even those medieval monks in awe?" she snapped, before cringing internally. But no, she couldn't give up now; not when she'd come so far. Tightening her resolve, she went on, "What, like back in Shoreditch, when you used Donna as an excuse to get me out of the way, then almost karked it yourself?"

"I was just trying to protect you!" She watched him clench his fists, jaw tight with anger. His eyes were so hot they almost burned; lips gone white, they were pressed together so tightly.

"Right, like I can't protect myself. Not like I didn't go crossing worlds, or nothing."

"This is totally different, Rose," he said quickly, voice serious. "And you're forgetting another incident, once again in Shoreditch, that rather proves my point." He raised a brow in smug satisfaction, moving to cross his arms over his chest, looking all high and mighty in mismatched jimjams, like only he could pull off as he pretended to bury his anger.

"I'm not the one who ended up almost dying in a bunker in Islington, while Torchwood's finest doctor had his hands up in defeat, saying he knew bugger all if what was supposed to go where, as he was trying to stitch you back together!" she rejoined, temper flaring more at his arrogance.

"Don't blame me for the lack of any proper medical training on this backwater of a planet, I'm not the one in charge of educating you lot," he said back, lip curling in defiance, temper showing under the mask that was starting to slip again.

"Right," she ground out, deciding she could use sarcasm just as well as he could, "you blowing up a building, with you right by the bleeding door had absolutely nothing at all to do with it. If He'd not been regenerating, you'd be dead."

Hints of hurt and betrayal showed in his eyes for a moment, before the angry glint covered it up and the façade returned wholesale. "If He'd regenerated properly in the first place, we'd not be in this mess, now would we, sweetheart?" he snarked, voice getting rougher by the moment.

"It's not like I would've gotten a choice then, either. Still would've gotten dumped off here, wouldn't I?" Her words made her bite her lip in regret, thinking she'd taken it a step to far that time. But no, his condescending eye rolling and him saying, "You just don't get it, do you," made her abandon her momentary feelings of guilt. He could be such a highhanded git sometimes. Scrap that, he usually was a highhanded git. "Right, I forgot. We're all just stupid apes to you, incapable of deciding anything for ourselves," she retorted, cutting him off. In that moment, she decided to hell with it; time to vent some of the frustrations that had built up over the last few months, starting on a beach in Norway.
Eyes burning even hotter, he spoke through gritted teeth, spitting out, "If it's something you know absolutely nothing about and cannot possibly grasp the magnitude of, then why the hell not?"

At his flippant tone, and the way he was leaning forward, she decided enough was enough. "Typical. Got to play god, even when you can barely sort out the mechanics of the postal system or doing the laundry, much less pull your own head out of your arse."

"Nine centuries and more of living, Rose, I'd damn well say I know a damn sight more than any Joe Bloggs you'll find at even that oh so illustrious and valorous Torchwood," he returned, voice rising slightly to just below an outraged squawk. "I'd think that qualifies me to know if and when someone's needlessly putting themselves in danger."

"Right, because someone who can't even manage a successful trip to Tescos is such a threat. I'm done with being treated like a child and told what to do, Doctor."

His voice was sour, heavily paved with sarcasm, as he drawled, voice dropping an octave, "Gee, good for goose is good for gander, sweetheart. I think you'll find if anyone's been mollycoddled and bossed about, it'd be me."

"If you weren't so useless--" She stopped herself there, thinking that was a step too far and starting again with a simple, "Dammit, Doctor, a girl has needs. I'm only human."

That seemed to let something loose, along with the last of his control as he quickly stepped forward. Rose didn't back down, even when they were almost nose to nose. "You knew I don't do domestic! All that time, you bloody well knew, and what do you all do, start telling me what not to wear, sending me out with grocery lists, and generally thinking you could turn me into something I'm not from the moment I go stuck here. Add in the total denial when you find something that's not in your little plans, and well, I'll tell you what, it ends now, missy." With that, he pulled away, just as suddenly as he'd been in her face. "Needs," he said, with a disgust she didn't know whether it was directed at her or him.

She could feel her own heartbeat echoing in her ears, she was so angry. "Should've know you couldn't do it, too much like a commitment," she muttered, looking away, breath hitching in her chest.

"What the hell do you want, Rose?" he growled, turning back in a blur of movement.

This time, he was all ice cold rage, not letting up even when her back was against the wall and she could feel his breath hot against her face. A detached part of her mind was marveling at seeing the Oncoming Storm this close, while the rest of her was reminded of the time when she'd stood between him and a lone Dalek.

As he moved closer still, she could feel his arousal pressed against her, as he growled, "Would it be worth it, risking it all for a quick shag? I could have torn your mind apart like so much fluff, left you a mindless vegetable, or bound your life to mine in such a way that if any of those mad scientists get ahold of me, you'll feel every single second of it, every cut of the knife when they're tearing me apart, bit by bit. So tell me, is that what you were dreaming about when you came up with your naive little fantasy?" Just as suddenly, he was on the other side of the room, once again standing in the doorway, back turned once again.

Catching her breath that had somehow sped up like she'd run a mile uphill, Rose fixed him with a glare before turning away, speechless. How the hell did he expect her to respond to that? 'Oooh, a pint of lager and we'll see who screams first'? They were already well past the screaming and yelling point, having skipped that, and over on the other side, with the low pitched, biting tones and voices
right with rage. Yeah, maybe stomping away was a bit childish, but it was the least provocative thing
she could think of. If she'd opened her mouth again, someone would be calling the police to report a
domestic, if they already hadn't. The clock on the nightstand was flashing three a.m. when she
stormed into the bedroom. Good thing he had moved away so quickly, or she'd have slapped him
one, probably. Still would, if he'd had the bollocks to follow her. But no, she could hear him moving
around in the other room, so he'd decided not to tempt fate. Settling back into bed with a growl of
frustration at herself and him, she rolled over to face the wall when she heard the front door slam.

That wasn't a surprise, either.

It was the sharp kick in the shin that woke him, startling him into disoriented wakefulness and
blinking against the too bright early morning sun in his eyes. A moment to remember the sounds of
his trainers slapping against the pavements as he'd mindlessly walked through the night, stopping in
an unknown park to catch his breath on a bench. The bench he'd apparently fallen asleep on and
now had a disgusted looking pensioner leaning over him.

"If you've not got the wherewithal to get yourself back home from the pub after a night out, mayhaps
you shouldn't have knocked so many back," the old man scolded before walking off, muttering about
"youth today, no moral fiber."

He was still blinking in confusion, wondering how he'd gotten to the point he'd just fall asleep in
random places and more to the point, exactly where he was, when he heard a soft chuckle
somewhere off to his left. "Ignore him. Old bastard's not happy until he's made his daily rounds,
spreading hate and discontent," said a middle aged woman pushing a pram. Dressed sensibly, if with
little attention paid to coordinating colors or patterns, she seemed harmless enough. Without any
qualms, she sat herself next to him, humming to herself contentedly. "He must be feeling charitable
today, old Colin, since he didn't just call the coppers to roust vagrants. Usually, he does," she added
after a moment, smiling cheerfully.

Like a dam had let loose somewhere up stream, she started a virtual torrent of chatter. Chatter that
would have done him proud on one of his better days. As gregarious as he usually was, the Doctor
didn't feel all that up to making conversation. Leaning forward to bury his head in his hands, he
thought back through the fuzzy memories from before, occasionally grunting when she paused for
breath. Had to be somewhat civil, else he'd be telling her to piss off while he tried sorting out his own
messes, instead of listening to her nattering on about negligent dustmen and council taxes. If he'd still
had the TARDIS, some percussive maintenance or the like would've helped. As it was, it was a good
job Rose's little car was back in the garage at the mansion, 'cos who knew where he'd be by now.
Halfway to Ipswich, or wrapped around a tree on a country lane somewhere by now, most like, he
thought. Which brought up an extremely pertinent point. "Where am I?" he broke in, when she'd
paused long enough to catch her breath. He didn't even bother to look up, yet he could still feel her
goggling at him.

"You don't even know where you are? Must've been one hell of a party," she chuckled, not
sounding in the least judgemental. When he did look up, the wink she gave him was almost
scandalous. "Wish I'd been invited, but no, you're in Hoxton. The A10's over just beyond those trees," she added, helpfully. Nodding in the opposite direction, she added, "I live off over there."

Of course he'd heard the traffic, but since this was a major metropolitan area, he'd dismissed the significance. OK, he remembered wanting to get to Hackney, and finding none of the bus lines were going the right direction at that hour, deciding to leg it instead. Just as well, he'd forgotten to grab anything from the flat, other than his shoes and changing into a pair of jeans and a shirt he'd found lying tucked behind the sofa. Convenient, that. Didn't even want to think what might've been said, had he gone back into the bedroom. "Right, a party. I wish." Straightening, he sighed, leaning back against the bench, feeling almost as tired as he vaguely remembered being when he ended up here.

Her voice sounded sympathetic. "Trouble at home, then?"

"Something like that," he said ruefully. A quick glance had shown him that, unlike what one reasonably would've expected, there was not a baby in that pram. Probably a good thing, the kid would either be completely barmy before they were walking, or a mute until they were old enough to move away and get a word in sideways. Nope, from what he could tell, all there was in that pushchair was a newspaper, a liter bottle of cider, and a pint of milk.

Seeing where he was looking, the woman laughed, flushing pink with embarrassment. "What you must think. It's not mine, it's the old man's. Figured I'd get his stuff ready before he finally rolls out of bed. He's happier when he doesn't have to wait. Morning will be half done by then, but oh well. Best thing's an early start, I always say." She made to stand up, turning her back to him.

"Well, can't say I'm one to judge," he said, rubbing at the stubble on his chin ironically. "I'm the one who's been accused of already having had my fun, not that I even remotely experienced anything anyone would call fun." Grimacing, he added under his breath, "No matter what planet you're from."

She turned back, giving him a sympathetic look. "Put your foot in it, did ya?"

"Nope, dove in headfirst," he replied, popping the 'p' and wincing at the memory. Oh yes, with great alacrity and lead plummets, to make doubly sure he stayed in it but good.

"Figured so. You had that look about you, like my Bryn used to before he settled down and learned what was good for him," she said good-naturedly, reaching over to pinch his cheek.

He was too focused on hearing the name "Bryn" to even bother with being annoyed at the familiarity. He had a sense of foreboding, like something else was going on outside of his view. But then, when didn't he? Everything had felt wrong and off kilter since he'd woke up in a burning TARDIS in another universe. It was par for the course. "Bryn? As in Holburn? That Bryn?" He was incredulous, thinking maybe things weren't quite so bad. Having something to keep him occupied certainly would give him the chance to do some constructive thinking, come up with a game plan or at least suss which possibilities would leave his arse slightly less in a sling. Maybe his luck was turning around again. Nah, but there was a smidgeon of hope. Against his better judgement, he was still rather fond of hope. Just proved how completely daft he was. But still...

Sure enough, she looked hardly surprised and more like she was used to that sort of question. "Should've known. Is there anyone in London who doesn't know him?" she complained gently, laughing a bit as she settled herself back on the bench. She was in no hurry to leave now.

Oh, this was just fantastic. Brilliant, even. "You must be Edna." He smiled, before pausing to consider. "How is Bryn? Haven't seen him since... you know?" He didn't want to mention Miles' murder, what where he'd been briefly suspected of it.
"Oh, as well as can be expected, since those two weren't close -- never really got on, they didn't. Not that that's hard to imagine, Miles being so much of a hermit, and Bryn and him both tied up in their work, bless 'em. Bryn's still out and about all hours of the night," she said, before fixing him with a look. "Though, you'd know that already, wouldn't you?"

He nodded, unabashed. Not that he'd actually known, just sort of suspected it. Still, half a dozen of one, six of the other; it's all the same, innit? "Seen him around a time or two. Did a job for him awhile back."

"So, that eliminates you being a copper, then," she said, peering at him closely, a crafty look appearing in her eye.

Commendable, being able to hide that much behind the demeanor of a gossipy housewife; he was rather impressed. Leaning back comfortably and crossing one leg over the other, he gave her a wry half smile, raising a brow in open admiration. "Not hardly. Though, I dare say, your reputation hardly does you justice."

It was merely out of habit that she'd parked beside that particular section of kerb, having found she had a fondness for that café's chocolate croissants. Closing her eyes in pleasure as she bit into the still warm pastry, Gail jumped when someone started thumping on the car window next to her ear.

"The hell," she muttered, wiping at her spilled coffee and inwardly cursing. Another stain. Just flipping cute. One more set of work clothes for the donation bin. At this rate, she'd either have to forgo paying rent or turn up at her desk starkers, and wouldn't that be a laugh?

Uncharitably, she snapped, "What do you want? Bugger off, I'm not on duty yet," as she cranked the window down. That was when she recognized the frantic looking blonde. With a sinking look, she took in the lack of makeup, the frazzled hair and Rose Tyler. That made her get out of her auto, looking for any signs of anything untoward having happened.

"Have you seen him?" Rose asked, so much raw hope and concern in her voice, it almost hurt to listen to.

"No, I haven't," she replied, knowing exactly who the Vitex heiress meant and wondering why the hell she'd listened to 'common sense' and given up her quiet surveillance of these two.

"Oh God," Rose breathed, eyes dulling as she seemed to shrink into herself. Suddenly, she looked rather wan and out of it.

"I'm sorry, I just got here not even ten minutes ago," Gail apologized, putting a hand out for the girl's arm as she watched her rub at her head, swaying gently in the breeze, as it were. Looking around for any available assistance, she steered Rose through her still open car door to sit in the driver's side seat. Bugger the rules, she'd make an exception in this case, since it was clearly an emergency, especially since she couldn't see what else to do. Seat the daughter of one of her boss' friends on the grimy paving slabs? Right, how fast can you say 'sacked'? Nope, not happening.

"Here, have a sit down and rest for a mo," she suggested soothingly, rubbing Rose's shoulder while
reaching across to grab her radio. If she didn't call it in, there'd be hell to pay. If she did, there was a good chance she'd be making someone else pony up an explanation. Finally, getting some real answers seemed possible. "Get me an ambulance here, directly across from 184 Kennet Street, in front of Harnden's Lattes. Oh, and put in a courtesy call to Torchwood HQ while you're at it, since they'll be shouting the walls down around our ears if we don't."
"And don't think I don't know who you are, duckie," Edna Holburn said with a tight smile. "Pretty face like that, splashed over the front of every gossip rag, on every newsagent's stand in the city... let's just say you're hard to not notice."

The Doctor gave her a slightly sour look, with a dose of amusement mixed in. "Well..." He gave her a wry smile. "Bloody tabloids."

There was a hard glint in her eye as she said, "Bryn's mentioned you a fair bit -- the smarmy little wanker that some say is running a Hell's Angels chapter from behind the scenes, while turning the loyalties of an entire neighborhood."

Raising a quizzical brow, he snorted, "Some people have unusual fantasies, I dare say. Just a simple man with a job twisting a spanner all day, that's me. Got the calluses to prove it." He held up his hands in example, smiling brightly.

Something was beginning to feel off; it all felt a bit wrong, almost like something was trying to get his attention from far away, or an itch he couldn't quite reach. All the while, he could feel a slight pressure building in his right temple. Had been since he'd awoken, been no more than a niggling annoyance easily ignored, but when he felt something cold and sharp pressed against his side, it decided to flare into a full fledged ache. Glancing down at the knife Edna was holding to his flank, he gave her an arch look. "That's hardly what you'd call polite, and I'm supposedly the rude one."

"'Rude and not ginger'," she sneered with a certain knowing, mocking him. "Believe me, you're the talk of certain circles. Wonder how much the Tylers would pay to get you back alive -- or even how much others would pay to see you dead." With that, she prodded him sharply, motioning for him to stand, following after.

"Blimey, a kidnapping." Rather amused, he grinned down at her, going along with her wishes. Moving carefully, as she frogmarched him across the turf, he glanced back at her. "Now, if I'm going to get nought but bread and water, you should know I hate rye, wheat's far superior, and could I have a milkshake, instead? Water's just so boring..."

If anyone could see him now, they'd probably suffer hypoxia due to uncontrollable laughter. Him, being kidnapped at knifepoint, by someone's gran. Someone's gran, complete with the whole tweed skirt set and sensible shoe ensemble... it was unbelievable. It was just fan-flipping-tastic.

"Shut it, or I'll gag you. I know your games, Mr Smith... or should I say, Doctor."

At the sudden, sharp poke that left him wincing and certain he could feel a trickle of blood, he clamped his mouth shut, sighing inwardly. Just brilliant. While he'd been hoping to pry some information out of the woman about her husband's business dealings, he'd not wanted to become one of those business dealings. Nope, just a quick nose about, a chance to regroup his thoughts, and then go back to apologize to Rose. Maybe even do some, ugh, 'explaining', even a little begging if he had to... that's what his plans had been. See what planning things got him?

"You don't have to do this. You're bound to find I'm far more trouble than I'm worth," he said sincerely.

"Shut it, I said. You aren't telling me anything I'd not sussed on my own," the woman growled, with
yet another prod that had him biting back a yelp. That persuaded him that the gob was not going to
help in this situation. More like it would probably end up getting him more acquainted with knives
and the semi human tolerance for pain during dicey situations.

Reaching the street, Edna steered him to a dodgy looking van that seemed more rust than paint. The
driver looked up in surprise. "Found an unexpected bonus on my morning walkabout, Les," Edna
said. "Grab something to tie him with, he's a tricky one."

He managed to keep an amiable expression on his face, hiding his agitation and annoyance under a
brittle smile as that bloke Les tied his hands with a bit of rope. Squinting, he tried remembering if
he'd seen the man around, but was drawing blanks. Honestly, with the way his head was starting to
 pound, the fact he was even able to pretend to be taking this in stride was a testament to centuries of
reflexive behavior.

As his luck would have it, no CCTV cameras in sight, and not many people about at this early hour.
The few passing pedestrians were moving right along, either ignoring what was in front of them or
simply oblivious. They said 'the early bird catches the worm', but in this instance, bugger all if he
knew whether he was the bird or the worm. Side street like this, out of the way, with the early hour
of 6:23 a.m., there weren't really any passing motorists to avail for assistance, either. Bugger it again.

When he opened his mouth to protest, after Les viciously yanked his arms behind him and tightened
the knots, Edna plucked a balled up handkerchief out of her sleeve and shoved it in his mouth.
"Before you go getting any ideas, love," she said, chucking him under the chin and smiling sweetly
in the face of what he was certain was one of his best glares. He was still staring at her, no longer
pretending to be amused or concerned about the knife that was still against his side, when Les gave
him a rough shove. Back he fell, landing uncomfortably on his arms, through the rear door that he
hadn't even noticed was open.

"D'you think he'll be okay like that?" Les asked nervously, eyeballing him warily. "Everyone says
he's a slimy little bugger."

Narrowing her eyes, Edna gave him a considering look, before reaching for a tyre iron. "Good point.
Better safe than sorry."

"You can't hit him with that!" Les protested when she handed it to him.

Already, he had an idea of what was coming and it definitely wasn't good. Scrap that, it was the
icing on the shite cake he'd dropped himself into. Forgive him for being forward, but he was rooting
for what he hoped was Les' better nature to prevail.

"That's why you're doing it. At my age, it would be untoward. Hardly proper, you know," Edna
sniffed.

"You'll kill him! D'you know what he's worth?"

Bugger it, he was just going to start assuming that everyone was an arsehole from now on, and then
be pleasantly surprised when he was wrong. Bloody hell, this was going from bad to worse by the
moment, and they were ignoring his attempt at protesting. So, it was frantic mumbling, instead of
yelling, and he couldn't even scramble away to safety, since Les then grabbed his shirt in an iron grip
and pulled him forward, holding him down, but still...

She waved a hand dismissively. "He's an alien of some sorts. Survived a bomb blast -- a bump on the
head won't hurt him a bit. And he's worth nothing at all, if he gets away. Those Torchwood people
will be after us, spit spot."
Shoulders screaming at the way his arms were twisted under him, he blinked away a bead of sweat that rolled off his forehead into his eyes. Time seemed to slow, as he marvelled at the substance he found and analyzed to be human adrenaline coursing through his system. No, this wasn't the way he wanted it to go. He'd wanted to go home to Rose, say he was sorry.... he'd even fold knickers for the next fortnight, if she wanted. He'd even do one of those preposterous things the chat shows called 'heart to hearts'. He'd even learn to appreciate the failings of the human endocrine system, for Rassilon's sake! But this, this was wrong, so wrong, and the urge to run back to Rose was getting more overwhelming by the second. He just wanted to go home.

Looking up at his captors, he wondered if it was worse that, unlike when he'd been captured by Chambers' pals, this bunch didn't have that hard gleam of insanity in their eyes. Nope, looked just as sane as anyone, no nutters here, and that was what worried him. He could work with people who're off their onion; it was the normal ones he couldn't snowball so well. Well, that changed that assessment. His luck certainly hadn't changed at all. The last thing he saw, before the darkness claimed him, was Les (really, what kind of name was that? Couldn't have found a 'Les' abbreviated one?) bringing his arm back in a might swing, gripping the tyre iron in his hand.

She'd barely slept at all, keeping one ear open for the sound of the Doctor returning. Honestly, Rose didn't know whether she'd have hugged him and dragged him to bed, or slapped him harder than her mother had managed. It was early when she suddenly was startled awake by a pain in her head, that felt like someone had crept up and clobbered her upside the head. A sudden rolling nausea and a ringing in her ears brought her up short, when she tried to sit up. Cringing, she closed her eyes, pressing her hands to the back of her head and her right temple at the same time.

It was like the headache after he'd accidentally slipped into her mind without asking, but not quite. Another layer of pain, hot and sharp seemed to flourish in a line above her left ear, going around to the back of her head. For a moment, the ringing in her ears almost sounded like a woman's voice frantically calling, "Sprout, no!"

Blearily, she looked around, finding no one else in the flat, of course. The pain seemed to ease off into a heavy pressure, allowing her to stumble from the bed. Finding her mobile was the work of several minutes, since her eyes didn't seem to want to focus. Scrolling through her contacts, she pushed the send button when she got to the right one, only to hear the number she had been trying to reach, ringing through from the other room.

Mentally, she chided herself for thinking the Doctor would ever have the presence of mind to ever think to grab his phone. A quick check of the flat showed he'd also forgotten his wallet and keys, left by the shower. The sonic was on his side of the bed, under the pillow, of all places. Hoping against hope, she opened the front door, but no. The hallway was entirely devoid of any po faced part-Time Lords.

Rose went back inside, leaned against the wall in the entryway, pushing the rising fears down, and closing her eyes as she tried to think. Years of Torchwood ops and using the Dimension Cannon and the required ability to think on her feet seemed but a fond memory, at this point. Courses of action
that she would've chosen and the proper protocols alike, seemed insignificant; had to be, when she kept hearing this strange echoing in the back of her mind. All she knew was suddenly, there was a overwhelming feeling of dread and a longing for something she couldn't quite place.

Opening her eyes, she wandered through the all too empty rooms, wondering if maybe, he'd been right; that there was an inherent danger to intimacy, with him being somewhat psychic; and now she was on the verge of losing her mind. Barmy or not, something clicked when she happened to glance out the window. That nosy police woman was parked below, and probably had been for hours, had maybe even kept her vigil all night. With one hope left, she rushed out of the flat, grabbing her keys and shoving them into her pocket as she took the stairs two at a time.

"It's alright, I'm fine," Rose sniffed, minutes after the call to emergency services had been made, trying to pull herself together. She gave Gail a wan smile that clearly was fake. "It's just, we had a stupid row and I sorta panicked when I found he'd left his mobile and the sonic. Nothing to be calling an ambulance over."

Gail made an unladylike noise of disagreement. "You're the color of bleached paper, you're hardly alright. Did he hit you?" She looked Rose over carefully.

"What?" Rose almost shouted, outraged. "No! You clearly don't know him at all if you'd think..." She sputtered off into silence as she shakily stood. Balling her fists, she swayed slightly, nearly falling.

Like she was trying to calm a spooked horse, Gail made apologetic shushing noises, steering her back to sitting in the car. She was careful to look contrite and was even more concerned by Rose's worsening condition.

The girl had looked pretty weak when she'd first made the call and now looked like death warmed over. Eyes red-rimmed and slightly hazy. When she rubbed at her head again, Gail took the hint. "Did you fall?"

"No, it's just a headache. A... migraine of sorts." Rose looked pained as she spoke, closing her eyes.

Gail leaned down, crouching, flicking open first one eyelid, then the other. Pupils seemed even, though the rescue aid course hadn't been her best subject when she'd taken her training. Rose had only pulled away, looking annoyed, but not willing to make too much of a bother. Unfortunately, Gail's agility on the tactical obstacle course hardly applied in this instance. Relieved she'd thought to call it in, she focused on the one thing she remembered from that course: keep the person talking. "Has he done something like this before?" she asked, wondering if there was foul play involved.

"That's him, always loved the running. I think I pushed him too far this time." Rose's voice was small, her words introspective.

"I'm sure he's fine," Gail said hurriedly, not wanting Rose to get any more upset.

"I hope so. It's just, it's always him leaving me behind, and yeah, he promised, but things happen. The things that you can't predict, they tend to get in the way of the things you've hoped for, you
Gail nodded. She knew that all too well. She'd once had a cozy childhood home, a loving family, all anyone could wish for. And then the Cybermen came. All she had left of that was the one sister, who made a living chasing weirder things then metal men, and she went about chasing murderers and thieves, besides the passing interest in enigmatic figures from the papers. "Been rough for you two, lately," she said sympathetically, firmly pushing away her own memories.

"Yeah." Rose nodded, sinking back against the seat gratefully. She sucked in a breath, letting it out slowly, seeming to be considering something. "I... neither of us realized, you know? What it'd be like... we aren't the same as we were back before, when we travelled together." She swallowed, eyes still closed, lips twisting in a sad, ironic smile. "I didn't really even think how much he'd lived before I even met him, why he was the way he was, despite what he'd said and what Sarah Jane..." She sighed, lapsing back into silence.

"Tell me about how you met," Gail prodded, faintly catching the sound of sirens in the distance. That was a relief, because she wasn't sure if she'd ever been this far out of her depth in ages. Certainly not on the job.

Rose smiled, looking almost like she was in the middle of a peaceful dream. Gail was entirely gobsmacked by her words when Rose finally answered. "He grabbed my hand, told me to run, then blew up my job. And it was fantastic."

Rocking back on her heels, Gail eyed her with trepidation and wonder. Sure, she'd wanted to unravel a bit of the mystery around the man known as the Doctor, but this... it was too good to be true, wasn't it? Then again, from what she knew, it probably was true. Clearly, the pair of them were barking mad; mad, or there was a lot more to the story than was being said.

Far more.

Pete's heart felt like it stopped in his chest, when the alert came in. He was passing through the Comms room, planning to check with the overnight dispatch crew, when Jason waved him down. "Sorry, Sir. Report just came in, it's Rose. She's being brought in by ambulance."

Pete automatically turned around, Jason following him after motioning to someone else to take over the hub. "What happened?" Pete asked tersely.

"Paramedics aren't sure yet, but they're thinking it's like last week. Vertigo, periods of confusion, combined with the migraine-like symptoms, they said." Jason gave him an odd look, breathing heavily as he tried to keep up with Pete's longer stride through the corridors to the medical wing.

Everyone else was wisely staying out of their way; though many were watching them pass with grave looks of ill concealed fascination, like they were watching a disaster in the making before their very eyes. They all had probably heard about what happened by now, but most of it would have been heard through the around the various bubblers and the caf. Most wouldn't actually believe the story. You don't know the half of it, boyo, Pete thought grimly. "Did he say what happened?"
Jason's professional demeanor slipped a little, as he gave Pete a look of confusion. "He?"

"The Doctor, damn it. Who do you think?" Pete barked, pushing forcefully through the fire door. He had no time for pointless delays, not when there was an ongoing situation.

"Wasn't mentioned." Jason scooted through after him, barely managing to avoid being caught in the heavy steel door.

Pete gritted his teeth, shoulders tight as he surveyed the casualty ward. Bustling nurses and doctors all rushing to meet the gurney bearing his stepdaughter. She seemed unharmed, other than barely lucid and frightfully pale in the brief moment he got to speak to her before the medics hauled her out of sight.

"Dad," she murmured, breathless, reaching out a hand fitfully.

"It's alright, love," Pete assured her, taking her hand and brushing aside his own worries and smiling at her. He swallowed down the sudden lump in his throat, noticing how unfocused her eyes were with a detached horror.

"He was right... something happened..." Rose tried looking around, head barely coming up off the gurney pad. "Got to find him..."

"Hush now, these doctors will fix you up in no time flat. Let me worry about finding him." Pete's jaw tightened, his smile more of a rictus, as he felt a flash of anger. He'd find him alright, and when he did....

"He's not safe. She's calling him, but he won't answer." Rose settled back bonelessly, seeming to fall unconscious, just as one of the nurses elbowed Pete aside without any concern for who he was.

Numbly, Pete watched them wheel Rose into the assessment area, the doors closing behind that same nurse. A throat being cleared behind him caught his attention, snapping him from his moment of parental concern. The bright eyes of that damned DI from before met his as he turned. She raised her chin in defiance, wordlessly asserting her right to be there and challenging his authority.

"DI -- Evans, was it?" he said brusquely. "Now's not exactly the best time for your little attempts at solving the universe's mysteries."

Gail tilted her head to the side, eying him with consideration, not backing down any. "Hardly. But I'd reckon you might need some extra man power, when it comes to locating him. And time might be of the essence, if she's right."

"What do you mean?" Pete snapped, stalking closer to glare down at the petite blonde.

"She said someone grabbed him."

He waved a hand in impatient dismissal. "Probably just her trying to protect him," he said shortly, turning to stride back toward Comms. He started a bit, having forgotten Jason had followed him down.

"Got teams deployed, checking the flat in Wapping and the one in Hackney and all surrounding areas, sir," he said, snapping to attention.

Pete gave him a quick nod of appreciation, ignoring the 'sir' and hurriedly thinking through the other possible places the Doctor could be found. "Chiswick should be on the list and Whitechapel," he said, thinking of Donna Noble and her family.
Then came fruitless hours of waiting and wondering; waiting for answers and wondering what the hell had really happened, while Jackie arrived, all in a flutter. Rose hadn't said anymore about it, mostly speaking unintelligibly. Countless theories were hatched and discarded in that time, and none came any closer to an answer. Owen had suggested a possible psychic link, but of course, none of them could prove or disprove that, much less do anything about it. The only one who would know, or could possibly do anything to fix it, was apparently missing in action.

When the search teams turned up nothing, both flats empty, not a hide nor hair of the Doctor in Chiswick, Donna hadn't seen him in days, and it was going on dark, things got more intense. Rose was in and out of consciousness, Jackie was on the verge of going off her nut with worry, and things weren't any clearer than before. At that very moment, if a certain gangly, six foot tall half-alien had appeared in front of him, Pete probably would have had to restrain the urge to throttle him, or worse. Uncertain whether this was a case of foul play, or the Doctor having flipped his lid and lashed out purposely, he decided to err on the side of caution and act in the belief that there were outside forces involved. Pete wasn't sure which possibility was more frightening. He was well minded of what he'd managed to overhear of the conversation between the Doctor and Chambers. That brought things to a head, quickly.

"Don't bother about stepping on any toes, or feelings," he said sharply, voice resolute. "Kick down any doors you have to, and spare no one's feelings in this search," he said, emphasizing the 'no one' harshly when he spoke to the assembled search teams. The police had stepped in to assist, as promised, and there was going to be a piece during the evening news broadcast, with the hopes that someone had seen him somewhere.

So far, nothing.

Floating, it was like floating in the dark. Somewhere in here, there was a familiar hum, almost like a song half-heard in the night, surrounding him but never really catching the attention of his wandering consciousness. It was just there. Occasionally, he'd hear the murmur of distant voices that would dint the surface of his dream, but didn't break through entirely.

".....the hell, Edna, what were you thinking... were you even thinking...."

"...you wanted him out of the way...."

"....not like that... forget the rozzers and those knobs from Torchwood, Edgar'll...."

"....can't take him back now...."

"....alive...."

"....can't take him to the warehouse, 's first place they'll..."

All so disjointed and disorienting, he really wished whoever it was would stop. Just stop, and leave him to his quiet meanderings. They were starting to break through his lovely smidge of oblivion,
light was starting to peek through on the edges and he was aware of so much pain. Pain in his side and head, and it was that and the sensation of moving, or being moved, that started to drag him from the comforting depths of the darkness. He didn't want to come up; for down here, there was peace and a sense of completion. Down here, he wasn't alone, for he could feel her at the far edge, beyond the gulf between them.

*Rose.* He'd wanted to go home, but where was that? Was that a state of mind, or a place somewhere far beyond the horizon? He didn't know and there was something else, something more. Instinctively, he could feel another force beckoning him, pulling at him, but he resisted. It was an presence he felt he should know, that maybe he could trust, but he didn't dare. He wasn't sure if that would stop him from getting home again.

".....grab his legs..."
".....coming around..."
".....don't bring out the dogs..... left enough blood, he did..."
".....hold him..."

Pain. So much pain, that he pulled away again, dove back into the darkness. Block transfer computations danced brightly around him; baby harmonic relays scarpered in the distance, in a tangerine flavored breeze, and domed cities under twin suns lay just beyond the horizon that he couldn't see. Down here, everything was as it should be. It was brilliant. Oi, it was his fantasy world, down in the dark. He could have whatever he wanted, now couldn't he?
It could've been days or weeks that had passed, he didn't know. Pain and cold brought him to awareness finally. Cold, that seemed to seep through his body, was what finally started to rouse him, general discomfort combining with the aching in his skull. An unyielding surface was under him - concrete, he surmised -- and he was still bound. He could only guess, because during the short time he'd cracked his eyes open, it had been total darkness and even the dark had seemed to spin disconcertingly. That set off a bout of nausea that he fought back, curling himself into a ball of misery as best he could, with his arms still wrenched behind him.

He could just imagine the knot on his head. It felt large enough to require its own post code, a throbbing lump that kept pulling his attention back to it. Couldn't tell much of anything on its size or severity, other than a patch of stickiness around the left side of his head and down his neck that he knew was probably blood. He really hated blood, especially his own. Even that River Song woman hadn't hit him this hard, the last time he'd been knocked out by a purposeful blow to the head, back in the Library.

Breathing through his nose, he assessed his situation as best he could. Faintly, he could hear the sounds of a telly overheard somewhere and the scent of cooking wafting through the air. Could be someone's house, or a warehouse somewhere, he didn't know. Blimey, they could've been sporting enough to remove the gag, but no. So much for talking his way out of this one. Then again, no one to talk to yet, since they'd apparently left him. Hopefully, not for long, since he really wanted to go home and check on Rose. Apologize, whatever she wanted, whatever it took to make her happy again. With a groan, he turned his head aside, trying to avoid the smell when his stomach protested the stimuli. Right, good case of concussion, most like. Beans, he could smell baked beans. If he ever got out of here, he'd never tolerate that smell again. Beans were bad; evil beans. Up there with carrot juice, and pears. Blimey, he hated getting knocked out like that.

Carefully, he shifted his hips, wincing as he did when his weight came on where Edna Holburn had got him with the knife, rolling himself on his back, while he waited for the resulting spinning sensation to die down again. No telling how serious that was, just that it was another source of burning pain to go with his head. The twin set of misery, his muddled mind came up with in the moment. Ignoring his discomfort, he managed to lever himself into a sitting position, still keeping his eyes closed. Finally, after a moment to catch his breath, he started again. Drawing his knees up under himself, he let himself sag forward with a groan, waggling his fingers behind him to get the circulation going as best he could.

Much better, he thought. Despite his head pounding away like a drum, it was better than the unforgiving floor beneath him. No weight on the wound his lower back either, though the strain of sitting up was making the muscles in his back quiver already, and feeling the turn of the earth had never been so sickening. He was just starting to wonder how he was going to get out of this and why things like this seemed to happen to him, when the sound of footsteps was heard overhead. He waited patiently, head slumped forward and eyes still closed, as whoever it was got nearer, down a staircase by the sounds of it. Possibly multiple someones. And they'd switched on the lights, too. Ouch.

Flinching away from the blinding light shining on his face, he recovered his composure enough to raise his chin and try to look slightly more dignified. He heard some fumbling and a squeak and before he could even wonder what it was, a jet of ice cold water hit him full on. Soaked to the skin,
he was still shuddering when it stopped, just as suddenly as it had started. Whoever it was, they ignored his pitiful failed attempts at yelling his outrage. Bloody gag. Damned inconvenient, that. How was he supposed to voice his totally valid complaints about the level of care in this place? He'd be letting them know exactly what he thought of that, when he had the chance.

Knowing that faking it was probably a bit pointless, he opened an eye, mentally cursing them both. He, shivering, looking up at his captors blearily. He had so many questions, and no way to ask them. Sent many a telepathic insult, he did; sent them in past, present, and future tenses, even. Those walleyed, feeble minded offspring of knock kneed street walkers -- and not a bit of acknowledgement, the cheek of it all. Mind blind humans, peh.

"There, grab a flannel, I'll do his face." Edna again. "Have to have him looking presentable for our guests. Dickie wants a look at 'im and Eammon's boys want a peek at him, too."

It took a moment to make the connection, but once he did, he almost wished he could've gone back to his un-blissful ignorance. Eammon. That wasn't good. Nope, positively bad, even. Whole suitcases of bad, more like. Wasn't this flipping cute?

"Hardly has to be clean for that, does he now," came another voice. Bryn, most like. Or Les. As blurry as his vision was, could've been the bleeding dustman, for all he knew. Looked to be four, or was it two of them? Could've been eight, for all he knew, or another figment of his imagination, at that; wouldn't surprise him in the least. "He'll be a lot worse after they're done with him. And now he looks like a drowned rat."

Edna shushed them. "That could be our retirement bonus, right there. Check him over, see how he's handling it."

"D'you think I'm an effing doctor or something now? How'm I supposed to know?" her companion complained.

Edna gave a frustrated grumble. "Just do it and quit your moanin', Bryn. They'll hardly pay if he's already dead."

"There's some that will," muttered the man, but he still complied, roughly swabbing at the Doctor's face. "Depends who the customer is."

Forcing himself to look as amiable as he could manage between winces, he kept himself still while he was manhandled. Same old, same old, it seemed. Nefarious dealings, people taking him captive, and him having to think up a brilliant escape plan. Certainly something would turn up, wouldn't it? For now he could listen in, find out what the Holburns were planning, and come up with the aforementioned escape plan.

"Are you sure he's even what they say he is? Seems human enough to me, if a bit scrawny," Bryn mused, giving him the once over.

"How should I bloody well know either?" Edna sounded more exasperated. Perhaps she was considering some of the possibly consequences, if they got caught. Torchwood had a zero tolerance policy, when it came to the lives of their agents. He wasn't Torchwood anymore, per se, but Pete might be feeling peeved enough to not be so lenient with them. Maybe it was the headache, or maybe even the sudden soaking, but he found he was not all that bothered to be thinking about persuading anyone to be merciful about now. Not when he was suddenly feeling a tad squiffy at the mo and a wee kip sounded better than anything else.

"You're the one who reads all the gossip rags! You know all the rumors, and you're the one that
brought him home!"

"Well check him over, then, why don't you. See if he's all that they say he is."

"I'm not taking his kit off and looking him over down there! What do you think I am, some kind of bleeding pervert?!"

"Get on with it, will ya."

Now they were arguing between themselves. He should probably be more concerned about the threat of a strip search, but meh, vague alarm was all he could muster. All he wanted to do was go back to sleep, see if the headache and the nausea would be gone when he woke up. If he was really lucky, he might find this all had been a lousy dream, such as the ones that still haunted his nights frequently. Nah, not likely, the feeling of someone jackhammering their way through his skull put paid to that little fantasy, but still... all those lovely little half remembered images were better than this -- far better. Other than that crazy bag lady, the one that he kept seeing every time he closed his eyes. The silly one, who kept calling him Sprout and seemed far more upset about all this than he was. Funny, what the subconscious comes up with, innit?

"...eyes supposed to look like that?"

"...should I know..."

"....should probably try to keep him awake.... should he be sleeping this much...?"

"...just a ickle bump on the noggin... alien... should be able to handle it..."

"...the gag off..."

"....can't keep him like this..."

"...find him like this... trace it back to us... dump him off somewhere..."

"...the money.... the making of our fortunes...."

"...no use....dead..murder...gaol..."

A whole night of waiting and wondering, it was. Rose woke several times, speaking of impossible things, wanting to go home, and once, late in the evening, she was wracked with chills, complaining of being wet. Shortly after, she slipped into what seemed to be a semi comatose state. The baffled doctors were at their wits end, never having seen the likes of it before, and being driven harder by Jackie's reaction. While she'd come in ranting and raving, as could be expected under the
circumstances, by the time the clocks were striking midnight, she was getting quieter in her state of frenzy, like her batteries were running out.

When Pete came in around two, exhausted like everyone else, having been overseeing the investigation and searches, she folded herself into his arms, quietly sobbing. "Why, Pete, why? What is going on?"

He held her close, resting his chin on her hair as he breathed out slowly. "That's what we're trying to find out, love. Last place the CCTV picked him up, he was walking across the motorway in Hoxton last night, an hour or so after Rose said he'd left the flat. We're looking everywhere in the area; start going door to door, if we have to."

"But how could this have happened?" Jackie asked, voice muffled against Pete's chest.

He could feel her struggling to keep from crying, reminded again that Jackie Tyler had more back than most. He sighed, wondering the same thing. "We'll have to ask him, I guess. Once we find him, I guess."

"He'd better be okay, cos I'm gonna kill him once he's back." Pete almost chuckled at that, but then Jackie continued, "Running out like that, and whatever's wrong with my Rose, I'm sure it's something that barmpot did. I told her he was dangerous, that that life wasn't safe, but she didn't listen. She never would." Jackie sniffed, but no tears fell as she stood back, eyes burning.

"C'mon, Jacks, at least wait until we've got an explanation, before you crucify the man. No one knows what went on, except them. And if he'd known ahead of time, you don't think he'd have gone off, would you?"

Jackie shook her head, grudgingly. "He died for her once, I think, him with the ears," she admitted. "Sent her home, where she'd be safe, and I sent her back. Pulled that machine of his apart with a friend's truck, and sent her back. Next I saw, it was that skinny git showing up, all charm and smiles, and there was no stopping her then." She paused to look over her shoulder at the hospital room behind her. There, through the door, and looking impossibly fragile, lay Rose. "What if..." Jackie didn't look away, even as she swallowed thickly. "What if we don't find him? Or it's too late, and we lose..."

The drone of heart rate monitors and other equipment beeped and hummed in the background; such a hateful sound to them all, by now. Pete stopped her there. The rest was unthinkable; unacceptable, in his view. "We will find him," he said firmly, turning Jackie to face him. He tipped her chin up with one finger, so her eyes met his. With a smile braver than he felt, he continued, "And when it's all said and done, everything will be fine, everyone will be fine, and we'll go back to whatever madness that passes for normal for us all. You'll see, love."

"Do you think?" Jackie stared up at him.

She was taking this as a solemn promise, and she would very well hold him to it, if he was wrong. Pray God, not.

"I do. Come on, get some kip in the lounge. It'll do Rose no good if she wakes up, and you're half dead from exhaustion, scaring the wits out of everyone with your mascara run all over the place."

Jackie gave him a halfhearted smack on the arm, but shuffled off to the nearby lounge with him. If anything turned up, any new information, or anyone found anything at all, he'd be notified immediately. So far, it was looking like whatever had happened, foul play was certainly involved. This was too far beyond the Doctor's normal behavior for it not to be, and Pete was mindful of the
barely heard snatches of the conversation he'd overheard between the Doctor and Dougal Chambers.

As for that angle, a quick call to Jake had had the man interrogated for hours over in Ireland, all to merely confirm that Chambers had no involvement, though not that he was surprised. He'd said to watch Eammon Isaacs and they had, going over every inch of the man's life, without actually raiding his home for a full-scale search. If nothing turned up by noon tomorrow, Torchwood would be exercising their full powers, under the emergency affairs act. Sure, they'd be risking egg on their faces and possible parliamentary hearings, followed by likely sanctions if they were wrong. But, if Chambers' info was good, the world would likely be a safer place, if they could dismantle the Earther movement before it got more violent. And that was Pete's main fear, that the Doctor had been kidnapped as a political message. So far, they'd been rather quiet. Too quiet, if you asked him. Other than the tabloids, with their never ending speculation about the Doctor and Rose, and the conspiracy rags going on about him being an alien, there hadn't been much in the press in the past week or so. No hue and cry, no protesters gathering outside the flat in Wapping, and none outside Canary Wharf, not since the aftermath of the Shoreditch incident. Pete wasn't sure if that should worry him more.

In case it was someone out after the chunk of coral that was growing in the flat in Hackney, Pete had set an entire team to guarding it, all of them well armed with plasma cannons. No weapons to be set to stun, since the likelihood of a peaceful outcome, in the event of that actuality, was slim to none. All the observations sent back were everything seemed normal, as far as they could tell, but was it supposed to be glowing like that? Not that he had an honest answer to that, but he'd assured them it was, hoping nothing was going to explode or suddenly pop the building into another century or on another planet. How was he supposed to know? Nothing the Doctor had said had ever made any sense, Rose hadn't been able to explain it very well before, and there wasn't anyone he could really ask. Why couldn't the damned man just build a spaceship the same way all the other aliens he had experience with had done? The energy readings were off the charts for the entire area, all centered on that dingy little flat, so the team's scanners were useless. Just useless, and left the whole lot of them flying blind, so to speak, if anything untoward did happen there. Not that the neighbors cared a whit; the telly reception had never been better, they said.

Bloody civilians...

They'd also gone after the common criminal element, since Pete was well aware that some of the Doctor's associates were not quite on the up and up. He had enough suspicions about that himself, since some of the tech he'd seen in Hackney he knew had never been anywhere near the Archives. For all he knew, one of the Doctor's less savory little pals could've gotten in a feud with some other street gang. Who knows -- he certainly didn't. Not that those 'little' pals at the garage had been all that forthcoming. But Edgar and his boys had joined in the search, against the wishes of the police. Even threats of arrest and imprisonment hadn't dissuaded them. Pete had barely managed to keep Wilf and Donna from jumping in, despite dire threats from both Donna and Sylvia. He had no idea what he was going to do, if worst came to worst. Anything other than an eventual happy outcome would be a disaster, as he well knew.

Even if Rose woke up in the morning like nothing had happened, it would still be a disaster if they didn't find the Doctor. It had taken all of Pete's clever wit to persuade her to stay with Torchwood, after the first trip to Norway. Then came the stars going out, and the Dimension Cannon, so she could go back, and that had given her motivation for several more years. This time around, if the worst did happen, he had no idea what he'd do. And if she didn't wake up....

No, not going there; not going there at all.
Donna sat in her cubicle, mind definitely not on her work. All morning, she'd mostly been lost in thought, but on the ball enough to make a good show of pretending to be efficiently plonking away at the report she was supposed to be typing. So far, she had two paragraphs. Two paragraphs, and four million theories about what could've happened to the Doctor, ranging from the strangely bizarre, to something out of a horror film. It had been a day since Pete Tyler had called, asking if she'd seen the Doctor. She'd hardly slept last night, not that she could imagine they had either. They'd not even let her in to see Rose at the hospital, when she'd stopped around that morning.

"You've written and deleted and rewritten that sentence four times now." Siobhan O'Connell was leaning over the partition, looking vaguely amused and curious.

"Yeah." Donna shook her head with a sigh, shoulders slumping. "Sorry, mind's just a bit... friend of mine went missing, and no one's had any luck finding him," she said softly, giving up the pretense of working.

"Oh?" Siobhan leaned in, intrigued.

Most of the office had gone off on their elevenses break, but both of them had been too caught up in other things to join in. Siobhan had probably come back early, Donna figured. She always suspended the woman kept her super slim build by skipping meals -- plenty of them, by the looks of her.

"Mum's even in a fluster, since he's a relative of sorts."

Donna hadn't really expected that reaction, since her mother usually nagged him even worse than she got; had done since he'd tried explaining that meta-whatsits thingy. Not that they had the foggiest what that really meant, but it was nice to think that somewhere, in another reality, there was another Donna Noble, one that was the most important woman in the universe, instead of working in an office somewhere. 'Course, that meant he was sorta like her brother or something, which meant her mother's dream had almost come true, in a way. Everyone in Chiswick knew her mum had been hoping for a boy when she'd been pregnant. Not that she knew what to do, when she sorta ended up with a fully grown, half alien one, like the paper cut with the famous girlfriend that had shown up two months ago. So, Sylvia had coped with the change the only way she knew how: she tried feeding him enough for three every chance she could and nitpicked at everything, from his appearance to his job and friends.

"Really? He?" Siobhan raised her brows, digging for more information. Gossip was currency around this place. "Like that bloke on the telly, the one who's the Vitex girl's boy toy?"

Donna made a face and rolled her eyes, chagrined. "Don't let either of them hear you say that, they'd both do their nut."

"Well, I never... Really, him?" Siobhan practically squeaked, scandalized and nearly salivating at this particular nugget of information. "He's an alien!"

"Only part alien -- doesn't make him less of a person, does it?" Donna snapped, thinking it probably hadn't been the best of ideas to go spouting off here, but it had just slipped out, all on its own. "He just wants to live his life, same as anybody else."
Slightly taken aback at Donna's defense of the most notorious person to have come to the public attention in several years, Siobhan drew back. She didn't back off entirely, though. Instead, she glanced about, looking around to see if anyone else was listening in, before asking in a low, excited voice, "So what's he like?"

Donna narrowed her eyes with suspicion. "Whaddya mean?"

"No... tentacles, or anything?" Siobhan hazarded cautiously, still intent on prying.

Donna huffed angrily, sitting up straight, offended. "What's with all you dim witted bozos, thinking everything alien's got to be green or have tentacles?" she complained, not caring who heard her. "He's just a regular bloke, bit skinny, and far too clever for his own good. In fact, it's people like you that's put a target on his back, and that's what could've gotten him killed, for all we know!"

By the end of that spiel, Donna was shaking with rage and from her reaction as that possibility struck her. No, he couldn't be. Just couldn't. It would break her Gramp's heart, the two of them spending so much time together watching the stars and nattering away up on the hill of an evening... and he was almost her best friend now. He just couldn't.

Donna stood and hastily gathered her things, scooping up her handbag. To hell with this job. If they fired her, she'd tell them she'd quit. She could find another one, easy. Could try over at Canary Wharf; they had an office- surely they would better appreciate her organizational skills and her hundred words per minute typing. That is, if this all came out right in the end.

Siobhan was watching her with big eyes. "Where're you going?"

"Leaving," Donna said brusquely, shouldering her bag and roughly pushing the chair out of the way. "Someone's got to go help look for the big idiot, while making sure no small minded fools have got their hands on him," she said with a glare, as she swept past. "Oh, and I quit; here's my notice, ta."

Edna opened the door cautiously, looking past the three men waiting on her doorstep. The neighborhood was dark and quiet, but they'd been waiting an entire day since the night before, when they'd gotten the message that the man himself would come. "Weren't followed, were ya?"

It was a big deal, having someone so important come to call. She'd even put on her best, what she'd normally wear for Christmas and Easter. One had to make a proper impression, you know. Couldn't have the likes of these types going about thinking they were just the normal riffraff from this neighborhood. They had standards to maintain and appearances to be kept up. She was even using her poshest accent.

The more important one of the three men huffed in offense, but stepped in when she opened the door to let them in. "What do you think I am? I've got a damn sight more to lose than you if we're found out," he retorted. He turned to one of the men with him, obviously one of his bodyguards. "Go confirm the identity."

"Sir," the man said, pushing past Edna to where Bryn waited by the entrance to the cellar.

"Thought the photos I sent would've been enough for that," Edna murmured, artfully disdainful.

"Mustn't be too careful, madam. You could've decided to try something clever, and try switching him for someone else you picked up off the street," the man said with an arrogant sneer, looking down
his nose at her.

When his underling came back shortly, nodding in confirmation as she knew he would, he instructed the other to stay upstairs and keep watch. The man silently complied, taking a watchful stance by the front door. Edna glanced out the window; there was another outside still, waiting by the nondescript van parked out front.

"Shall we retire to the basement, gentlemen?" she said grandly, ushering them to see what she had found.

Down cellar, Bryn had set up an extra light, focused on their 'guest' who was sprawled out, unconscious still. He'd dried out since the dousing they'd given him last night. The stylishly mussed hair was still plastered to his head though, and streaked with blood on one side, but his natural brunette tones hid most of that. Thank goodness he wasn't blonde. His stubble covered cheeks were pale, highlighting the smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose. Hardly looked like he did in the papers, but then, no one could be expected to look their best all the time. They'd stuffed him into one of Bryn's shirts, but there was only so much they could do, not having anything that wouldn't hang off him like a bin bag. As for the trousers, they'd not managed to find anything in his size either, so she'd had to pull them off him and throw them in the laundry. He looked human enough from what she'd seen, and she'd seen as much as she could, getting him presentable again.

"He's not much to look at, at the mo', but had to do something to keep him from scarpering. Needed a good washing after, of course. Les got a bit rough with him," she apologized.

"Indeed." The man beside her breathed in through his nose, his lip curled and his expression a mix of disgust and satisfaction. He reached out with a foot, prodding the person on the floor none too gently, to no reaction at all. He bent down, flicking up an eyelid, shaking his head after. "How long has he been like this?"

Edna shrugged. "Since we gave him a bath last night, why?" She gave the man a distrustful look.

"Pah, you went too far," he said, standing up and fastidiously brushing imaginary dust from his trousers.

She'd cleaned that floor but good, scrubbed it on her own hands and knees, she had, just before they'd dragged that skinny little alien freak down here. He'd even bled all over her lino in the kitchen while she was doing that. How dare this stuffed shirt of a politician presume her cellar floor wasn't spotlessly clean? The cheek of the man, thinking he was better than everyone else, just because he was a member of Parliament and all that. "He's perfectly good for what you wanted," she growled, crossing her arms over her chest.

"What good is he like that?" the man said with exasperation. "Useless for getting any information out of him and just look at his eyes, they're not right! If you got someone with a concussion, you don't let them sleep."

"No one ever said," she said in defense of her own ignorance.

With a sigh, the man straightened. "I'm sure you've saw the segment on the evening news last night? They're probably running another as we speak."

Edna glanced over at Bryn. "Mayhaps," she said cautiously, not committing to knowing anything of the sort.

"There's a couple hundred coppers and Torchwood agents out looking for him. They're already
going door to door on the other side of town."

Bryn gave her an alarmed look. "What do we do," he asked worriedly.

"My suggestion? Dump him off somewhere, before they find him here and trace this back to any of us." The man exchanged a look with his bodyguard, clearly ready to leave. "I'll not be going to gaol over this palava."

"But, wait," Edna protested angrily, feeling cheated. "What about the money? This was supposed to make us rich, the making of our fortunes, you said."

"I'm hardly going to pay, with him already half dead, and I'm not getting sent up for murder for nothing!" the man replied, flushing hotly. "How am I supposed to rally the people and convince them turn on the alien menace, with all the dangers they pose to the populace, when the alien menace has practically carked it and looks like a harmless yobbo?" He waved an impatient hand at the subject in question. "Does he look any sort of threat like that?"

Edna had to admit he didn't. "But still..."

"Just find a dark alley somewhere," he said, moving to start the climb up the stairs, "and dump him off. Make it look like it was something he did himself, an accident, and leave him. I don't think you'd want to end up in prison for murder, either of you."

He was peacefully lounging in a garden, surrounded by flowers, a carpet of red grass under him. In the distance he could hear shoboggans gambolling in the brush, chattering away to their mates. Smiling to himself, he closed his eyes, letting the light from the twin suns warm his face.

"Should've known you'd come here," came an annoyingly familiar voice. "All of time and space to hide yourself away and you chose here. The last child of Gallifrey, running home when he should be doing anything but."

"Sod off, lady. Just taking a wee kip here -- or I was, until some bloody rude cow decided to disturb it," he snarked.

He heard the rustling of the grass as she seated herself next to him. "It's not real, you know, Sprout; all's just an elaborate mental construct you've dreamed up."

"It was brilliant, wasn't it?" he mused, before saying sarcastically, "Or it was, until someone came barging in, uninvited. Should fix that."

Next to him, the crazy lady huffed to herself before speaking softly, "Things were so much more simple when I was just a fantastic time ship, cruising through the vortex, and you were just my Thief, off to see the universe. Far simpler, back in those days when I stole you away from that repair dock, you with your granddaughter. Now, there was a dear little creature. Shame you couldn't be half as charming and tractable."

He forced himself to sit up, gaping at her. *That was just... there was no one in this universe who*
should know that. How... who was she?

"Told you once already... or did we not have this conversation yet?" She peered close, waving a hand dismissively. "Bah, linear time -- makes no sense to me. Can't imagine why anyone would subject themselves to a single time stream, sounds horrible."

He continued to gape at her, until she rolled her eyes at him. "Fine," she sighed. "It's your telepathic connection. Me TARDIS, you Sprout, got that? Or is that not simple enough for your silly little Time Lord mind? Flighty things, you ephemerals."

Oh, right. It was all just a dream; he forgotten that already. Should've known any dream his mind would come up with would end up not so pleasant. But still, it was impossible... fully interactive interfaces didn't come with the old Type 40's... "You're."

"Yeah, I am. Anyhoo," the woman said dryly, ignoring his continued look of incredulity. "Moving on, you really do need to work on waking up. The Wolf needs you."

"Wolf? What wolf?" he said, confused and still befuddled. After all, it wasn't every day your mode of transport started talking back, especially when the last he knew, she'd only been a lump of coral, growing away at its own pace in Hackney.

She gave him an arch look, like he'd dribbled on his shirt. "Bad Wolf, of course. Now wake up, Sprout!"
Chapter 36

It was a packed house at the Met's main conference hall for the morning briefing. City and Metropolitan police had turned out in force for this, the third day of searching. Fortunately, there was no media presence, since the public statements the previous two evenings had been handled by her bosses.

"Okay, people, I'll need everybody's attention. Eyes front, everyone! Obviously, we need to be looking harder, since we've nothing yet. As you all know, the first forty eight hours are the most critical in a missing persons case and we are well beyond that time period now," Gail said grimly, eyeing the crowd of police and volunteers before her. "By now, you all should be familiar enough with the subject to not need another full description given, but in case there's anyone new joining us, here goes. John D. Smith, also goes by the name 'Doctor', age 35; six foot, one inch, approximately 180 pounds. Brown hair, brown eyes and was last seen wearing jeans, faded red converse trainers, and a Madonna t-shirt. Any questions?"

She looked up, half in expectancy and half in hope; hope that this all might finally be over, with a happy resolution for all. With every passing hour, the likelihood of that faded even further. No hands shot up, to her disappointment.

She continued, "I hardly need to say that if anyone sees him, to call in immediately, do I?" There was a nervous tittering through the crowd at that remark. "We need to finish focusing on Hoxton and the surrounding areas, fanning out and going door to door, asking residents if they've seen anything out of the ordinary."

A hand shot up. "What about the lady on Hackney Road that was complaining about her missing cat?" a spotty faced young man asked. He wore a uniform with that fresh-pressed look that only the rawest of new recruits managed.

Gail huffed, forcing herself to keep a little patience and moderate her tone. "Tell her we'll look into that after we've got all this sorted." She looked around again. "Anyone else with anything? Reports? Old reports, new reports, anything with a possible bearing on our case?"

A desk sergeant from the precinct house in Hackney rose, shuffling papers and fumbling with his glasses. "Had a complaint about some vagrant sleeping on a bench in the park three mornings ago."

That was beyond their current search perimeter, but it could be something to look into, if nothing else turned up. "And?"

"No one there when we got there, but we'd only done a quick look about, since the complainant is a regular," he said with a wry smile.

Everyone in the room was familiar with the sort he was implying, the ones who seemed to have naught better to do than call to complain about any little thing, from noise to the neighbors. Another nervous tittering went through the crowd again. They'd all had those frivolous complaint calls and there always seemed to be one in every neighborhood, frequently a pensioner with naught else to do. Knowing that no stone could remain unturned, she nodded. "Go check the area again. More thoroughly this time, if you would." With a grim smile, she nodded at McAndrews. "All parties will check in with PC McAndrews here, before leaving. She'll be handing out the sheets with your
assigned search area."

With that, she stepped down from the podium, only too glad to be out of the spotlight again. Public speaking had never been her thing, still wasn't, and she'd been surprised when DCI Jacobson and Hartley had assigned her the duty of organizing the search. She remembered when he'd called her up to his office three mornings before when she'd gotten there, direct from Torchwood's medical center.

"You're the one who was on scene when the Tyler girl collapsed, and Pete Tyler specifically requested you, since you apparently have more familiarity with dealing with the pair of them than anyone else," Hartley had said gravely. The look he had given her then told her he was well aware of her clandestine stakeouts. It had been a silent warning of sorts, but her concerns about getting answers could wait. All of that would be pointless if he wasn't found alive. "I trust you'll put in your best effort, DI Evans," he'd said with a stern glare, making her nod earnestly.

She'd certainly done her best since then. Even now, on the third morning since Rose Tyler had banged on her window and startled her into dumping her brekkie on herself. Every single question she'd had, since she'd been sent out with her former partner to bring in an injured man from Islington for questioning, would remain unanswered if they didn't find him. Now there was not only that, but the implications that her career could be in jeopardy if they didn't.

Donna walked into her mother's house, already dreading the inevitable confrontation she expected. She blithely grabbed the cup of coffee that her mum was preparing, silently counting down in her head.

"Why aren't you at the office?" Sylvia cast an eye towards the clock wearily. She looked slightly worn down, but then, they all been on edge since the police had come by asking if they'd seen the Doctor.

Donna nodded to herself, squaring her shoulders. Right on time, she thought. "I quit," she said breezily, ignoring her mother's expression. "Gramps up yet?"

"He's up the hill, but Donna, why? You'd a perfectly good job, and it's not like you can afford--"

Donna set the coffee aside with a moue of distaste. Too much sugar and cream. Putting her hands on her hips and taking a confident stance, she replied, "Some things are more important than a pay cheque, Mum. You know that."

Sylvia nodded reluctantly. "I know that, it's just--"

"You can't expect me to go back to that bloody cubicle, driving myself up the wall all day with wondering what's happened to him, do you?" she challenged.

Sylvia looked down, picking fitfully at the sleeve of her jumper. "No, it's just--" She looked up, eyes showing her own measure of worry and concern as she looked at her daughter. "It's been such a whirlwind, since we came back from Brighton Beach and there he was, large as life and sitting right
on my dinner table." She cast a look at the table in question, clearly remembering the occasion with a
cinder attitude than she'd had at the time. "I can't help but keep thinking I'll look up and see him
there, giving me that cheeky smile and arguing back when I tell him about the proper use of
furniture," she sighed regretfully.

Donna softened, smiling sadly at the memory. "I'd called him a burglar, at first. Then I thought he
was another one of Gramps' strays. Little did I know he'd come so far, just to find us."

Sylvia nodded in agreement. "All his talk of other worlds, other versions of us-- can't begin to make
heads nor tails of it all, truthfully," she admitted. "Just sometimes, he'll say something or have a look
in his eye, something I can't really even describe, and I can't help but believe him. Just makes sense
in a way, somehow." She made a tsk-ing noise, waving a hand in embarrassment. "Oh, don't ask me,
I'm just blathering on now. Getting soft in the head. Maudlin, too. Comes with age, they say, and the
change of life." She gave herself a little shake, as if changing gears. "Speaking of which, your
biological clock is ticking, you know. If you don't find yourself a husband soon--"

"And I'm going to go find Gramps now," Donna cut in smoothly, inwardly amused. Leave it to her
mum to not stray from certain topics for too long, even in the midst of a crisis.

As expected, her gramps was sitting in his usual chair, looking up at a sky that had mostly held
clouds, all covering the sun. Even the weather was gloomy today, it seemed. Wilf was staring at the
unused telescope standing before him on its tripod.

"Missing him already, Gramps?"

He nodded, visibly turning something over in his head. "Of course," he said softly.

Donna sat down, nudging him gently with a shoulder. "C'mon, I can see you thinking. Can smell the
burning and see the gears turning from all the way over here. Spill it."

He smiled briefly, heaving a sigh. "I've spread the word, but it's no use, Donna. Nobody's seen a hair
of him anywhere. Not since that Miss Etta over in Hoxton looked out her window at half four and
saw him walking by on the pavements, looking all small and lost she said. She's got the insomnia
something fierce, her sister says, so she's usually up that hour. That was two, three days ago, now."

With a sinking feeling, Donna slumped back in her chair. So much for that idea. If the swarm of
OAPs her gramps knew hadn't caught a whiff of him, what chance did she have? Even the police
hadn't turned anything up and not the high and mighty Torchwood had, all of them coming up with
nothing at all. But she couldn't give up, she thought. Not before she'd had a chance to do some
proper looking. Someone out there had to have seen something, know something.

"I'm so worried about him, Donna," he said so softly she almost didn't hear it. "Properly, so. Just hate
thinking of him out there, all alone. Maybe he's hurt and wondering if anyone's going to find him
soon, wondering if anyone's even looking for him."

"Yeah," Donna agreed, closing her eyes. She'd hardly slept the last two nights, wondering the same
thing, and more so last night than the one before.

"He's a lot like you, in some ways. Doesn't think he really matters much to anyone, scared to let
himself shine. Worries me, it does. Scares me enough to think..." He paused, turning to look at
Donna, who'd opened her eyes when he'd started speaking again. "Maybe he took off on his own,
doesn't want to be found?"

They both shook their heads at that. "No, he'd not have left Rose like that, not unless she'd told him
to, given him the boot," Donna said firmly, denying that notion right out. Wilf agreed. "But if she had... and no one really knows what went on, do they?"

"She'd not woken up yet, last I'd heard," Donna said with reluctance. As badly as she didn't want to even entertain the idea, Rose had voiced frustration with him in past; recently, even. With his rapidly changing moods and fickle behavior, the trouble he'd been in with the police and fighting, she wouldn't have expected any less from someone else. But with Rose, no. "I hardly think she'd be kicking him to the kerb like that, not if she went risking her life to go jumping across universes, looking for him."

Wilf sighed. "People change, Donna. Nothing's simple in life, especially relationships. He even told me once, that he feared he wasn't sure if he was the same man he used to be, that something might've gotten lost along the way." He looked down at his hands before continuing slowly, gently, "Sometimes, when you really want something and will do anything to get it, then sometimes, you end up finding you didn't want it as much as you thought you did in the first place."

"Not those two, not them," Donna said resolutely, denying it with a shake of her head. "I've seen them together more than you have. His whole world revolves around her, and hers around him. You remember how they were, don't you? Even if things aren't what they'd expected, they've only been back together what, just under three months? It wouldn't all just fall apart that fast, would it now?"

Wilf shrugged, chuckling humorlessly to himself. "It beats the alternative, that someone's got him. I hate thinking people could be so horrible, but they can be, and some are." His eyes creased, face hardening slightly. "They've not been kind to him, some of the folks out there. People shoving him around on the bus; calling him names behind his back, just loud enough for him to catch it, when us regular folks haven't the hearing he's got. If they'd do that right where anyone could see and no one stopped them and him not daring to say 'boo' to anyone in his own defence, what might they do to him if no one's looking?" He clenched his hands in helpless frustration. "That's what scares me, what they might be doing to him right now, and us all too far away to help."

Donna shuddered at the thought. She'd been doing her best to steer clear of those thoughts, trying to keep her mind focused on more positive worries. Of course, those niggling little thoughts had crept in during the darkest hours of the night, but she'd stomped them down with a passion. If her mind went there fully, it would be impossible to hold onto anything like hope. "He'd not said anything."

"Didn't want you all worrying and carrying on, he didn't. 'Fraid he'd end up stuck inside the flat, not being allowed outside without proper protection. He won't say it to anyone, but he's lost most of his freedom. Like a caged bird, longing to fly free, that one. Hates all this worry and bother, just wants to be left alone without all the fuss." Wilf looked up at the cloud covered sky thoughtfully, musing quietly, "Can't imagine it, living up there, amongst all them stars. All just to get stuck here, in London. Drive a body mad, losing all that, I'd reckon." He shook his head sadly.

"Don't think he wasn't half mad to begin with," Donna said wryly. "If he gets that loofah of his ready, they'll be back up there again."

"Think we'll see him again after that?" Wilf chuckled.

Thinking of that lump of coral was giving her an idea. A sudden urge to go check on it, even. She wondered if that might have anything to do with this, or have any answers. It seemed rather daft, but nothing else was panning out, so she'd might as well give it a go.

"Yeah," Donna assured him, standing up. "He'll need a good feeding once in awhile, and he promised, didn't he? They'll be back after they go, him and Rose, just you watch. After we find the dumbo, that is."
"Where're you heading, then?"

"Where do you think? To go find him, of course. Rose's be going out of her head if she knew. Better go round up the skinny idiot before she wakes up and finds him gone," she said with more confidence than she really felt. Honestly, if the people whose jobs it was couldn't... But she had to at least try, didn't she?

"That's my Donna," Wilf said with approval. "Give me a hand up, and I'll come with."

"Gramps, you can't--" she protested.

"Why not?" he argued, raising his brows and looking stubborn. "Might be old, but it's still another pair of eyes. The more, the merrier, eh?"

Donna sighed, helping him stand and fixing him with a pointed look when he flexed his knees experimentally. "Your knees aren't likely to forgive you," she advised, knowing it was pointless, but saying it anyway. When her mother found out and gave her a bolloxing after, she'd be able to say she tried, right?

Her gramps raised his chin defiantly. "Wouldn't be able to forgive myself, if I don't at least try," he said, looking resolved.

Donna smiled at him fondly. "So we bringing Mum along on this adventure, too?" she asked with a hint of sarcasm. It wouldn't surprise her now, her mum showing up at the car, insisting she had to come along, too.

Wilf shook his head immediately. "Good heavens, no. Let her stay back to the house and worry there, instead of reminding me about my blood pressure, arthritis, and age every thirty seconds." He pointed a finger, giving her a warning look. "And don't you even start in on it."

Donna laughed, putting her arm through his as they walked down the hill, going around the side of the house to where her car was parked out front by the kerb. "I suppose that settles it, then. First stop, Hackney."

"It couldn't be that simple, could it? The police would have to be completely daft to miss him at his own flat, would they? Since I'd imagine that was the first place they looked." He paused to look at her in bewilderment.

Donna stopped too, unable to contain the triumphant grin as the idea that had first seemed weak grew stronger with her conviction that it could be right. Or at least something along those lines. A clue, anyway. "Yeah, but unless they went inside, they wouldn't really know, would they? Even if they had, they'd not have known what they were looking at, most like."

"His ship," Wilf murmured, with a nod of understanding.

"Rose said something about it being part of him, so maybe..." She shrugged, unsure of how to say it, but her meaning got across, clearly.

"Good thinking!" Wilf said proudly, finally cracking a real smile for the first time she'd seen him that morning. "That's my girl. With that kind of thinking, we'll find him in no time. No time at all! Come on, Donna, time's a-wasting!"
Rose awoke, feeling groggy and disoriented. She recognized the room as a standard, generic hospital suite, but couldn't remember how or why she'd be in one. All her limbs seemed intact, everything seemed functional. The only thing off seemed to be a sort of numbness in her head, almost like the memory, or leftover impression of a headache. Not that that made any sense, not even to her own thinking, but that was the only way she could describe it. Blinking at the ceiling, she slowly remembered some of what had went on before, a creeping panic sweeping over her as she sat up.

"Doctor?"

No answer. Somehow, she wasn't surprised.

Someone had to have been nearby, keeping an ear out for her waking, since it was mere moments before she heard footsteps approaching. Her mum and Pete hurried into the room, both looking worried, yet very relieved. "Rose!" her mum exclaimed, wrapping her in her arms and nearly smothering her in the process. "How could you do this to me? What were you thinking, letting him do that to you again, after what happened the last time?"

Rose pulled away, gently batting away her mother's attempts to drag her back into another enveloping hug. "Mum, he didn't..." she tried, looking at Pete for some support when her mother continued, rambling on without notice.

"It's been two whole days. Days, Rose! You could've been killed, or ended up like that girl what was on Casualty, trapped in a coma for years and then what about poor Tony? Having to grow up without a sister, all because that alien nutter couldn't..." Jackie was weeping tears of relief, letting out how much she'd feared losing Rose.

Pete intervened gently. "Jacks, come on, let Rose breathe. She probably needs some air." He fixed her with a look, letting her know he expected some answers as to what had started this when she felt up to it. The accompanying smile he wore told her of his own relief.

Feeling somewhat chagrined at all the worry she'd apparently caused, Rose ducked her head. She nodded numbly, taking a breath before craning her neck to look at the doorway behind Pete. She tried, but she couldn't see the Doctor anywhere. Had they found him yet? Did anyone even know he was gone? No, they had to have. They'd had to have looked for him, looking for answers and an explanation, if they were that concerned about her health. "Where is he? Did you find him yet?"

Pete shook his head, looking grim. "I'm sorry, but we're still looking."

Swinging her feet over the side of the bed, her progress was hampered by the wires attached to her arms. "What--?"

"I wouldn't, if I was you," Pete said dryly. "Wait for the nurse, love."

One soon appeared, looking reluctant to remove all the monitoring equipment, and saying that since they were dealing with a set of unknown symptoms, caused by unknown circumstances, it was highly inadvisable. Pete had waved her away, saying they'd call immediately if anything went amiss. Once she was gone, he turned back, raising a questioning brow.

"But--" Rose was flabbergasted. She recollected her mum saying something about two whole days, but it couldn't be true. She had felt fine when she woke, if a bit out of it, but when her feet finally touched the cool floor, she had to admit a moment where the room spun crazily. Woozy, she sat down, to the sound of her mum's clucking tongue.
"See, Pete, she never listens. This is how it started, too. First that Jimmy Stone, then that broody git that became this daft idiot. Nothing but trouble from the start. I told her it wasn't healthy for a body, but no never mind. Then comes all that jumping universes, looking for that git to warn him, ending up back here, and now this. Typical!" Jackie harrumphed.

"Jacks," Pete cautioned.

"Has it really--?" Rose interrupted, when her mum paused to catch a breath.

Pete exchanged a glance with Jackie before nodding. "Can you tell us what happened, before," brow deeply furrowed, he waved a hand in the air vaguely, "all this?"

Rose took a deep breath, thinking back. Twining a piece of hair through her fingers, she thought back to their darkened flat and him sitting on the balcony looking so torn and tired. "We'd had a row--"

"I knew it! Just wait until I get my hands on him--" Jackie was already working up a full head of steam again, but Rose jumped in before she could go any further.

"It wasn't him! He never even touched me." Rose glared, eyes flashing hotly. She swallowed, looking away. "That's what started the row," she admitted to herself under her breath.

Lack of volume still didn't prevent Jackie's sharp ears from catching that stray remark. "He wouldn't--? Oh, so now you're not good enough for the likes of him," she sputtered. "Hoity-toity little wanna be lordship, him. I'll give him a piece of my mind, I'll tell you."

Gaping slightly at how fast her mum could change gears and seeing why he'd always said her mum was a bit mental, Rose jumped to the Doctor's defense again. "Mum, he had nothing to do with this. Nothing. He left the flat, left me, and I was fine until I woke up. Started getting bad when I went to ask that policewoman if she'd seen him. It's all a bit blurry after that."

Pete winced, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else about now, but bravely staying put and soldiering on. "Do you remember anything else? Anything at all?"

Rose shook her head slowly, biting her lip in concentration. Everything was so disjointed from between when she remembered the DI helping her to sit down, and then later, waking up here. "Just... faces, people I don't know. A park somewhere, with a motorway nearby, I think. But it might've been a dream."

Pete gave her a skeptical look. "A dream? That's it?" He sounded incredulous.

Rose shrugged, diffidently. "If it's all we got," she said, hoping she was wrong, that they had something to go on. "We've gone on less than that before, haven't we?"

"I'll have to look on that," he replied with a sigh and a slow nod, proving she wasn't wrong. That was disheartening, but she tried not to show it. Jackie grabbed her hand, squeezing it in a show of support. She glanced at Pete, knowing if anyone had any real answers or knew of a way to prevent this from happening again, it was the man who was currently missing.

"You said..." Pete paused, clearing his throat before pressing on, "You said 'someone took him', back when the medics first brought you in. Do you know who did this, or why?"

Rose shook her head, face crumpling finally. She'd been holding it in ever since Pete said they were still looking, but if they expected her to know, what hope was there? Something, call it gut instinct, had been telling her when she awoke -- what was it, two, or was it three, mornings ago? -- that
something was really wrong. Her mum was holding her again, crooning to her softly and rubbing her back. "No, it's... he wouldn't do this. I know him, he'd have been back by now, or he'd be over at the garage or something. He'd have been here or done something, something you'd have seen on the telly and the police calling 'round to inquire about it. He'd not just run out, I don't think," she added hopefully, wiping at her tears with resentment. She hated crying. She'd been through too much over the last few years to waste time and energy on something as ineffective as tears.

Pete shook his head regretfully. "No one's seen him. We've got the police looking in on this. They're looking at it as a missing persons case, with foul play involved. Even had a bulletin on the news, the last two nights."

That did it. "I'm getting up," Rose said firmly.

"But, Rose--" Jackie started to protest, and Pete was also looking like he didn't think it was a good idea, either.

"Mum, I have to." Rose was resolute. Lying here in bed wasn't going to solve anything any more than crying would, much less bring him back. Sliding her feet over the side again, she leaned on the bed for support. "He could be out there, hurt or trapped, or anything. If it was me out there lost, wouldn't you want someone to do the same for me?"

Jackie was hesitant, but finally nodded. "But you've been unconscious for almost three days, you've not had anything to eat!"

"I'll grab something on the way," Rose said, standing on her own two unsteady feet and silently cursing whoever came up with the design for hospital gowns. Uncomfortable things, but she'd already spotted the locker in the corner that hopefully contained what she'd been wearing when she got here. If she was lucky, she still had a spare change of clothes in the employee lockers in the other section of the building.

Pete nodded in understanding, leaving the room so she could have some privacy to get dressed. "I'll see about getting you checked out, then we can head over to the Command Center; get you caught up on the investigation."

Rose made her way to the little cupboard quickly, her balance improving with every step, something she was grateful for. Sure enough, fortune was smiling on her, and there were her clothes, trainers too. All those missions that had ended with being covered in alien goo or worse, during the dimension jumps, had put paid to any bashfulness regarding getting dressed in front of someone. Still, she kept her back turned so she wouldn't have to see the worry in her mother's eyes.

"How's Tony," she asked, with a momentary pang of guilt for not asking sooner.

"As can be expected," Jackie sighed. "He missed you, but overall, he hardly seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary, other than me being away here most of the time."

Right. As if that wasn't going to make her feel worse. "Sorry," Rose said softly, hooking her bra. Jackie sighed. "It's not your fault, is it? We've all been so... caught up in things. Forgot what it was like to have that one around, even when he's not actually around," she said ruefully. "Still, it's what you wanted, innit? Him, that bloody box of his -- you all just need to sort yourselves out and figure what you're gonna do."

Rose tried not to roll her eyes as she pulled her shirt on; the trousers were next. They still didn't know where he was; even if they found him today, who knew what sort of condition he was in. Then,
there was the issue with his connection to the growing TARDIS and all the problems that entailed. Knowing him and knowing how stubborn he could be, he could purposefully remain in a blissful state of denial until he was old and grey, never even trying to travel again once it was possible.

"He's not like he used to be," Jackie offered softly. "All that bluff, bluster and charm seems to have fled him. Left when that other him did, it seems."

Rose nodded, closing her eyes. How many times had she thought the same, or wondered how much was from the meta-crisis, or the circumstances they were in, or was just him being him? Then she remembered Krop Tor, when he thought he'd lost the TARDIS for good. He'd been willing to jump into a hole of unknown depth, without even knowing whether he'd ever be able to get back. But remembering that impossible planet helped, since reminded her of something. She turned, a triumphant grin on her face. "That's it! It's the TARDIS!"

Jackie screwed her face up in confusion. "What's a big lump of rock in a tip of a flat got to do with anything?"

Rose pushed her hair behind her ear. "They were connected before," she explained. "He's... slightly psychic."

"No slightly about it, if he can cause this," Jackie retorted in a mutter.

Narrowing her eyes in warning, Rose continued, "If the connection was broken, and his mind's trying to find something to connect to..." She paused, mostly thinking aloud at this point. "It's like a wireless modem on a computer, maybe. Always trying to find a connection, and with nothing else available... he was trying to reach out to whatever he could, and didn't realize it, couldn't control it." That was seemed to make some sense, though she felt a surge of worry when she realized what that meant. "He was broadcasting -- that's what happened, why I collapsed and was out for so long."

Jackie looked uncertain, all of this far beyond her ken. "So he's hurt somewhere? Somebody really did grab him?"

Rose nodded, hurrying to put on her trainers. If she was right, maybe she could find him. That park, she couldn't describe it really, but she'd know it if she saw it with her own eyes. "All of it, the faces, the TARDIS lady, that was him sending out the message, or trying to, at least," she added when she stood up, ready to go.

"Then what're you standing around for?" Jackie snorted, hurrying for the doorway. "Let's go get your father and go fetch that little git, before he's worse off than he already is now!"

Rose blinked in surprise again, before shaking her head in bemusement. Mum was mum, she thought. And right now, I'm not going to even stop to consider why that connection, if there really was one, just suddenly just stopped. Or wonder why she had been the only available connection, since she had a few ideas about that. Hopefully it didn't mean what she feared it might.
Chapter 37

Forty five minutes after the morning briefing and seventy two hours after Rose Tyler had first banged on her car window, back when they'd first learned that Smith was missing, the call came in: "Blood found on a park bench, in a park along the A10 in Hoxton."

There was already a crowd of scene of crime specialists when Gail arrived. Torchwood's agents were enroute already, or so she'd heard. She didn't imagine they'd be lagging behind, considering. The desk sergeant, whose careful combing of the complaints logged in the last few days had caught them the lead, was already there, looking grim. One of the forensic technicians stood by his side. "It's not much, but it is more than what one would expect from someone just barking their shin. Preliminary tests show it's got human DNA mixed in with the sample," the man reported, fussing with the collar to his white overalls. He looked uncomfortable as he added, "We'll have to wait for the big shots over at Torchwood to come in for the final confirmation, since we've not the equipment they do and most of the information on him is still classified."

Gail sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. How did they expect them to run an investigation this way, with everything necessary to ID any evidence they found was all still classified? She could understand not releasing the information beyond anyone completely necessary, but they'd barely even scraped together enough for an E-fit on him. Just a bare minimum physical description and a photograph, one that was barely any better than the ones the tabloids had of him. "We'll have to wait on them, I guess," she sighed. "Good work, Sergeant--" "Whittier, Ma'am."

"Morton," added the SOCO with a nod, before returning to his fellows.

Gail turned away, carefully surveying the area beyond the yellow police tape. A nearly abandoned green that was well tended, with a few trees scattered along the edge bounding the motorway, and a few morning joggers met her sight. Most of them wouldn't have been out this early three days ago, if they kept to regular routines, but perhaps they'd be lucky. "Has anyone spoke to the locals yet, especially the original complainant who called it in?"

Sergeant Whittier nodded, giving her a confident look. "Already underway, ma'am. We've got uniforms combing the area. Nothing has turned up, so far," he said regretfully. "Most were still at home and abed at the hour we've guessed at, provided that's actually correct," he said referring to how little they actually knew about this case. So many uncertainties they had to deal with, on this one. He dismissed himself shortly after, returning to the crowd around the bench to keep watch for the arrival of Torchwood's field agents. They all knew it wouldn't be long before they got here.

Damn, she thought. "They'd have remembered seeing him," she said to herself, thinking about the media coverage so far.

Between the reports on the evening news and the gossip rags going at it full bore, she couldn't imagine there was anyone who didn't know what the Doctor looked like. His face was splashed across every newsstand in the country. This was far beyond the rabid speculation from over a month ago and earlier, when the paps had first spotted him accompanying the Vitex heiress and the events in Shoreditch. That Rose Tyler's condition had, so far, been kept from the press was nothing short of a miracle, in her thinking. A miracle, since the worst of the rags had jumped to the worst of conclusions from the beginning.
"Think he's still alive out there, somewhere?" MacAndrews asked softly, walking up behind her.

Not looking away from watching a man tossing a ball for an energetic spaniel, she shook her head. "I hope he is, but the statistics don't lie," she said truthfully, thinking of what little she'd learned from observing him and Rose for a week. That wasn't much. Riddles wrapped up in enigmas, really.

"What do you think happened, then? I know we've been running this case differently, but if that's his blood, we can likely dismiss the notion of it merely being another domestic and him just taking off on his own," McAndrews suggested diffidently, her eyes on her restlessly shuffling feet.

Gail shook her head, thinking of how closemouthed Pete Tyler had been, regarding his daughter. "Not necessarily. Could've started that way, then turned into something else after someone else got involved. They still refuse to even let us interview the medical team, much less admit what really went on, a week ago. Pah, food poisoning, my arse." She turned back, to look at the PC again. "Even if we, by miracle, find him alive somewhere and he's been kidnapped or something of the like, there's still something hinky about all this."

"No ransom demand," MacAndrews pointed out.

"Exactly. Which makes things a whole lot more grim, if you think about it. Add in the statistical data, and, well..." She sighed, wishing she could wake up and find this was all just a bad dream. A dream she could wake up from and have a laugh about someday. Not bloody likely, as yet.

"You don't expect to find him," the PC replied softly, finally meeting her gaze with shock widened eyes.

"Alive?" Gail raised a brow, considering the possibility. "Honestly, the chances of that are slim to none. If this was someone planning to pull him apart to see what makes him tick and how he's different, then we'll be lucky to even find anything of him left after they're done. Pray God, it wasn't that sort."

"Torchwood's here," Sergeant Whittier announced between puffs as he approached again, nodding toward the black unmarked vans pulling up.

"Right on schedule, then." Gail sucked in a breath, steadying herself. She could do this, not act intimidated. Sure she could, she told herself as they went to greet their counterparts. She was fully prepared for seeing all the paramilitary-like efficiency, the body armor and black uniforms with sidearms like nothing she'd ever been issued. What she was not prepared for was the sight of a very familiar blonde; that set her back in surprise.

"Rose Tyler," she marvelled under her breath. That was an unexpected surprise. The young woman looked pale, tired and frankly unwell, barely any better than when she'd last seen her. Health issues or no, here she was, businesslike as she handed a piece of unknown equipment over to one of her team, all traces of anxiety hidden behind a dutiful mask. It was rather impressive, Gail thought, being able to maintain that level of professional detachment at a time like this. They train them well over there, apparently.

"How's the head," she asked when she got near enough to do so, stepping to avoid the agents setting up their own gear and ignoring the debating between them and the forensics team already on hand.

Rose gave her a distracted smile, one that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Still there, as you can see."

Gail eyed her carefully before saying cautiously, "We are doing our best; haven't stopped looking. This is the only thing that's turned up so far."
Eyes shuttered, Rose nodded, looking away for a moment. "I know -- I was brought up to speed on the way here." She turned back, jaw set with determination and a fierceness in her voice. "We're not giving up, he's still out there somewhere. He's still alive."

Gail gave her a tight smile, trying to be reassuring and hoping she didn't completely fail. "Of course he is."

Rose gave her a glare, resolutely retorting, "Don't patronize me. I'm not just running on misplaced hope. He's still alive, but for how much longer, I don't know," before turning away.

It was mere minutes before there was a shout. One of the team came running up, finally confirming it with a grim nod. "'S definitely his. No one else can mess up a scanner like that one. Readings all over the place and an asrse load of error messages," he said with a careless grunt of exasperation.

"Are you sure, Owen?"

"There's nothing else on this planet that causes an error code 1-19 like him, other than that whole flat over in Hackney, according to the poor bastards still stuck watching that shite hole," the man said, rolling his eyes.

Gail was surprised at the informality, wondering how they ever managed to maintain discipline. She was rather surprised when Rose apologized with, "That's just Owen," like it was a normal state of affairs. "He's a bit of an arse and doesn't really like anyone, much less the Doctor."

Gail raised a very questioning brow at that. "And you've got him looking for him?"

Rose nodded. "He's the only medical doctor who's actually even seen him in that capacity before," she explained. "The only one with any real experience, if necessary. Thought we should have him around, just in case. Even Dad was skeptical on that part. I had to convince him."

Concerned, Gail hesitated, but finally asked, "How long have you even been awake?"

Rose shrugged, not seeming to really care about much beyond the issue at hand. "An hour or so, maybe. Why?"

"You should still be in bed, resting."

Rose gave her a tight lipped half smile, expression one of easy going annoyance. "Mum said the same thing; so did Pete. Had to convince them, too." She shook her head, before moving to join her team in a discussion of the possibilities of using the DNA sample to rig a tracking device.

Gail listened in, stunned. The Met definitely didn't have access to that type of equipment. It was highly impressive, even if it was an idea quickly dismissed with the assessment that there was insufficient sampling and tech on hand to achieve that. Even more shocking was the mention of alien tech that could've done the job, but was currently unavailable.

"Well, his sonic probably could do, but I don't know the right settings for it," she overheard Rose saying to a woman on the team.

"Oh, that's a help," Owen said acidly. "After this, tracking collar, like they've got on the polar bears in Russia, yeah? Might help just a bit next time he goes swanning off on us, spare us all the time and effort."

There was a chorus of shut up, Owens as Gail continued to eavesdrop on the conversation. She'd had little expectations of any real information sharing between Torchwood and the police, even if they
had been doing all the public statements and handling the press, while running a good part of the
search. Listening in like this might be the only choice she had of learning anything, if that little smear
of blood held any major revelations. Apparently not, since even Rose looked more anxious and
frustrated once they broke apart again, the rest all heading back to the vans.

Voices, along with indistinct shapes, moved at the edges of his vision when he finally managed to
force his eyes open again. Lying on his side now, a bitter aftertaste filled his mouth and the smell of
sick was strong. Unable to pull away and finding that the gag had been removed at some point, he
probed the corner of his lip. Finding them dry and cracked, he tasted the coppery salt tang of blood.
He tried to groan, to roll away, but even that small amount of effort seemed too much.

"I told you you mucked this up, Edna."

Someone was bending over him. "What do you mean? His eyes are open now. Been playing possum
on us the whole time, I'd expect."

There was bitterness in the second voice and barely restrained anger; disappointment, too.

"Can't have, look at his eyes. 'Member that lodger Mrs Avery's got hanging about, the medical
student? He said 'check his eyes' and I mean, look at them, does that look right to you? Just like Mr
Isaacson said."

"No." It was grudgingly admitted. "But they're open now, isn't that enough?"

His head pounded, his lower back was filled with a burning sensation. Bugger that, everything hurt.
But hey, they'd at least untied his hands. That would explain the new level of protesting in his highly
aggrieved shoulders. Couldn't even adjust his weight to take some of the pressure off the left one.

"Not hardly," was the retort he vaguely heard.

Funny that, even sounds seemed distant and blurry, just like his vision. A blinding light was shined
directly in his eyes, making him strain to pull away, but he couldn't. Closing his eyes was impossible
he found then, as his body suddenly seemed to be refusing to listen to any of his brain's frantic
commands. This difficulty wasn't going to stop him, nor would he give up as he continued trying to
get the message across to his non-compliant body.

"Look, he should be able to follow that light with his eyes, he'd said."

"So?"

He could hear a lot of resentment in that tone. A lot. If he could've managed it, he'd have winced. Or
then again, not. Could figure out something about his captors this way, what with them thinking he
was unable to hear them. Maybe they'd even feel bad and take him home, let him go, or something.
Anything other than being left to moulder away in this dank cellar, with the cold having crept into his
bones further every time he awoke. Bloody hell, he didn't have the foggiest how long he'd been
down here, even. Could've been hours, days, or even a month; he didn't know. Wasn't sure he
wanted to, either.
"They're not even focusing on anything, woman! He's just lying there, staring away and drooling on 'imself. That's not right, it's not normal. Even you have to see that; Mr Isaacson obviously did."

"So what'll we do?"

"The only thing we can do: protect ourselves and keep the coppers from tracing it back to us."

Oh, that did not sound good. Nope, not at all. C'mon, at least say what you're planning to do to me, he thought. Don't leave me hanging, wondering.

"You mean--?"

"Yup. Leave him somewhere where someone will find him, make it look like something else than what it was."

Consciousness was trying to flee again, black creeping ever tighter around his sight with every breath he forced in and out. Paying attention to his respiration, he pried out a few more minutes of awareness, hoping to know what was happening before he sunk back into the waiting darkness. Pass out at the wrong time now, and he might not be coming out of that dark again. Well, he wasn't going to go softly into that good night. Sod that, he'd be fighting the whole way. If only he could even manage to blink just once. Just once, and he was sure the spell of immobility would be broken.

Funnier still was that bit, as he remembered far too well a whole adventure of that -- doing everything he could to not blink and warning everyone else to do the same. Even ended up stuck in 1969 for a couple months, with poor ol' Martha Jones. And that Billy Shipton, seemed quite taken with her, he did. Quite right, too. Brilliant girl. Wonder what she was up to, back in Universe Prime? Still defending the earth, probably. Hope not with UNIT, them and their bloody Osterhagen thingamabob. Flipping loonies... Ah, good times, those.

Don't blink. Yeah, right. I'd do anything to be able to blink now. Oh, the irony! Forget the universe not being kind, I could deal with that if it wasn't for its sick sense of humor. Oi, is anyone listening out there? I'm bloody well not laughing now, am I? I'm down here, not laughing at all. Not one ha, ho, or chortle, because it's not funny!

"Suicide or an accident, then? Making it look like he offed 'imself would be an easier of it," came a musing voice. "'Course, we'd have to remove anything that's not his -- that shirt'd be a dead giveaway, they'd know if something were a bit dodgy about it all. Can't have them come 'round here lookin', can we now."

Just as I thought. Actually, worse than I thought. This is so not happening. Not here; not now. I didn't come this far, put up with this much shite, just to end up dead somewhere on this stinking backwater of a planet. I don't even bloody know where the hell I am on this miserable little rock!

"And I know just the place. Don't worry, love. I'll clean up this mess for you and we'll just move on from here, try to forget all this palava. Someday we'll get the right opportunity and nothing will go all squiffy on us, yeah?"

Squiffy? For you? Ha! It's been an endless parade of squiffiness for me since I bloody well got here, with a few bright spots in between. Rose. Rassilon, I've got to try harder; get something working before it's too late. I'm running out of time -- ha, the Time Lord, out of time. Ironic, that. Always the same thing, over and over again.

The darkness seemed to be beckoning again, no matter how hard he fought. Bryn and Edna's talking (rowing) was mere background noise, something he mostly tuned out, even as he tried to focus on it
to keep himself awake. Remembering how to move was his biggest goal at the moment, but everything seemed sluggish -- even his own magnificent brain.

"...bridge near the embankment..."

"...someone'll see..."

"...won't if we wait for dark... you heard the report on the radio, they found the park where you grabbed him..."

"...won't be long before..."

"...an idea... we'll be rich, yet..."

Pete had tried to dissuade her, he really had. But he'd given it up for a lost cause, knowing what Rose was like. At least, he thought, she'll not be requisitioning the entire R&D department to go jumping universes this go around. Also, it would help keep her distracted while he dealt with something he'd rather not have her know about just yet.

"Jake," he acknowledged. "Anything yet?"

He'd asked Jake to meet him here, in one of the lower level corridors where people would be less likely to come across them. Couldn't have this getting back to Rose, much less Jackie. They were already worried enough, no need to get them even more het up than they were. Jake had been running a deeper level investigation since he'd gotten back after questioning Chambers thoroughly.

Jake sighed, shaking his head regretfully. "Nothing. Put a tracer on the Earthers, Isaacson; all of them, including the nutters that all post their hate blogs from their mum's basements. Got surveillance on 'em all. So far, just a rally Isaacson had announced then cancelled at the last minute."

That sounded suspicious. "Cancelled?"

Jake huffed, glancing around to see if anyone was coming along. "Website went from saying they had incontrovertible proof of the true threat to all of mankind and the government's involvement in the coverup," he said in a low voice. "All to just wiping the whole thing, with no explanations at all."

Pete's blood froze at that. "Do you think they had him?"

"If they did, sounds like they don't now." Jake scrunched up his face, considering the question. "Can't say he'd be much 'proof' of anything, other than proof of needing a loosening of the requirements for sectioning someone," he snorted, thinking back. "Unless..."

"Unless they'd really done something to him that would show off the differences between him and the average Joe Bloggs," Pete finished, catching his meaning and looking grim. He ran a hand over his thinning hair, thinking if he'd a lock left on his head in a year, it'd be a miracle.
Jake looked as tired as they all did as he made a humorless grimace. "There's nothing good that fits that description, that I can think of. Each one's worse than the last, if you're thinking what I am."

Pete hadn't thought of much else in the last few days, and certainly not since Rose had woken and confirmed that nothing violent had happened between them. "Add in that no one's contacted me wanting a few million pounds in untraceable notes, it's not looking particularly bright, is it?"

"Considering most of the physical differences only pop up if you've got access to the old style medical equipment..." Jake paused, shaking his head. "Already done a check on all the museums, and tracked down the remaining CT scanners and MRI machines left."

"And?"

Pete could guess what had turned up. Those machines were rare these days, most having gone to salvage years ago when the current tech had gotten widespread. He began to pace in the narrow hallway, the physical activity helping to focus his thoughts.

"Unless they've smuggled him out of country, nothing. No one's gone into the National Museum after hours, or been tampering with the one at King's College- checked the CCTV, plus sent a team to check for fingerprints. But, those things are still in use in the less developed areas, yeah?"

Pete stopped, mulling it over. "I can't see him being a willing participant in any of this. One thing is it's not likely any of this was planned, not from the blood spatter left in that park. If they'd planned this, they'd have at least thought to try cleaning it up."

"Crime of opportunity, then."

"Exactly." Pete pursed his lips, clapping his hands behind his back as he began pacing back and forth again. "Means they're less likely to have gone far; possibly knew him or had met him."

"Couldn't have cheesed that many people off that much, could he? Dougal Chambers, well we've eliminated him and his lot."

Pete turned back suddenly. "He'd been sniffing around some smuggling operation, trying to track the origins of the TD gun. Never said who, though." He bit back a frustrated curse. "Never actually says anything that matters, unless someone's got him by the bollocks, does he?"

Jake smiled ruefully. "Rose and Mickey had said the same thing often enough, when they were talking about him."

"Right." Pete had an idea. "Let's go over everything that could possibly have a bearing on this, that he's been all to happy to avoid."

Snorting, Jake shook his head, envisioning years of database and file searches. "Yeah, but where the hell are we gonna start? That covers just about everything that doesn't involve music, telly programmes, films, and complaining about anything and everything under the sun, including most of our customs and culture."

Pete smiled, seeing the obvious. "Start with the police interview a fortnight ago and work from there. He managed to dodge all their questions quite aptly, so there could be something there. I'll get Hartley to send the file over, since I believe it's still an active investigation."

"Great. Open, unsolved murders, just what I always wanted," Jake groused good naturedly. "A whole lotta interest over a dead bloke that the coppers wrote off as finally getting what was coming for running illegal books and fencing stolen goods out the back of his shop."
"A shop, if you remember, that the Doctor was nosing about in, just hours before that murder," he returned archly. Pete raised a brow, frowning. "If the Met went through the hassle of going through the proper channels and all runarounds measures that are in place to keep people away from him just to ask him about it, seems to me someone else might have done the same -- with a hell of a lot less courtesy, too. If they thought he knew something, what's not to say someone else did too? Start with the victim's family and associates -- see if any of them seems likely," he said, waving a hand in dismissal. "Get a team out to go have a bit of a talk, once you do."

"With reps like those, who isn't going to look like they're good for it?" Jake cheekily threw over his shoulder as he went off to continue the hunt. There was a truth to what he said, thought. An undeniable one, at that.

"Bring 'em all in, if you have to. It'll all come out in the end," Pete called after him.

Right. That was that bit sorted. Anything that panned out, Jake would be on the comms to notify him immediately. Rose had a team of agents scouring that park down to the individual blades of grass and the police were already going door to door in Hoxton. He had a feeling that something was going to break soon. Something had to turn up, it just had to.

Half past seven and it already felt like they'd been here for hours. Oh right, they had. She'd long since turned off her mobile, since Mum had been calling more and more, each time more dismissive of their plan. Not that they could actually say they'd gotten much of a result, so far.

"It's like cops and robbers, eh? See anything?"

"No! Skinny idiot just had to go and get curtains, didn't he?" Donna complained, adjusting the opera glasses and squinting harder. "Must've been Rose's doing. It certainly isn't like him."

Wilf looked surprised. "Thought they'd moved down to Wapping, to that posh flat of hers by Torchwood. 'S what he'd said."

She could see occasional movements behind the drapery. Couldn't see much else, but the biggest giveaway was the van parked at the kerb. Of course Torchwood would've cottoned on to that idea and staked the place out. Nothing seemed to be amiss, no telltale smoke or sounds of demolition could be heard from where they sat in her car.

Donna made a noise of sarcastic amusement. "Yeah, except he sorta failed to get the memo on that one, or he's got a different definition of 'moving house' than everyone else has got," she said dryly, not looking away. "Still pretty much keeps holed up there when he can, tinkering away on that loofah of his, trying to get away from here." Or he had done, but she didn't want to think about it in that context. Think positive and all that mumbo jumbo, remember?

Hopefully, no one was messing with said loofah, or they'd have one really unhappy streak of nothing on their hands. Once they found the dumbo, that is. She could almost hear the weeks of whinging, moaning, and carrying on he'd be doing just thinking about it. Suppressing a shudder, she wondered
if this really was a good idea, spying on those Torchwood agents like this. Yeah, Rose worked for
them, but the Doctor hadn't seemed all that impressed with the lot of them. 'Need both hands to find
their own arses, and half the time they'll miss it or lock it up for code violations,' was the last
assessment she'd heard from him. When Rose wasn't around to hear, of course.

Wilf smiled, chuckling. "Everyone needs their place to get away from the world, Donna. Bit of alone
time, with a chance to think does a body good."

"That one's turned it into an art form. He'll have blown himself to smithereens or be halfway across
the galaxy, if it gets much further. If it hasn't already come to that."

"Look, the lights just came on," Wilf said in a low voice, pointing.

"That's been there since we got here, I think. It's just getting darker out here as the sun goes behind
the buildings," Donna murmured.

"It's a peculiar looking light, innit?" Wilf hazarded. "It's not one of those thingies he's got lumbered
away in there, is it?"

"Dunno, Gramps," Donna replied, thinking. It could be, she allowed. She just hoped it didn't mean
one of those weird looking science experiments or gizmos he had wasn't going to be turning them all
into frogs or worse. She'd just gotten her hair done last week, after all. It'd be a shame to have it
ruined so soon. But what else was she to do? If they were all about to end up slimy and covered in
warts because of an unattended toy or because someone thought they'd get clever...

She sighed, making a hasty decision. "Let's head over. Someone has to go make sure no one's
sticking their fingers where they ought not be. I suppose it might as well be us, right?"
"Come on, no use pretending, we know you're in there. Open up!" Donna used the side of her fist to bang on the door to the flat. Hearing a rustling on the other side, she impatiently tried again. "The van sorta gives it away, dumbos."

The door opened, revealing a harried looking man in black fatigues. "Ma'am, you can't..."

Ignoring him, Donna breezed by, striding into the flat, her granddad following behind. "Oi, you! Step away from the rock!" she snapped, seeing another agent leaning close with what looked like some kind of sensors in hand, looking like she'd been poking where she had no business poking. "I'll have you know that's a very important thingamabob to Himself and he'll be thanking you not to touch it."

"But..." came the weak protest from a third one, who'd been lounging on the ratty sofa with some fancy looking bit of equipment with a screen. There were way too many people, around too many things he'd not be wanting anyone near, and who knew what they'd already gotten into or touched. Yup, he'd go off his nut if he knew. Other than that, things were pretty much the same as the last time she'd seen the place. In other words, a tip with oddments of wires, abandoned mugs, half empty jam jars, forgotten biscuits with a bite out of them and dirty clothes left lying about.

"Ma'am, you aren't..." the first one tried again.

Rounding on him, she put her hands on her hips, fixing him with a glare. "Shut it. Now who the hell are you and why are you here, picking over his stuff like bleeding magpies? He's not dead yet, you know."

"We're..." the second agent, a woman, started to say before being interrupted. She looked as worn and frazzled as they all felt, but no never mind that- they had some explaining to do, and they'd best be doing it now.

"This is Torchwood business, you can't be here," the first one cut in pompously.

"I said shut it, she was talking," Donna snapped, pointing a finger in his face. "Now, zip it." Turning to the woman, she waved a hand, indicating that she should continue. "Go on."

"Director Tyler sent us over here to keep an eye on things," the woman said steadily, eyeing her with interest. "I'm Sally Henderson. I've seen you before, hanging out with him and Rose." She paused, looking apologetic. "You really shouldn't be here, the Director would have fits if he knew."

"He's not the only one," Donna retorted, looking around again. Wilf was busy staring at the lump of coral in the corner in wonder and fascination. Donna noticed and smiled. "Is that--?" he asked with hesitation.

"Yup, it sure is."

Wilf looked slightly skeptical. Parallel worlds, alternate versions of themselves, those weren't that hard to believe, he thought to himself. A misshapen lump of rock that looked like a giant loofah like his Donna had said and was roughly the size of a cupboard- now that, that was a little hard to swallow. He shook his head at the thought. "And that's supposed to somehow turn into some kind of magic blue box that he can go travelling in?"
Donna shrugged, refusing to give up hope, any of it. "He said it would grow a bit more; take almost a year, he said. But you know him, head in the clouds, that one."

"Nothing wrong with that, Donna. Happens to the best of us, you know."

The three Torchwood agents looked on, stunned. "Hold on, you know what that thing is?"

Donna rolled her eyes. "Who doesn't? He'll tell just about anyone who'll listen to him for five minutes."

"So it's real, then? It's really real. That thing... is a spaceship?" Sally looked amazed, turning to stare at the object in question.

"Gonna be, provided someone finds its pilot before some loony kills him," she said pointedly, trying to steer things back on topic. "And secondly, why the hell aren't you lot out there looking for him?"

They had the sense to look abashed at that, at least. "Well," the first one, the one who'd tried sending them off, muttered.

"Erm, is that thing supposed to be glowing like that? Donna? Anyone?" Wilf asked, pointing toward the corner where the coral sat.

The ear splitting sound of alarms going off came before any chance to reply, along with those buggers from Torchwood yelling something about energy spikes and all kinds of techno mumbo jumbo. Donna clapped her hands over her ears and waited for the chaos to dial back a notch, so she could ask what the bloody hell was going on.

"Got out of there just in time. Did you see all the panda cars? Enough coppers to turn anybody's day to shite, much less ours."

"We can drop him off at Isaacson's- let him and the Earthers figure out what to do with him. Surely they know how to get rid of a body properly."

It was like swimming up from an impossible depth, up from the comforting dark into a cold and harsh reality. Light burned his eyes, despite being dim and intermittent, even as the dark was calling him back; the sensation of movement slowly bringing him further out of the deep. Suppressing a groan, he forced down the feeling of disorientation and tried assessing his surroundings. Coarse fabric under his cheek; an unyielding surface beyond that, biting into shoulder, hip and leg; the faint smell of petrol and exhaust all around him -- definitely not the basement. Whether that was a relief or a cause for more concern, that was yet to be seen. Still, it told him he was in a vehicle. Most likely, it was the same one that he'd been transported in before.

"But... the money! Don't tell me I went through all that trouble getting him, just to end up with nothing out of it!"

"Why? You got to play hostess to a half alien for a couple days, plus a very important member of Parliament. It's not many of the likes of us that can say that, now can they?"
"But..."

"Hush now. Only a few streets over from here, I think. Have you got those directions Les gave us handy?"

"We're in the wrong part of town, I tell you. Turn around!"

"It said 'go right when you come to Farringdon Road', didn't it?"

Smells assaulted his nose as he came closer to the surface, making him curse the inefficiency of human bladders because, blimey, he stank. He could smell the coppery tang of his own blood, feel the stickiness of it on the side of his face, too. Oh, and he was thirsty, so thirsty. And sore, and tired and his head hurt and all he really wanted to do was go back to sleep. Sleep, where he wouldn't notice bodily discomforts or the fact that the van he was in was slowing.

"That was supposed to be a left! Turn around, I tell you. We'll be halfway to Heathrow, at this rate, driving loops around the zeppelin port, you knob."

"Don't blame me! You were the one supposed to be doing the navigation!"

Right, that bit might be important. Very important, at that. Might want to be awake for it, do something about it. At least try for a groan of protest...

When a sudden halt threw him forward, then back, against a solid vertical surface, he managed to use the little boost from the momentum to get himself partially righted. The sounds of arguing from the front and cursing covered any noise he'd made, leaving him with a brief opportunity to assess his surroundings. Dizziness assaulted his senses, kicking the headache into high gear, but he'd been right -- it was the back of a van. He was propped haphazardly against the rear doors and he could make out the fuzzy edges of an inside latch to them. Well, everything was a bit fuzzy, muddled too, but what else could he expect? He felt like he'd had an argument with a lorry and lost and his thoughts seemed like they were trying to wade through a flood of treacle.

But hey, he'd somehow gotten one arm to flop in the right direction, towards the doors. Looked like things might be looking up. Taking more focus and effort than he'd ever have imagined, he inched his hand up the doors. The first weak attempt failed just as the row up front got more lively. Luckily, it covered the sound of his second go at it, the one that miraculously worked.

A breath of fresh air, then a sudden drop as he fell with a startled yelp, eliciting an even louder one when he landed almost headfirst on the macadam.

Oh, that hurt, really hurt. Bloody flipping hell, now wasn't that wizard...

"Christ, Edna, the little bastard's getting away!"

"Well, go on, what're you waiting for? Don't just sit there, get him!"

Groaning, he lay there on his side, struggling to keep himself awake. Intellectually, he knew that getting up and scurrying off before they nabbed him again was a priority, but somehow his limbs were back to noncompliance again and sleep seemed like a brilliant idea.

"Oh no you don't, laddie boy. Not getting away that easily."

A rough pair of hands grabbed him by the shoulders as another pulled his head back by the hair. Blearily, he eyed them from under heavy lids as they forced him to look at them. Blurry faces swam before his eyes, making the dizziness and vertigo worse. He just wanted to go to sleep, see if it all
would just go away if he did, but he knew that wasn't likely to work.

"Dunno, we could always just dump him at Isaacson's, then maybe go after that girl of his. She'd be an asset to them, even if she doesn't exactly make it in the best of health. Prime example of what happens when you go about with his sort," he heard Edna say musingly.

Hearing that summoned enough reserves of energy and determination to bring things into clarity. Clarity and rage, ice cold and burning hot at the same time, and oh, they had no idea what they were messing with. Right, fun and games is over now, kiddies, he thought as he looked them full in the face. One by one, he let all the shields drop, all those happy little façades that fooled these stupid little apes into thinking he was one of them. A sweeping hum that was reminiscent of something he knew would technically be termed 'tinnitus' rang in his ears as he grabbed the hands holding him and used them to force himself upright.

Edna's shocked gasp and Bryn's muttered curse barely registered in his awareness, his focus on controlling his rubbery legs was so strong. With strength he didn't know he had, he stood, looming over his captors as best he could. "You... will not... touch... her," he managed to grind out, tongue so dry and thick feeling it felt like a foreign object.

"Or what, you'll glare at us?" Edna scoffed. "You can barely even stand, what're you gonna do about it?"

"Try me." Yeah, sixty two thousand miles around, hurtling around the sun on the skin of this tiny planet... sure as hell didn't help the old balance, did it? Rassilon, he needed a cuppa and a lie in. A pint wouldn't go too far wrong, either. Oh, right. Focus, intimidating the bad guys here...

Edna turned to Bryn, dismissing him. "Don't just stand there gaping, you fool. Grab 'im and shove him in the back, before someone comes along, sees him, and starts asking questions. Since he's up and moving, they'll hand over the dosh for 'im now."

Bryn grabbed him from behind again, as if to do as told, but he latched on to one of the grasping hands with rapidly failing strength. A reddish glow was gathering around the edges of his vision as he summoned the last of his willpower. The waiting dark wasn't far, but oh, how liberating it was, to take the guilt and rage from all his years, all wrapped up in a ball with memories of watching entire worlds vanishing into dust, and push it into the man's head. Went and forced him to see the last vision of Gallifrey he had as he'd laid against the TARDIS console, hand still on the Moment, watching and dying inside. He was completely unaware of the humorless grin on his face as he did, just the sudden rush and a distant echo of a voice calling his name.

"If I could do that to an entire planet, just think what I could do to you. Just think, how little effort it would take."

Seeing Bryn's hands go to his head and scream in terror, Edna trying to muckle ahold of him to force him away from her husband and getting caught in the backwash -- it didn't matter, none of it.

"Just think of what I could do if I wanted, if I had to, if you force me to, and just think how little effort it really would be, you stupid little ape."

Mercy was well and good, but he didn't give second chances, especially when they threatened Rose, even if it was just a casual comment, even if their chances of getting near here now were slim to none. As for what they'd already done to him, well, that was just another shite day on top of centuries' worth of worse, he'd forgive that bit.

The connection was weak, unsustainable in his current state, and when it suddenly snapped, he
rocked back on his heels, almost collapsing. Rallying at the last moment, before gravity could take over, he was treated to the sight of Bryn and Edna getting in their van. The squealing tyres as they left, well, that just made him smile; for real this time.

Doing all that had taken a lot out of him, while a warm trickle on his lip was running down his chin and annoying him slightly. Brushing it away impatiently, he barely noticed the smear of blood because he had other concerns. Far more pressing ones, at that. The dark was surging ahead, trying to reclaim him again, to pull him down to its peaceful depths. A golden glow was growing around him, coming from behind. He turned, feet tangling and dropping him in an ungainly heap.

_Time to pay the piper_, he thought as he struggled to keep from slipping under, slipping away nonetheless. _Wonder what's on yonder shore..._

Someone had the sense to shut off that godforsaken racket before they'd not any ears left to hear with, but that's when things really went mad. People in those spiffy black fatigues seemed to come out of the woodworks, all swarming about and checking 'readings' on those fancy gizmos they all had. People Wilf didn't even recognize, all seemed to come from everywhere; all acting authoritative and getting all het up about 'unknown energies' and 'rifts' and something about a 'dimensional cannon'. He couldn't imagine what that could be, but apparently it had them all fussled. As they were jawing away about walls and things like that, he pulled at Donna's sleeve, urging her away. "Come on, don't think staying here will do any good, eh? It's people what done it, not funny energy thingies. Staying here isn't gonna get us anywhere and it won't be finding him, I don't reckon."

Donna nodded slowly, considering. "I suppose you're right," she admitted grudgingly. She gave one last look around. "They're all distracted here, might as well get out there and keep looking."

It was full dark as they were cruising the streets, scanning for any signs of him. Police patrols were going door to door in Hoxton, according to the radio. They saw nothing likely, just the usual assortment of ASBOs and tramps, lounging about on street corners, along with frequent sightings of police. Driving well beyond that, they looked for an area that wasn't being searched yet. They were in the warren of mews and side streets between Finsbury and Kings Cross when Wilf spotted something caught in the head lamps glow.

"Donna," he cautioned even as she was braking, having seen the same thing when he did.

"Great, drunken punters in the streets at this hour, isn't that flipping cute," she complained, just as the person stumbled, then fell heavily.

"Donna, it's not--" Wilf was already hurriedly unbuckling his lap belt, having glimpsed a brown tousle of hair that looked very familiar. It had been years since he'd moved that fast, even his old arthritic knees weren't bothering to protest in the face of something far more pressing than age and use. Donna was right behind him, getting there seconds after him. She'd have gotten there long before him, since the years weren't upon her her like they were him, but she was busy hunting down that mobile of hers to call 999.
"Oi, you lot with the ambulances and crap, get here now. We've found him," he could hear Donna yelling into the phone, in between snarking about dodgy reception on her mobile.

"Oh lad, what'd they do to you," he said sadly, easing down and pulling the Doctor into his arms. Frightfully pale, he was, and a proper mess with half a week's worth of whiskers that only made him look worse and clothes all half gone to rags. Pale enough that all those freckles of his looked like they were painted on when he opened his eyes partway and whispered "Gramps" hoarsely, coughing a little after he did. He was all floppy as a rag doll, too. That set fear into an old man's heart, more than anything else he saw then.

"Who the hell do you think I mean?" Donna was yelling nearby. "It's the damn Doctor, so bloody well shift your arses. PRONTO, bucko."

"Hush now, help's on its way, you hear? Donna's got them on the line now," he said, pushing the fringe from a clammy brow with a soothing hand. He wasn't going to fuss over the spots of blood he saw on dry, cracked lips, or let on how bad it looked, so's he'd not make him give up fighting. "You just hang in there, son, they'll have you fixed up proper before you know it."

"Hurts... everything's so dark... so cold... tired, Gramps, so... tired..." Another cough, one that shook a frame that was even skinnier than he'd last seen him.

"Where am I? How the hell should I know? Don't you have those fancy location thingies that I pay taxes on? Use that!" Donna was getting louder by the minute and venting her frustration, but Wilf hoped it would help keep the Doctor awake. It looked to be working, since his legs twitched a bit when she got a bit louder. "Don't 'Lady' me, just hurry up and get here now. Now, before he flipping carks it!"

Almost frail now, he thought angrily when a sudden movement brought a sharp shoulder blade up against his stomach. Heavens, the boy was withering away. Couldn't be bothered to feed him, could they? He gave the Doctor a little shake, forcing him to focus on him instead of having a kip now. "Now, now. You'll be fine, you'll see. Promised me a ride in that box of yours, you did, and Donna's talking to them, telling them where we are. Don't want them to come all this way for nothing do you?"

Eyes, that he wasn't sure could see, rolled away from his. "Donna's here?"

"You can't hear her shouting?" Wilf half joked, blinking away moisture that felt suspiciously like tears. He couldn't say he'd ever seen anyone look this bad and make it to tell.

Those dark eyes almost closed, a breathy laugh that ended on a groan as the Doctor whispered, "Quite right, too. At least... this Donna won't have to forget... I won't have to..."

Wilf didn't know whether to tell him to save his strength, since he wasn't sure he wanted to know what that meant, or to keep him talking so he'd stay with them long enough for the medics to get there. "How could anyone forget you? You're rather unforgettable, my boy?" He forced himself to smile. Hopefully it was a reassuring smile, even if it didn't feel like it.

"I did it, you... know? Or would've had to... other me, I suppose...my fault, really... if it weren't for me... she'd have..." That voice of his, always rambling off on tangents, was getting weaker by the second and his eyes were losing focus even faster. Wilf couldn't be sure the poor boy could even see him when he called Donna over and told her to hurry.

"Oh, Spaceman," she breathed, as she dropped next to them to take an out flung and limp hand, voice cracking as she spoke. Her mobile lay beside her, momentarily forgotten. The person on the
other end of the line was still nattering away, unheard.

"Tell Rose," the Doctor muttered, before falling silent and slumping down more.

"Tell her what, Doctor?" Donna pressed, pulling his hand up to cradle it against her cheek.

"Boy? Lad? C'mon, say something," Wilf pleaded, giving him a cautious shake when there was no reply.

It didn't matter anyhow, they could hear the sirens blaring away in the distance, speeding their way here. The only thing that mattered was if they'd get there in time. Like the boy's said so many times, it always came down to that, Wilf recalled as he cradled a body against his that was rapidly getting heavier and slacker against his own.

"You..." came a hoarse wheeze suddenly, surprising them both, though it was unclear who he was speaking to. "'S not the same... it? Not... like the... old days... when I stole you... and you stole... me... Is it?"

Of all things, laying there, freezing his arse off on that miserable tarmac, and there she was. Her, that lady in the ball gown that looked like she'd escaped the nut farm, here. Of all the things to see. At least he knew who she was now. And oh, right, unless his calculations were wrong -- which he doubted, cleverest person on the planet and all that -- he might just be dying right now. Not that he could say, since every time he'd gotten this far along, the regeneration energy was already kicking in and all systems were either shutting down or going all out in preparation for the change. No regeneration and only one heart... yeah, that might bollox things up a bit, since he was pretty sure the connection between him and his counterpart in the other universe was gone. Couldn't be expecting Him to go conveniently changing faces every time he hit a spot of trouble and needed a boost...

But here she was, the Old Girl, coming to check on him. He'd rather it was Rose, seeing as this might be his last goodbye for all he knew... but he had the suspicion she'd probably kill him for this. Yeah, kill me for dying. Resurrect me just to do me in all over again... no, but she wouldn't be happy. Not at all. Still, it would be nice to see her one last time... Though, her mother would probably raise me from death just to slap me back to it...

Restraining the urge to laugh at the absurdity of everything, he said, "It's not the same, is it? You and I? Not like the old days, oh such a long time ago, back when I stole you and you stole me, however that's supposed to go. Is it?"

Laughing wouldn't be good; laughing made him hurt, like breathing, moving and everything else that involved being awake. Must've landed on those ribs again, like usual. That, or forcing a telepathic connection had gone a step too far, further than he should've done. Too late to moan about it now, he gathered.

"Come off it, Sprout. Not letting you off that easy." She gave him a rough prod with one of her patent leather, high buttoning shoes.

"You're anot absolute cow, you know that, right?" He wondered vaguely if they had button hooks
on this plain, or if it was just part of his mind trying to make sense of the impossible.

"Tell me that when you're whinging cos you're sick of landing on Clom for a month of Sundays," she said with a smug look. "If you were half as impressive as you think you are, you'd know I'm right."

And then she vanished, like she always did, leaving him back swimming in that dark and all confused again. At least he couldn't feel the cold down here, his head didn't hurt, and Gramps had said someone was coming to take him home.

Home.

Somewhere, somewhen, in a land so very far away that was lost to time, twin suns were rising over mountains covered in red grass and trees with silver leaves. And when the light from those twin suns would hit those silver leaves, the forests would look like they'd been set afire....

Rose....?
Chapter 39

Jackie had gone home finally, at Pete's insistence. After all, it wasn't fair to Tony, now was it, for both her and Pete to be gone this whole time, with only Mabel to keep him sorted. Oh, he was in the best of hands, since she'd raised her own three boys, but Mabel wasn't the same as having his own mum. Plus, it was a relief to watch him play innocently and blissfully unaware of what went on in the world beyond home. Watching him push his toy autos about on the carpet in the den, cartoons on the telly and seeing a face that was untouched by all this -- it was bliss, at that. She just couldn't help but wonder how long it'd be, before he was old enough to get caught up in all this mess, too.

"Look, Mum, it's blue," he said, holding up a little car for her inspection.

"Yes, it is." Jackie couldn't help but feel proud. Only four, and knew all his colors. Thanks to that daft alien. Though God knows, he could've done it the normal way, instead of 'red for the devil, trapped on Krop Tor; green for the Slitheen with vinegar, splattered on the floor...'

"Why're you sad, Mummy?" Tony was standing by her knee, looking concerned, eyes large and worried.

"Oh, love," she said, pulling him into her arms. "Just being silly. Now, go back and play; tea is in another hour, so you'll have to go get washed up soon."

"Yes, Mummy," he said solemnly, before going back to his toys. He kept looking up questioningly, able to tell that something wasn't like it normally was, but he was used to odd happenings in his life.

Comings and goings at odd hours; her, Pete, and Rose being absent at random times; all things that were, unfortunately, normal for them. But she didn't know what else to tell him. Couldn't just go explaining the harsh realities of the world to him yet, he was barely even making it through the night without accidents yet. She'd told him about not going with strangers, the rest could wait til he was older. After all, he was already staring nervously at statues, wouldn't go near the library, and from what she gathered, having someone dress up like Father Christmas was out, too, and from what she gathered, having someone dress up like Father Christmas was out, too, and that last time she'd let the Doctor tell him bedtime stories again. Bad enough, he was asking for a puppy with no nose and now insisted cats were evil and kept sick people stashed in cages. She'd already decided to have a serious talk with the Doctor about scaring the wits out of young boys after that, since he'd done it before and hadn't heeded her threat of a smack, but she'd never gotten around to it. Now, she wouldn't have minded so much, other than the part about getting wakened by a screaming child in the middle of the night and her worries about what it all was doing to poor Tony's head. Along with everything else, that is.

That whole afternoon had passed so slowly and by the time teatime rolled around, it seemed like forever. Jackie fed her little boy his meal of mashed swedes and fish fingers, too distracted to bother about getting her own at the time. She'd wait until Pete got home, if he did manage it tonight. No telling when that would be, if he did manage it tonight. No telling when that would be, if he did, what with everyone out looking for Himself. Hopefully, there'd be something, some clue or someone who'd seen him.

Anything, so this could all be over and they could try to remember what normal was. Then all the running off to this emergency, or that emergency, and all the universe-ending catastrophes could stop. Mebbe they could even all sit down for a nice meal, for a change. Have a meal, watch telly, complain about the neighbors -- anything, as long as it was normal. No aliens, other than the one her daughter had brought home; no loonies or mad scientists, other than that plum; no gubbins what
could wipe out half the city, just everything blessedly normal for once.

"Then again, what was normal, when you're living in a parallel world, married to the parallel version of your dead husband and your daughter's living with a half alien, who's a duplicate of a real alien that flies about in a box in another universe? Normal, ha! Pah, we're all completely barmy, so to hell with normal," she harrumphed to herself. "Wouldn't know it if it hit me upside the head, by now."

Mabel came in when she was readying Tony for bed. "Any news, ma'am?" she called softly from the doorway of the loo, as she was running the water for Tony's bath. Jackie startled a bit, not having heard her approach. She shook her head, listening. She could hear Tony in the other room, playing quietly. "Not yet. But if there's a call..."

Mabel nodded understandingly. "I'll watch him, don't worry about that, ma'am."

Jackie was grateful beyond words. "You're a love. It's too much, asking you do all this extra, but these last few days..."

"It's my pleasure, Mrs Tyler. Anything I can do to help. I rather miss the little blighter, myself," she huffed softly. "If they do call..."

"I'll let you know," Jackie assured her, turning off the tap. The tub was set, but she couldn't find the energy to stand up yet. So much had gone on in the last three days, and the week before that too, and now she felt so drained. They all were.

"Good. Tell him there's extra banana biscuits that won't be eating themselves."

Jackie smiled at that. Despite the snarking and threats that came from the kitchens every time he was around and him getting into everything and messing with the appliances, all in the name of 'improving' them, Mabel was obviously fond of the Doctor.

"How's Rose? Mr Tyler called around noon and said she was up and about."

Jackie sighed, waving a hand sadly. "Off looking for him with everyone else. Says she's fine, but you wouldn't know it, looking at her. Wouldn't pay no heed about getting any bed rest, either. Doesn't listen and never has, always has to keep going at whatever she's doing. Lord only knows what'll happen, if they don't..." She stopped herself, closing her eyes.

"Something's got to give, ma'am. I know it from the bottom of my heart," Mabel said resolutely.

Jackie used a hand on the side of the cool porcelain to push herself to standing. "Yeah," she said, chuckling under her breath as she wiped at her eyes. "As long as it's not our nerves. Can't take much more, all this waiting's getting a bit old by now. Feels like I'm sitting on my thumbs."

When the call did finally come a couple hours later, all she could do was hope, pray, and go speeding off to Torchwood to go find Rose. She went to find Rose and hoped the whole time they'd not have to go pick up the pieces of her daughter's shattered heart after all this mess.

A whole day spent checking over every blade of grass in that ruddy park; even more time spent interviewing local residents. All for naught, so far. Gail had gone along when the Torchwood agents
had conducted their own interview with the erasable older gent who'd first called to complain about vagrants taking up residence in the park. He'd been unimpressed finding out who he'd really seen and he wasn't sure of the identity of the woman he'd seen with the Doctor. "Forties, I'd say, may'aps older. Comes about on occasion, acting like she's a royal or sommat," he'd said with a sniff.

"Do you know where she lives?" Rose had pressed, sounding hopeful. She had brought some pictures of people known to be associated with the Earthers and Issacson, but he'd not recognized any of them.

The old man had given offended look at that particular question. "Couldn't be bothered to find out. They let all sorts come around this place these days. No one's got any sense of staying where they belong. Jumped up beyond their station, the lot." He had shaken his head at that.

Seeing they weren't going to get anywhere with that, they'd thanked him and bid him good day, ignoring his further complaints about society today. Gail had been quite relieved to be out of there, but it was more frustrating knowing they weren't any further along with locating the Doctor.

"Could he have originally gone with her willingly?" she asked Rose cautiously. "Do you think he knew whoever it was?"

Rose had shrugged wearily, shoulders slumping. "Could have. He'll talk to anyone that seems friendly; made friends with half the neighborhood in Hackney within a couple days, back when..."

Rose had paused, eyes distant as she remembered. "Everything seemed much simpler back then. Just him and me, not a care in the world beyond the immediate future, even with Ferguson out looking for him and the whole world thinking he'd kidnapped me. It was almost like the old days, an adventure."

"Odd sort of adventure, if you ask me," Gail had replied archly, holding back from asking any of the many questions she still had. It hadn't been the time, nor the place then. So many things would have to wait, like hoping for answers. Answers where there weren't any to be had, her sister would've probably told her.

But that was then, when the sun was still shining on one of the last days of summer, when they were still searching desperately, and the call hadn't come in yet. And then, just after dark, someone found him, lying in a street in Finsbury. Once that call came in and the dispatchers relayed the message to all of the emergency services, then everything changed gears. It all changed from a rescue and recovery operation, to an all out mad rush to see what kind of follow up investigation it was going to be.

The language they used on the radio was coded, leaving no one beyond the medics that responded to the scene with any idea of what sort of condition he was in. However, they all could draw some conclusions from the call for Torchwood medical to be on standby.

News spread fast. There was already a small crowd gathered, people huddled around the chaos in the middle of the emergency lights on that narrow back street. Police barricades were already in place when they pulled in, the Torchwood van parking behind Gail's own vehicle. McAndrews had ridden with her, sitting silent and watchful on the whole trip. There had been no conversation on the way, with both their thoughts held in close behind shuttered eyes and faces pinched tight with concern.

Gail stopped to stand for a moment at the edge of the crowd while the others pushed ahead, just taking everything in for a moment; letting it all wash over her, while the red flashing lights cast everything in an eerie light. Saw Rose stutter to a halt at the edge of the barrier, either unwilling or unable to go any further, even though the traffic warden would've let her through. Saw the girl crumple, crying against one of her team members, seeing something Gail herself couldn't through the
mass of people. Everything seemed to go impossibly fast, while time seemed to slow and halt into
snapshots in those moments.

Memories like snapshots, some of an old man, standing with a ginger woman, close by the
ambulance itself. A glimpse of a flushed and harried looking medic, who was wearing an expression
of feeling rather overwhelmed. Pete Tyler standing there, arguing with another medic, saying
something about no medications were to be used. It all was sort of surreal. Chaos was only to be
expected at scenes like this, but add in Torchwood's involvement and the growing crowd of
watchers, this was a whole dimension beyond that.

"He'd have a fit, if he knew all this fuss was going on," an unfamiliar, harsh rumble commented from
nearby. Gail turned on her heel, wheeling to see who it was. Standing at the mouth of an alley,
beside a rubbish tip, the man was tall, heavy set and bearded. One of the biker gang that he was
known to associate with, she quickly gathered.

He jerked his head toward the commotion. "Tell that lot, we'll handle the rest. Botch this, and there'll
be hell to pay. Tell them. He'd better walk away from this, if they know what's good for 'em."

Gail swallowed, nodding, completely unsure of what to say. Was that a threat? It sounded like it was,
but to whom? Should she be doing something about it or no? After all, she was the police, even if
this didn't quite feel like part her duty at the time.

The man smiled one of those grim, not so friendly smiles. "Oh, and that's a promise," he added
before stepping back into the shadows, disappearing like he'd never been. Briefly, Gail caught a hint
of movement in the alley, like there were others there as well, but she wouldn't swear to it.

"Come on, lad, your lift's here," Wilf murmured, giving the Doctor a gentle nudge. He wasn't
surprised to get no response, since he was completely out of it, breathing rough uneven as he was.
The medics hurried up, pulling the slack frame gently from his arms. Wilf was reluctant to give up
his charge, but the medics seemed to know what they were doing as the fitted the lad with one of
those neck collars and an oxygen mask. Everything was a blur of hurried but efficient activity, as
they were getting him loaded on a gurney.

People were showing up, police and Torchwood vehicles lining the street, but Wilf didn't pay them
no mind. He was busy watching them check the Doctor over and trying to get a response. They
weren't having any luck, voices sounding strained and one of them shouting into a radio about
needing immediate assistance. It was bad, he knew it was, but it was going to come out alright,
wasn't it?

Sure, the boy looked a bit rough and seeing the side of his head in the light wasn't something he'd be
forgetting for yonks, but they knew what they were doing, didn't they? They'd get him all fixed up in
no time; have him back on his feet and all that, he was sure of it.

"Gramps," Donna murmured, burying her head against his shoulder, stricken when as she saw how
much blood slicked that thick mane of hair against the side of his head.

"It'll be alright, my girl," Wilf murmured, trying to sound more positive than he felt. "Head wounds,
they bleed a lot. Thick skull, he's got."

Donna snorted, the sound muffled and sounding a little teary. "You think? He almost blew himself to
"Smithereens just over a month ago."

"An' he bounced back from that just fine," Wilf added, watching the medics. One had cut off the Doctor's t-shirt, checking him for more injuries, while the other was putting a needle in his arm. There was another by his head, shining a torch on his head wound and looking grim.

"God, Gramps. Rose, does she even know yet? She'll need to know, has someone..." She fumbled around for her mobile, not remembering where it had gone after she'd made the call to emergency services.

Wilf turned his head away, not wanting to look any longer because it was too much. Almost stomach turning, he thought. He caught a flash of blonde on the edge of the crowd. "Hey," he said, nudging Donna. "She's here."

"Who?" Donna asked, voice thick with tears.

"Rose."

It had started out like a dream come true, hearing they'd found him finally. Rose had been full of so much relief and hope, all the way there, sitting in the jump seat, surrounded by her team. She should've known, the way no one was talking, the way everyone was so closemouthed. All that coded talk on the police radios, going back and forth between dispatch and the ambulance crew, so different from Torchwood's own coded lingo, but she should have known. She'd expected him to be maybe a bit sore, a bit tired, hungry and maybe a little roughed up. Who knows what they'd done to him, but he'd been in half the prisons and dungeons in the other universe, how bad could it be? Seemed like a visit to another planet wasn't complete without a tour of the local jail, up close and personal, back then when they'd been travelling. Not even the condition he'd been in when they'd found him in the rubble in Shoreditch could've prepared her for this, however.

The first sight of him she got, all she saw was an arm hanging limp on the tarmac as the swarm of medics were readying the gurney. "Doctor!" she yelled, letting him know she was there. A couple people glanced over, but no one said anything and he didn't respond. Then someone moved, and she knew why.

It hit her like a punch in the stomach, everything seeming to spin and it was all she could do to even stand. Someone grabbed her to steady her, but she didn't see who it was. Couldn't have really cared about anything on that side of the barricade she was clinging to just to stay upright. Even back in the bunker, he'd not looked that bad. Rose had to close her eyes, willing it all to just be a dream, a horrible nightmare. But it wasn't. Everything, from the first drops of rain she felt on her face and shoulders, to the growing headache she felt settling around her temples, told her it was all too real.

Pete was arguing with a medic about not using any drugs on him, since most of the ones they had wouldn't work or could kill him. Paps and gawkers were showing up by the dozen, flashbulbs going off every few seconds. Distantly, over the roaring sound in her ears, she heard the police ordering them back, out of the way. She wanted to go to him, see how bad it really was, to hold his hand, but she couldn't seem to make her feet move. It was like they were rooted to the ground, watching them load him into the back of the ambulance.
Then somehow, Wilf and Donna were there. Wilf gathered her into his arms, making shushing noises, while Donna was chanting, "He's gonna be fine, everything's gonna be alright," like it was a mantra or she was trying to convince herself.

Rose pulled herself away, still feeling unsteady on her feet. After the Canary Wharf and all those jumps, going so far to find him again and ending up back here, and then the Old Ones- now, this. He'd been so miserable here, all the adjusting to the slow path, and everything seemingly against him. Wilf kept trying to turn her away so she wouldn't have to look and she didn't want to look, but she couldn't make herself stop. She kept thinking it might be the last chance she had; that she'd not get to say goodbye, like with the other Doctor on the beach...

"Rose, listen to me," Donna said sharply, grabbing her, turning her about, and shaking her slightly. "If he was gonna..." She paused and swallowed. "If it was gonna come to that, they'd not be keeping everyone away from him like this. They'd be bringing you over to him, if it was that. They all know, you see?" Donna pointed.

Sure enough, Pete was standing over beyond the medics, looking stressed and tired, but not hopeless. He looked up, met her eye, and gave her a tight nod that gave her some hope. It wasn't over yet.

"Come on, we'll give you a lift to hospital," Wilf said softly. "He'll be happy to see you once he wakes up."

"Then you can listen to him whinging about his head hurting for hours on end," Donna teased with a brittle smile, trying to lighten the mood. "It'll be bad enough that you'll want to knock him on the head, just to shut him up again."

Pete caught sight of Owen, frantically motioning for him to go ahead of the ambulance. They were heading direct to the medical unit at Canary Wharf and despite his own reservations, Harper was the only one who had any real medical knowledge. Orders for the antiquated style MRIs and x-ray machines were already in, both on their way there from the National Museum. After this, he decided, they'd be purchasing and keeping something similar on hand, since it looked like they'd be needing it in future. It was laughable, they had all the latest tech and most of it was nigh on useless for dealing with one alien hybrid.

But the ambulance was pulling out, the crowd of lookieloos, still rubberneeking, and the reporters, still snapping photos. Such was life, he thought. One of the medics had handed him the shredded remains of a shirt in a clear bag, just before they left. That would be going in to the labs to be analyzed for evidence, along with the rest of the Doctor's clothes, once they got them off him. Pete had sent an agent along with the medics as extra hands and in case he woke and was able to tell them who'd taken him. That was one question, out of many, that still needed answering.

Once at Torchwood, there were what seemed like hours of waiting, in one of those rooms that smelled of quiet desperation and ringed about the edges with uncomfortable chairs and a telly on mute in the corner. Rose and Jackie were already there, along with Wilfred Mott and his
granddaughter. Sylvia Noble had turned up halfway through the first hour, joining them in their near silent wait. It was silent because there was too much to be said, with no way to say it, and nothing much anyone dared say, for fear they'd be wrong. Or worse, that they'd be right. So they waited, nearly breathless for the three and a half hours it took before Owen came in, looking tired and frustrated.

He sighed grumpily when he saw them. "He's alive, if that's what you're wondering," he said gracelessly. "Not that I can do fuck all about any of it, so if he lives, he lives. If he doesn't, then you get to plan a lovely funeral and have cakes," he added with a noncommittal shrug.

Pete restrained Jackie, immune to Owen's attitude and lack of bedside manner after several years of experience. Wilf was doing the same with Donna and Sylvia nearby. "How bad is it?" he asked bluntly, with an eye on Rose. She looked somewhere between stricken and angry, but they all were, for various reasons. Owen, being an arse, was the least of it. That was the only bit of normal to all this, he reckoned.

Owen pursed his lips, considering. "Well..."

"Nicely," Pete cautioned him, sounding stern.

"Won't know, really, until he's awake more. He's not comatose. If you really poke and prod, you can wake him, but he comes up swinging. Hell of a slap on him," he said ruefully. "Nearly clipped me a good one."

"And?" Jackie prodded, glaring. "What'd those bastards do to him?"

Owen held up a hand, ticking things off on his fingers as he went through the list. "Severe head trauma, brain hemorrhage, that seems to have stopped on its own; cracked skull, with a gash that earned him a shed load of sutures; severe dehydration; and oh, someone poked him with a knife. Wouldn't amount to anything much, 'cept no one cleaned it, left him in his own mess and now it's infected. Can't do anything about any of it, since everything I know of is useless or will probably kill him now."

Pete raised a questioning brow. "I thought you went through the list of human medications he could take when he came in for his medical," he said in an ominous voice. If this was the result of an oversight...

"So, you mean you've done nothing for him," Donna cut in suddenly, sounding dangerously close to going off her nut. "Nothing at all? Are you kidding me, you prat? Not a damn thing!"

Jackie looked like she agreed, but Rose was staying out of the exchange, clearly waiting to hear something further.

Owen scowled, raising his chin as he spoke in his own defence, "Got as far as going through the antibiotics he could possibly take, the one time he actually came in, but then he got bored and wandered off, looking for Rose. I'd ask someone who knows what his sort can take, but oops, the only one with the foggiest is in there, conked out with a lump on his head. So don't blame me for it. For a Doctor, he's more paranoid about the medical profession than anyone I've ever met."

"Well, what use are you, then?" Donna retorted.

"Oi, I got him cleaned up and looking as presentable as possible. Even stuck his skinny arse in a goddamn bed and got an IV into one of those scrawny arms. All just to get some fluid into him, before whatever he's got that passes for kidneys conk out on us. What the hell else do you want?"
Owen rejoined. "If you think you can do better, have at it. If not, you'll just have to wait, like the rest of us. It's all up to him and that weird biology of his. If he starts glowing this time around, don't ask me, I don't know. This shit's beyond me."

Rose suddenly spoke up, having stayed silent this whole time. "Can I... see him?"

"Knock yourself out," Owen snarked, pulling off his surgical scrubs and tossing them over one of the chairs in the waiting room. "Not that he'll even know you're there, since he's off in lala land with the best of them. Scrambled whatever wits he had. Good on you, if you can get anything out of him."

His hand was warmer than normal, even for this part human version of him. Warmer than hers even, but they'd said he'd a fever from the infection. It was weird and so wrong, seeing him like this, so fragile and almost looking small against the hospital bed. Rose couldn't decide whether the linens were paler than he was, or if it was just her imagining things. Hours of sitting there, her bum well beyond the point of going numb, listening to the sound of the heart rate monitors beeping away. They had him surrounded by medical equipment, the likes of which she'd not seen since she'd been in her proper universe. IVs lines in his arms, a bandage around his head, and him so still, it seemed wrong.

Finally, when she thought she'd go mad if she didn't get away for a moment just to breathe, she slipped out of the room to the corridor outside. Wilf was still sitting in a chair, having nodded off some time around dawn, so he'd not be alone. Out here, the sounds were muffled, almost distant. The sterile, antiseptic smell that clung to hospitals everywhere in the multiverse wasn't as overwhelming. She shuffled her way to a conveniently placed row of chairs, sitting down with a sigh. After this, if she never saw a hospital again in her life, it'd still be too soon.

"There you are," came a familiar voice, startling her out of her thoughts. "I brought a cuppa," her mum said, leaning across to squeeze her hand. She had come in at some point during the night, but Rose hadn't noticed even after she'd gone back out. "It's not gonna help, Mum," she said dully, exhaustion weighing heavy on her small frame.

"It worked the last time, didn't it? Good for the sinuses, didn't he say?"

"Synapses, Mum, synapses. Not sinuses." Rose shook her head, knowing her mum was just trying to help but resenting it just a little all the same. Why did people keep comparing things to the way they were before, when nothing was at all like it was back then?

"He'll wake up, just wait until it's time to eat. He always turns up when there's food about," Jackie remarked lightly, clearly still trying to be comforting. She leaned closer and grabbed her daughter's chin in her hand, forcing Rose to look at her. "Don't you be giving up on him, now. That awful doctor out there said..."

"Said he'd no clue and if he woke up, then well and good," Rose interrupted in a low voice. "But what if he doesn't? What then? This is all my fault. He'd not have been out there were someone could've gotten ahold of him, if I'd not pushed him to it. So how can you be so hopeful?"

Jackie didn't back down in the face of Rose's own fears and guilt. "Now, you stop. You didn't shove
him out the door, that was his own choice. Same with the people that grabbed him and did this, it was their own choice. You can get all maudlin as you want, but later. You once convinced me to go borrow a truck so you could break into that box of his. Said he told you you couldn't just give up, even when everything looked hopeless, you did. Just because everything's changed since then and all for the better, I say, doesn't mean you can give up on him this time."

Rose ducked her head, too tired to argue. She went back to his room, being too hard to have him out of her sight any longer. In that short period, nothing seemed to have changed. Wilf was still snoring softly in his chair and the Doctor was still breathing in a deep and easy rhythm. They'd said it was merely a deep sleep, not a coma, but he'd not wakened, despite a nurse coming in and trying every hour or so. She'd even tried waking him, hoping the sound of her voice would stir him, like it had so long ago. Centuries, it seemed like sometimes, but it still hadn't worked. He'd not woke up since that one time before, apparently.

Par for the course, really, she thought, as she took his hand and once again sat down at his bedside to wait. It had all been like the rollercoaster ride from hell, these last few months. Especially, the last two weeks. Everything had all seemed to be coming together, like they were finally finding their feet again, after he'd located that damn Temporal Distortion Gun and got Dougal Chambers to turn himself in to Torchwood. Things had seemed to click into place, just before it all fell apart once it all caught up with him and he started to panic.

But she couldn't bear thinking about that now, it was too disheartening. If she closed her eyes, she could still see one of the last purely happy moments they'd had together. He'd been lying behind her spooning, as she sleepily drifted off, his arm around her waist as he told her about how he'd once outwitted a computer that was bent on conquering the earth. She'd fallen asleep that night to the happy burbling of his voice in her ears...
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

If you're so inclined, feel free to leave a review on what you think so far.

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Pete sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face wearily. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been home, much less seen his son and had more than a few moments of kip on the sofa in his office. With everyone keeping watch on the Doctor in the infirmary and the investigation just started, he didn't reckon that would be changing any time soon.

A knock at the door startled him as he was looking out his office window, watching the milling crowds below. Damned press was all over the place down there, already spinning their stories that'd be a good part lies. "Come in," he called shortly, not turning away. The snick of the latch as the door opened and closed seemed almost distant, barely consequential as Pete considered how soon to have the PR department step in to deal with some of the more outrageous rumors. "Most of them are sympathetic, but there's already some speculation about Rose being strung out on drugs, just from that bloody photo from the Finsbury last night. That, or alien mind control gone wrong," he said, narrowing his eyes at one knot of reporters being escorted away from the premises. "The bastards."

"They're not all wrong on that, though," Jake replied softly, coming over to stand next to Pete. He absentmindedly picked at the window shades, a sheaf of papers in one hand.

Ignoring that, Pete merely gave Jake an exasperated look. Spotting the papers from the corner of his eye, he glanced down, motioning towards them. "Anything yet?"

Jake nodded, looking just as knackered as the rest of them and even more frustrated. "The preliminary forensics on his shirt are in. The Met's giving us a hand, provided we help them clear their own backlog of unsolved after."

"Figures; nothing's ever free. And?"

"As expected; blood -- all his -- and a few other biologicals, also mostly his. A few hairs, that will only do any good if we actually nick the right yobbo. Traces of petrol, that is too common to narrow it down any, and fibers -- lots of those. Most are from automotive upholstery, an older VW van, but again, it could be any of thousands in the greater London area."

"Not counting the ones that could've come over by ferry from the continent, if you count the possibility of foreign operatives being involved in this," Pete surmised, shaking his head.

"Got it in one," Jake confirmed with a frustrated snort. "If he can't tell us or won't...." He broke off, kicking a chair in a fit of temper before righting it and dropping down. The papers he'd held fluttered down to fan out on the floor, forgotten. He heaved a sigh, head in hands. "Only thing we've really got is a smear of shoe polish on one side, but that's also a brand that's as common as anything. Can find it at any of the posher men's apparel stores. Only narrows the search down to millions who gad about in fancy shoes."
"Isaacson?" Pete leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest, wondering at the possibility.

Jake shook his head, shifting to rub it, in a gesture of combined exhaustion and barely reined in contempt. "Hasn't diverted from his regular routines since we first started watching him yesterday. The tap on his phones hasn't given us anything, other than one garbled call from last night. That lasted less than twenty seconds and ended with him hanging up after saying, 'I've told you, we don't want any.' We traced it back to one of those throwaway mobiles from Tescos."

"Damn, not too far from where he was found, either," Pete muttered, drawing a deep breath through his nose and letting it out slowly. "What time?"

Jake looked up, giving the first hint of a smile. "Almost the same time the call to 999 was going through."

Pete froze, not quite daring to hope. "And the caller?"

"All in a panic, but nearly impossible to catch anything, but we did catch the words 'Farringdon Road', just before the line was disconnected." Jake finally did give a grim smile.

"Man or woman?" Pete was almost breathless. Could this be it, the break they needed? He was already running through the logistics of what it would take to bring down a powerful MP.

"Man. Extremely slurred speech, nearly hysterical, and sounded like whoever it was well into a few pints or sommat of the like," Jake said, before adding soberly, "Still isn't enough, though. Not for an arrest or even to bring him in for questioning."

"Not yet," Pete agreed, feeling a smile start to form on his face. An unfamiliar feeling, that. Seemed like nothing had gone their way in ages and this could be the turning point for their luck. "It's why we'll have to keep watch, wait for him to slip up. They always do, in the end. Hartley still has people assisting, least of all that DI."

"She'll be back asking questions, you know." Jake smirked. "It'd be a laugh, locking her in a room with Himself, once he's awake again. I've known few who've had a good knock to the head before, and him... well, he's like as not to be in a bit of a temper, isn't he?"

Pete chuckled ruefully. Even he wasn't exactly looking forward to the first few weeks of the Doctor being awake, provided they were lucky enough that he did wake with all faculties intact. "You're a heartless bastard, sometimes."

"Still," Jake reasoned, "It would be entertaining, at the very least." He sobered, changing the topic again. "Planned anything for after yet? Provided..."

"Provided we're not stuck with a vegetable or an amnesiac?" Pete finished, frowning. He walked to his desk and sat on the corner of it, looking down at the carpeted floor. He wanted to ignore even thinking about that subject, but he couldn't deny he'd not already gone through a half dozen ideas and discarded them already. It had been a long night, since the street in Finsbury. "Oh, I've thought about it, I have. Thought about getting his name changed; going into all the records, public and official, and wiping all traces of his existence, so people would forget. Maybe then, they'd have a chance at privacy, some safety from the nutters. But that would only set the conspiracy theorists afire, since even with that I can't go into people's heads and wipe the memories there -- can't make them forget, though I'd love to be able to."

"Wouldn't we all love to be able to do that," Jake agreed.
Pete continued, "Then I thought, if maybe they could get away, just get out of England, maybe people would forget on their own."

"The missus would have your bits," Jake pointed out.

"Yeah," Pete sighed. "There is that and plus, you can't make him do anything he doesn't want. Rose either, for that matter. Telling him to do something and getting him to do something are very different things and she's as bad as he is."

Jake chuckled. "That's why I just deal with stopping alien threats, not try to bring em home and make them part of the family. Good on you, if you can get the point across to him this time. Though, I'd imagine he might have gathered the dangers you were worried about might just be something to have a care about now."

"God, I always knew there were dangerous loonies out there, but I never thought this." Pete had tried, really he had, but in the end he'd had to give up before. It had been like forcing water to fall up, or holding meaningful discourse with a hedgerow.

"Never thought he'd go waltzing up to them?" Jake raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, I'd figured he'd go jumping in headfirst, just not so soon. I swear, he's been kicking every bees' nest he could find, since he got here. I mean, I understand he'd spent a few centuries just wandering, with little or no restraint, and all this is a bit confining, but couldn't he know when to just leave well enough alone?"

"It doesn't help, with all the public awareness now, and most of it doesn't exactly show aliens in a good light," Jake added. "The stadium crash, the loss of the wheat crop in Bulgaria, Shoreditch..."

Pete thought back to one of the few candid conversations he'd had with the Doctor, where he'd actually given some information. Hard to tell if it had been accidental or not, though back then it had seemed to be. He'd been even more guarded with his words after that. "He'd said that he thought some of it had crossed over, the effects from the other universe, bleeding through onto this side. Said when those walls between worlds came down, things started to change out there and we'd be feeling the effects."

"Can't blame us this time, can he?"

Pete shook his head. "No, but apparently we're going to have to deal with the consequences, like karmic payback for messing with the rift before, going after the Cybermen. There's wars going on out there, among the stars and we're getting all the fall out, seems like. Can't say that sending them off to hide in obscurity would even be the greatest of plans. Especially considering, the only one with any idea of what could be heading our way, is him. And that's if he'd even do it, the hiding, or if I really want him anywhere near any more trouble."

"I'd rather the global warming," Jake said, standing up. Bending over to gather the fallen papers, he handed them to Pete. "Everything's in there, the whole report from the labs. Hopefully the little bundle of cheer and goodwill can fill in the blanks and get this done with. That is, until he's found another mess to put his foot in."

Pete nodded, shuffling through them, seeing nothing he'd not had reported already. "And you?"

"Off to catch an hour or two of sleep in the break room, before I get back to watching the CCTV and listening to boring phone convos again," Jake huffed. "'Bout ready to drop, I'm so knackered." He walked to the door. "Have someone wake me if anything changes."
Pete dismissed him with a grateful wave, leaning back to rest his hands on the desk behind him. Already half on twelve and he was beat. Jackie would be wondering where he was and they'd all be expecting him to make an appearance soon. He wasn't sure if he really wanted to go down there, see all those anxious faces, all expecting answers, and sit there waiting for something to happen. Keeping vigil was all well and good, but he was more attuned to action and all the waiting so far was already driving him half mad.

*Bloody hell, was it too early for a drink yet?*

Gail looked around curiously, as the security guard escorted her through the halls of Torchwood's medical wing. It was satisfying to finally have access to the place, even if she had an escort and the access was limited. And here she was, acting in an official capacity, too. Since the victim in this investigation was still out of it, she was here to interview the doctor who'd treated him, to get a scope of the injuries involved. The rest of Smith's clothes had already gone in for processing, and she'd already read the preliminary report on what had been found on his shirt; now to get to the rest.

When they stopped at a closed office door, she knocked confidently, after reading the label off to the side. When there was no, answer, she turned the knob. "Doctor Harper?"

A disheveled and exhausted looking man looked up from a stack of medical readouts and charts, obviously having not heard her. "Bloody hell, is there some sort of requirement now that everyone's got to bother me," he snarked under his breath, before rudely saying, "What do you want?"

Gail raised an eyebrow, taking in the shadows under his eyes and his expansive scowl. "I'm here about Smith."

Owen nodded, leaning back and casually stretching. "Right, the bane of my existence." He impatiently stuck out a hand, motioning for her badge. After she handed it over, he inspected it before tossing it back. "Can't be too paranoid these days, or so the wankers upstairs tell me. God forbid anyone should lug him off again. Buggered if I know why anyone would want him, he's the biggest nuisance I've dealt with in years. Since you'd not have gotten down here without the proper clearance, what do you want to know?"

Gail cleared a stack of files off the chair in front of the desk and sat down, arranging herself comfortably. This could prove informative, she thought to herself. "I'll need access to your patient. Tyler's already authorized it, pending your approval. On medical grounds only, he said."

Owen squinted. "What for? It's useless to try questioning him, he's not woken in the last twelve hours."

Gail leaned forward, surprised. She remembered well what Smith had looked like last night. That he was even alive seemed a miracle in itself. "But he was awake?" she pressed, looking for clarification.

Owen snorted, looking dismissive. "Eyes opened, for maybe a minute at most when I was checking him when he first got here. Pupils uneven, but reactive; he wasn't exactly what you'd call lucid. Took
a swing at me, even. Caught me by surprise, it did. "He shook his head at that, face going blank for a
moment before he said regretfully, "Would've put him in soft restraints, but when I saw his wrists, I
decided not to."

"Ligature marks," Gail surmised.

Owen gave her a look, confirming her guess shortly. "They had him tied up the whole time, despite
the fact he wasn't going anywhere. Not even sure how he survived it this far."

Gail grimaced. So far, so good, as far as the promise of cooperation was concerned. This was the
only part she'd had any real doubts about, actually getting in to see Smith. After all, it'd be a waste
otherwise, with McAndrews waiting two floors up with a camera. "That's why I'm here, brought a
police photographer to take snaps of his injuries. We'll need them for evidence if this ever goes to
trial. Especially if he's unable to testify."

Well, even if that wasn't her usual job description, McAndrews had at least met the man they called
the Doctor. Pete Tyler had requested as few outside persons coming in as possible, to minimize the
chances of this turning into any more of a circus than it already was. Good luck on that, she thought
wryly. As if the swarm of paps outside wasn't bad enough as it was. Some of this morning's
headlines were tending a bit toward the wrong side of lunacy.

Owen glanced at the clock on the wall, shrugging after. "Fine then. I was going to have to go check
him again in another hour. Might as well have you tag along, save the effort of having to going again
later."

McAndrews was waiting by the lift when they got to the appropriate floor, looking apprehensive
with camera still in hand. She followed without a word, pausing for a moment in the door of the
hospital room. Owen breezed on through, ignoring the people who were seated by the bedside. Gail
graced them with a curt nod of acknowledgement as she walked over to the bed. She ducked her
head when Doctor Harper shooed everyone out of the room to a chorus of protests and complains.

Taking the chance to study Smith while hiding her own twinges of embarrassment, she took in the
general pallor of his face and the padded bandaging around his head. Other than an IV line in his
arm, the bandaging, and changing him into a loose smock, it didn't look like they'd done much,
beyond a scrubbing and plopping him in a bed. The sight of a bit of his fringe, peeking out under the
cotton gauze, surprised her. "You didn't shave him?"

"No point, other than around the immediate area of injury," Owen explained shortly. "Wouldn't do a
jot of good and damn me if I want to listen to him whine and moan about the state of his hair if he
ever wakes up. With my luck, he will."

Gail waved a hand and McAndrews stepped forward, hesitating slightly. "Where should we start?"

Owen snorted. "The easy bits first -- obviously."

Noting his brusque manner as he held up one bruised and abraded wrist then the other for
McAndrews to photograph, she said in a low voice, "Quite a bit of hostility you've got towards him."

Owen stopped and gave her a narrow look, appraising her and her words carefully. After a moment
he looked down, lowering the limp arm he was holding. It was done more gently than she expected,
making her realize that despite the complete lack of bedside manner, the man did care about his
patient's survival. Possibly -- she still had her doubts.

"Imagine if you were me. Top of my class, most experienced medic with training in xenobiology in
Britain, treated over twenty different species -- most barely even humanoid in appearance -- and then, this one. The patient from hell, since I can't even figure him out and there's nowt to do to sort him out, either." Owen made a disgusted noise, making a frustrated gesture. "He just shows up here, after everyone's heard the Tyler's blathering on for years about him. 'The Doctor did' this, 'the Doctor would know' that -- and then, he's here. Except they say he's sorta not quite entirely an alien now and oh, he's like a bloody magnet for disaster."

Gail smiled wryly at that. She'd gathered that, so far. If he wasn't causing it, trouble still found him. Hadn't taken a lot of investigative skills to sort that out for herself after the last two months.

Owen spoke as he pulled back the blanket and pushed aside the johnnie to expose Smith's narrow chest, displaying a good size area of dark bruising. "I've put him back together once before." He pointed at a mass of scarring on one side. "Whole time, I was thinking I'd bollox the whole thing, end up killing him, and there's me, as good as dead." He pointed a finger to the worst of the bruising. "This is recent -- probably from getting kicked around a bit, that or falling, the klutz. You'll notice his shoulders are a bit swollen and more bruising there?"

Gail nodded. All she could think was the infamous half alien was even more weedy looking than she'd thought he'd been before. No food and ill treatment hadn't done him any good.

"Goes with the wrists. It's what you get, being tied with your arms behind your back for long periods. Probably dragged him like that after bashing him on the head, then left him lying on them." Owen's lips twitched into a grim look of disgust. "There's more, beyond that."

Through the whole proceedings, Smith didn't even stir. He stayed just as unresponsive as if he was already dead. Just as well, since she knew he'd otherwise not have been calm about all the photographs being taken or so many people seeing him like this. Unnerved, Gail was taken aback when Owen asked her to help roll his unconscious patient. It was even worse when she saw what he was pointing out.

"That wouldn't be much, merely a scratch that looks a bit impressive," he said, pointing at a small angry looking wound. It was right in the area she knew the kidneys would be on a human, on his left side. "Like I said, not much except, it's gone bad. As can be expected, when someone is left lying in their own mess for a number of days. I've got a computer running a search for alternative treatments, since apparently all hope of giving him a shot of penicillin in the arse is out."

Gail gestured toward the scarring just a few inches over. "Seems impossible, that anyone could heal that fast, much less survive that."

Owen rolled his eyes, settling Smith back and covering him again. "To be expected, when you're dealing with the likes of him. I mean, one heart, but a binary vascular system? Two totally different, non compatible biological systems, all thrown together in a mishmash that makes no sense? I'd call him a bloody miracle, if it wasn't me what had to deal with him. Bloody headache, more like."

Once he had Smith back settled, he donned gloves, stepping back for a moment. He sighed, glaring at the unmoving person under the blankets like he blamed him specifically. "Now, for his head."
Rose was already fighting off the urge to nod off when Owen shooed them out of the room. Rubbing her eyes, she gratefully accepted the momentary chance to stretch her legs and took to pacing the hallway, while her mum started gossiping with Sylvia Noble. Donna was just coming back from the canteen, carrying a tray with several mugs of tea and coffee. "Why're we all out here?" She glanced at the now closed door, concern creasing her brow.

"That Harper bloke is back poking at him," Jackie fumed. "That and a couple of those police officers."

"Standard procedure," Rose explained, for the third time in the last ten minutes. Her mum had nearly done her nut when they'd all been unceremoniously told to leave. At least DI Evans had had the grace to look slightly embarrassed when she'd been standing there beside Owen. "Brought a photographer," she added for Donna's sake.

Donna rolled her eyes. "Great, so they'll be staring at him all over, to boot. Lovely. He's not gonna be half chuffed when he finds this out."

Rose couldn't help but agree, even if she didn't say it. Nothing she could really do to stop it, if it was necessary and not like Pete would be letting the police keep the file for longer than needed. If he even allowed it that long, she amended to herself. When the door finally opened and Owen came out, followed by the two policewomen, she stopped pacing. When Owen nodded, she went back in, looking carefully for any signs of him waking -- none.

"Tyre iron," a voice said softly, startling her.

"What?" Rose looked up sharply, glaring slightly at the female detective standing on the other side of the hospital bed.

"It's what it looks they hit him with. That, or a section of piping," she clarified. "I've seen it before, on other cases."

Not knowing what to say, Rose turned back to him, smoothing a coverlet that didn't need it and reaching to gently grasp his hand. It was wrong, all of it. Him, lying there and completely out of it, not even knowing when people were in here, gawking at him.

"Doctor Harper -- he seems confident that he'll regain consciousness," Gail said cautiously, clearing her throat. "It's not to be cruel, but I'll have to talk to him as soon as it's possible when he does."

Mutely, she shrugged. It wasn't as if she could stop them from trying. Not like he was likely to be any more forthcoming with them this time. He hadn't been last time, and she doubted a bonk on the head would make him any more likely to indulge anyone's curiosity, no matter their reason.

"Do you know anyone who would have done this? Any enemies of his?"

Fighting down a bitter laugh that was threatening to come out, Rose ducked her head. Enemies, right. What a laugh. "Too many to really list, unless you want to sit here for a week listening to me naming them all off. Thought we'd left them all back in the other universe."

Gail didn't reply, merely looking at her with stark disbelief for a moment before she left the room quietly. Settling back in her seat, Rose settled in for the wait. At some point, the others came in, but she was too tired to notice. After some persuasion from her mother and the grudging permission from a nurse, she carefully laid beside him on the narrow bed. Not like he took up much of it, she'd fuss, but maybe he'd somehow know she was there. It was as she drifted off, still holding his hand, that she thought she felt the slightest of squeezes against her fingers.
A warm body against his side and a familiar scent that he couldn't quite place -- that's what he was first aware of, other than pain. Quiet murmurs that didn't sound hostile or threatening came to his ears, sounding muffled like his ears were full of cotton. He tried focusing on that, but the pain in his head was too much to ignore. Radiating out from above his ear, it was like he'd been trampled by a platoon of Judoon or he'd had a long trip off a radio tower again. That or he'd had an argument with a lorry and, regretfully, lost. It took on a life of its own, all that red, hot agony, dancing away behind his eyes and wandering down his neck to nestle right above his stomach.

Right. This was rubbish; complete rubbish. He tried letting himself wander off again, settle back into the deep and dark. Down in the dark, there was no pain. There was no feeling like he was going to sick up his toenails or anything else. And forget about feeling like his arms had been ripped off and inexpertly pasted back on, that wasn't down there either.

"Doctor?"

A voice -- sounded awfully familiar, too -- speaking from somewhere near his ear startled him, making him forget he'd decided to just lay here and hope to sleep again. He imprudently cracked an eyelid to a blurry world that spun like mad. A pink and yellow blob hovered, inches away... and oops, there went his stomach.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

When I originally wrote this it was right after a surgery so I was under the effects of codeine. As such, if it's a bit of a mess, blame the codeine. Though if you find it even slightly brilliant, thank the codeine. ;-)

Okay, so watching the bloke who you're madly in love with sick up everywhere, and him narrowly missing getting it all over you, isn't the most romantic or enjoyable thing ever, but Rose couldn't care less. At least he was sorta awake, even if he was groaning and half leaning off the bed and looking rather green around the edges. That meant he wasn't going to remain a comatose vegetable, even if the amnesia part was still up in the air.

It had seemed unbelievable at first, but those first little movements of his hand in hers had banished all desire to sleep. Like it was a dream, he'd even seemed to respond to her voice, turning his head and snuffling against her shoulder for a moment before he opened his eyes. Then, reflexes honed by running for her life and the Dimension Cannon had saved her once again. At least this time, it hadn't been a threat of bodily harm, just a major mess. She hadn't seen anyone get that sick that fast after waking up, since the last Christmas party when she, Jake and Sally had tossed a few too many back, and Jake especially had paid the consequences the next morning. But even Jake had gone a couple minutes before making a mess everywhere; this was almost instantaneous.

By the time someone got there with a basin, he'd already flopped back onto his side, gasping for breath and shuddering a bit as he caught his breath. Everyone was getting all excited, all thrilled to see him awake and he was just lying there, deathly pale and keeping his eyes screwed tightly shut. When an orderly came to go clean up and tried shifting him over to replace the blanket that he'd sicked up on, he weakly tried batting them away, slapping at their hands without even looking. She even heard a muffled, grumpy sounding, "Sod off."

"Doctor?" Rose reached out and gently placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. Seeing his mouth moving in response, but not hearing what he was saying, Rose leaned near, mindful of what had happened the last time.

"Why the hell's everyone so bloody loud? And why're you lot all staring at me? It's not a bloody zoo, now bugger off," he grumbled, pulling at the clean blanket fitfully, trying to pull it up with little success.

Unfazed, she did it for him, smirking to herself. So it wasn't anyone's idea of a romantic reunion, but she couldn't think of the last time she'd ever been so glad to hear anyone be that rude. "We'll just go, let you rest," she said softly, pulling away.

"No," he said in a gruff whisper, grimacing at the sound of his own voice. "Not you. Stay... please. Everyone else..."

Glancing up at everyone else in apology, she saw they were all shuffling out, all looking relieved that the long vigil was over.
"Told you," Rose heard Jackie whisper hoarsely to someone as they left.

So it wasn't what anyone would really call comfortable, lying there on that narrow bed, with him holding her arm in a death grip. Maybe his skin was just a little too clammy and his breath rather sour and his stubble prickly against her neck as he snuggled closer. And who cared if he was still clinging to her for dear life? So what, she was clinging onto his arm just as hard and she wasn't even sure the last time she'd even seen a shower. All that, it didn't matter a bit, none of it. Right now, he was alive and somewhat aware, and damn, didn't a few hours of sleep sound like about the greatest thing ever?

Time seemed to pass in a unholy blur of people hovering over him, poking and prodding him and generally being nuisances. They'd be along every few hours, stirring him out of the depths of sleep to shine lights in his eyes and ask him really stupid questions. They'd ask if he knew who he was, as if they even had any idea themselves; ask if he remembered what happened, when he'd rather just forget, ta. In those hours when reality seemed to distort and bend and the fever dreams burst forth merrily into that fog he dimly identified as the waking world, they'd be even worse.

Then, the indistinct faces with the overly loud voices would be back in spades, bearing sharp pointy objects and beakers of a substance he refused to qualify as meant for any being's consumption, much less his. It couldn't really be tea, could it? Tea was good for the synapses and a wonderful beverage that would warm the cockles of your heart! This, this was reminiscent of Mel and her flipping carrot juice. Perhaps it was. Wouldn't surprise him, really; not with his luck. No matter how much he tried to convince them, they just didn't seem to understand he'd gotten rid of the weight problem quite a few lives back. He might as well have been speaking a different language, for all they seemed to comprehend. Perhaps he was. Perhaps they had that blasted exercise bicycle hidden somewhere, ready to spring it on him when he least expected it.

Those were the times he was unsure where or when he was, fearing that the brief dreamlike flashes of a white ceiling and the repetitive beeping of medical equipment was just that, a dream, and he'd never left that infernal basement. That's when all he had to hold on to for hope was a hand to hold on to and a face he wasn't sure was really there. He hoped it was Rose -- sounded like her, pink and yellow like she was, but that could've been just the product of his fevered imagination.

As for that, fevers and nausea had suddenly trumped everything else on the list of biological disadvantages he'd suddenly been afflicted with. How humans ever managed to survive long enough to get out of their trees, he'd never fathom. Perhaps Ian shouldn't have stopped him, would've been far more merciful to that caveman, if he'd had the likes of this waiting for him in future. Then again, maybe karma was real and this was the cosmos having another laugh at his expense. Figured.

Then: cold, so cold. It was like being stabbed with icy daggers, while a brass band had substituted his head for their own space for practice sessions. That twonk with the trombone was a complete bastard, hitting all those notes that required the slide and always managing to get him right above the ear. Then again, they'd also brought in some wanker with a bass drum, who seemed bound and determined to bang his way out through the walls. He could feel the vibrations all the way to his toes, starting behind his eyes, every time he started to crawl up out of his hiding spot in the shadows.

"Hold on to him, let him lean up against you."

Someone now had propped him upright, setting the world to spinning wildly and the dreaded
uncertainty in his stomach to start creeping back up his throat. It was distinctly becoming less of a possibility to more of an imminent danger, that newfound friend of his, nausea. Distantly, he could feel someone probing at the cut on his back, where Edna had prodded him with the knife. It was rather uncomfortable, so he tried moving away, squirming in protest. Must've gone too far, annoyed his captors too much, since the vague discomfort went straight to a red hot agony that, no matter how much he tried, he just could not escape. For a moment, up became down and then he found floors were very uncomfortable, unforgiving places to be. Rough on the landing, too.

"For the love of God, hold him, I said! Not coddle him, pat him on the back, then let him go the moment he tries to get away. Christ, this isn't exactly a picnic, you know!"

Thankfully, his other companion, the darkness waiting below, was standing in the wings, waiting to whisk him away from that nightmare plane of faces that would've done Munch proud, and where unpalatable substances forced down his throat at random moments. He vaguely remembered murmuring to a familiar silhouette, one that had leaned over him, as the unseen hands settled him back against frigid sheets, "See, Susan, I told you that cohabitation with primitive life forms would only bring one to grief. Grief and despair, and who's crying now, hmm? They barely even have a vague concept of the medical sciences yet..."

The face shifted, becoming more like the one he'd once travelled with for almost a millennium, though he'd never seen her face until recent. "I thought you took me to where I needed to be," he accused. "In what way is this at all necessary, my dear Madam?"

Next time he awoke, there was a hint of early morning light coming through the window shades and less blurriness to his vision. He still felt too hot and was at an impasse when it came to determining his location, but he could at least identify the warm lump lying against his side and making his shoulder go numb. Thankfully so, since the other one was already voicing it's displeasure, along with various other parts of his anatomy that he was doing his damnedest to ignore. Alas, superior Time Lord brain, plus human genetics, did not equal the ability to transcend the physical realm. More like, observe and catalogue every ickle tiny point of discomfort and loudly broadcast it in such a manner that he couldn't get away from.

At the groan he tried to swallow, Rose stirred, looking up at him with sleepy eyes that held too much hope and belief for his jangling nerves. Why did they always look to him, expecting answers? All he wanted was a cuppa and a kip, though he wasn't too fussed about which order they came in. A decent bed and a pair of pants wouldn't go amiss, since he was dead certain he'd nothing on besides a sheet and the bit of cloth around his torso, one that he was hopelessly tangled in. A loo wouldn't be refused, either. Trying not to flinch too much or sound too desperate, he croaked a hello. And there it was, that tongue touched smile that had been the only thing that had made him hold on, through two universes and several different definitions of hell. She was smiling at him. Him, and wasn't it brilliant?

"You're awake." She reached out and cautiously touched his cheek, caressing it gently.

Warming to her touch, he finally let out the groan. "Don't remind me." He let his head flop back against the pillow. Big mistake that; thought his whole head would come apart then, while the room did the whole not so merry go 'round thingy again.

"Do you know who I am, Doctor?" She was peering closely at him, demanding an answer even with her gentle tone and pleading eyes, biting her lip in uncertainty and reined in fear.

"Yeah."

Of course he did. Why wouldn't he? Pink and yellow, very human, holding onto him like she'd never
let him out of her sight again, and looking at him like she believed there was anything good left in an old man who'd lived too long and done too much to fathom in his years -- couldn't be anyone else, could it? Well, unless this was another one of his dreams, in which case, that barmy bint in the ball gown would be popping up again shortly.

There was a commotion across the room and while it wasn't that woman who said she was his TARDIS, the one who couldn't say yea or nay about anything and was, is, and will be as confusing as all get out, it was worse than that. It was that even barmier DI. Oh, and Pete Tyler. Maybe it wasn't too late to ask Edna and Bryn to go hide him away in their cellar again. He could only hope.

He quite liked hope.

It'd been one of the longest two days of her career, waiting for any changes in Smith's condition after they'd already taken the snaps of his injuries. Here she'd thought the searching had been stressful enough. Though, Gail couldn't imagine the toll it was taking on his family, the waiting, even after he'd first wakened ill and disoriented. Waiting, through the sounds of garbled speech she would've sworn wasn't any language from earth and trying not to feel like a coward when she'd flinched at unearthly screams when Doctor Harper had finally come up with a solution to clean out the infected cut on his back. Flinched, but knew she wasn't the only one, since the others had all looked vaguely ill, themselves.

There was the old man, Wilf, who'd told her he was the 'lad's granddad', though she couldn't quite fathom that one. The look he'd given her, when she'd said, "Adopted, right?" had been just shy of pitying.

"What difference does that make?" he'd said softly, wiping at teary eyes as he sighed and shifted uncomfortably in the hard chair that was just like the half dozen or so lined up along the hall. Unable to come up with an answer, she'd turned away, watching the others there with interest.

Jackie Tyler seemed largely concerned about how this all was effecting her daughter, saying she wasn't sure how much more Rose could take of this. She'd said something to Sylvia Noble that hinted that there was some sort of difficulty between the two love birds, dating from long before they'd ever crossed her radar. Sylvia had agreed, though she'd seemed to think it was a miracle no one had sectioned either of them, said there was no sense between the pair of them, and a certain death wish on his part. Not that anyone with eyes wouldn't have sussed that, already.

Donna had spoken up, saying, "If you had any clue what it was like, losing everything, including your own planet, and having nothing left, but the one person you were the most terrified of losing and you weren't sure if you hadn't lost them, too..."

The rest was left hanging when she'd stomped off, too fed up to continue. After that, they'd all shuffled in embarrassment, too shy to look at each other and Gail had just watched.

Such an odd, disparate group of people they were. The wife of the richest man in Britain, whose daughter was still gamely sitting by the bedside of someone she'd just had confirmed as being not entirely human, sitting in hospital waiting like anyone normal would be. Then there was Donna
Noble and her family, though she couldn't see how a office assistant from Chiswick fit into all this, or why they all insisted Smith was family.

Gail waited through the second night, when the staff had tried dousing Smith in ice to lower his temperature, raising another round of confused yelling that was only partly in English this time. When she'd looked in, before promptly being escorted back out again, a pair of dark, bleary eyes had met hers, called her Susan and told her, "This has all been a mindless folly, hasn't it?"

Even if the nurse hadn't pulled her away, she would've fled those depths that had shown too much knowledge and age to explain. The next time she'd dared glance in, thinking that perhaps she was getting too credible, that she was losing her grip on sanity from a lack of sleep and improper diet from living off the canteen's meagre offerings, he'd looked up at her again and clearly said he didn't want to be there. The insane thing was, his voice had been different from the last time and on both occasions, Smith had sounded nothing like she remembered from past encounters with him. His voice had been crisp, well enunciated, more like the old fashioned way they'd spoken on the telly on the occasions she'd watched the old programmes, back when she'd been a child and gone to visit her Gram in Swindon. Certainly sounded nothing like his usual coarse sounding West London accent, with the dropped letters and the scattershot delivery.

It was all very odd.

On the third morning, after a mostly quiet night, Pete Tyler came along and caught her eye, jerking his head toward the hospital room. "He's awake enough, I think. Wait any longer and you're not likely to get anything before he clams up again. Not the most tractable of folks, him."

Rose glanced up first, giving her a piercing look as she sat up. For a moment, the blonde seemed to study her before giving her a reluctant nod. "You'll be alright, Doctor."

Smith stirred then, coming away from his apparent study of the ceiling. Startled, his eyes were briefly without focus, but sharpened once he realized who she was. A scowl and a hint of a glare followed shortly after. Gail didn't miss the way he reached for Rose's hand, face open and looking for reassurance. Nor did she miss the way those eyes immediately shuttered once Rose left the room. It was very obvious that he was fully in compos mentis, from the way he watched them from under lowered lashes with open apprehension.

"So, you've come to ask your incessant questions; come to pick over the ashes after the conflagration is done and spoke for."

Gail glanced at Pete, caught his pained smile and longsuffering smile.

"It is necessary, if it is a bother, Doctor," he said wearily, trying to act as a buffer.

Those dark eyes flicked over, appraising the man steadily. "Is it? Bit late, innit? Crying over spilt milk, closing the stable door, and all that twaddle?"

"Those people are still out there, the people that did this to you," Gail reminded him, casting a worried glance at Pete. He'd not been fooling when he'd said the man was nigh on impossible. And here she'd thought Smith was difficult before. "Mr Smith..."

He quirked a sardonic brow. "I have no idea who you presume to be talking to, lady, but it's not me. As for the rest, why get yourself in a bother over something you're better off leaving well alone?"

Pete opened his mouth to protest hotly, only to be cut off when the Doctor gave a half smile, eyes distant and secretive. "Don't worry, I'll sort this."
"But, you know who..." Words failed her when that unsettling gaze snapped back to her, making her wonder how anyone could hope to stand under that sort of regard without quailing. Gail just looked at Pete, gobsmacked anyone could be this stubborn. She wasn’t sure she could believe he was anywhere near what you’d call 'in compos mentis'.

After seeing Pete look like he was going to do himself an injury, getting all red in the face, he decided to relent a bit. After all, couldn't have him popping off, then and there, what with those fragile little blood vessels humans had. Also, he was sure he'd heard Jackie nattering on about his blood pressure at one point. That copper was giving him an incredulous look too, like he'd sprouted another head or something.

Flashing his most winning smile and wincing at the effect it had on the pounding on his skull, he gave over. "Oh fine, then. Since you're not going to bugger off and I don't want to go grey listening to you lot harping on about it, whaddya wanna know?"

That nosy DI gave Pete a cautious look before starting in. "Do you know who took you?"

"Um, never you mind, so try again."

Right, Edgar was probably having a look about, as they were speaking. He'd wait for him to report in, before he decided what to do next. Not like he was going to let this lot step in, get themselves and everyone else killed.

"Where did they keep you?"

"In a cellar, I believe. Wouldn't swear to it, it was all rather dark."

"Where was the cellar?"

He held back a snort, knowing it probably would be a touch too far. "Under a building, I presume. Most of 'em are."

He ignored Pete's glare at that, smirking to himself. Really? He could do this all day, other than the fact he really wanted to go back to sleep. Plus, he really had a pressing need for the loo, but he wasn't going to attempt it with an audience and no pants. To top that off, that drummer was setting up shop again, while these people were asking stupid questions. Never did ask the important ones, did they? Other than Rose. Probably a spot of luck, that she wasn't here to be asking the questions that weren't so easily avoided.

"Where was that, then?" Blimey, that woman was nearly cross eyed, trying to hold onto her patience. Nothing like winding people up...

"Dunno, I wasn't exactly keeping track. Got bonked over the head, lost a bit along the way." He could only grin, watching her turn a peculiar shade of purple, and Pete, he was almost a match.

"Doctor," Pete grated, sounding like he was going to be keeping his dentist's finances in the very bloom of health, with all that teeth grinding he was doing. If not actually putting a few of the bloke's tots through Uni...

"You rang?" Ah, perfect cure for whatever ails you, getting these two het up enough to burst. Only thing missing was the nibbles and Rose. Then he could've sat back and watched the show, while
Rose and him poked fun at the pair. He'd have to remember this for telling her later. He could only feel smug as he watched Pete apologise for his behavior, giving a cheeky little wave as the DI left, all out of sorts. That all disappeared once she was out of earshot and Pete turned around, looking like he was about to go spare in a mo'. Unfortunately, all that temper was aimed at him.

"What the hell are you playing at?" Pete sounded a bit cross.

"Hardly think that's good for a man your age, getting so bothered. You should look up the statistics on coronaries and aneurysms," he said mildly, picking at his blanket. Maybe he'd take a kip, hope Rose was back when he woke up again, or the loo. Yeah, the loo was a good idea. He could see a bed pan, just in reach, too, but damned if the only Biological Meta-crisis in existence was going to be caught using one of those...

Pete slamming a frustrated fist on the little bedside table startled him from his reverie. "Do you have any idea what you've put us through, these last five days? Sod that, try the last three months since you showed up, unannounced, on our doorstep?"

Feeling slightly put out because, really? Pounding fists on inanimate objects in a display of dominant behavior? He wasn't going to act the meek, little penitent. "Not like I had any choice in the matter, innit?"

"God, if you weren't... I'd kick your arse from here to that bloody beach, if I'd thought it'd do any good."

"Doubt it. Someone confiscated my passport."

Pete was well underway now, completely ignoring anything he said, too. "Three days, wondering if you were alive or dead, then another two spent not knowing if I was going to have to plan your funeral."

"Oh, we always did pyres, so much more efficient. Could always bring marshmallows, have a do, invite all your friends, even"

Pete was even wound up enough to be waving a finger under his nose. Blimey, a real telling off. "And how do you expect I was supposed to tell Rose? Or Jackie, at that? Or all those people out there who've been waiting by your bedside, too?"

He flinched at that, remembering how he'd wondered the same, back in that accursed basement or wherever he was when that thought had wandered through the fog. "Why're you picking on an invalid?" he asked, trying to disappear from notice under the blankets. Maybe they'd all just go away, let him sleep, recover.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Pete demanded, looking stern and more cross than his instructors back at the Academy used to, when he'd been hauled into their various studies for a bollocking.

Come to think of it, explained the poor marks he'd gotten back then. All that resentment bottled up, finally coming out with him having to take the final exams multiple times in sufferance. Good job he'd gotten them all so fed up they passed him in the end, even if they were only trying to get rid of him. And yeah, the bladder was definitely from Donna. No superior biology involved there.

After much thought and consideration over Pete's words, he answered the only way he could manage, with full awareness of how heartfelt his own response was.

"Be a sport and me to the loo, then, eh?"
Pete gamely helped him to the toilet, relieved when he didn't require further assistance. Though he ended up nearly carrying the half alien back to the bed. He felt a twinge of concern; wondering if this was too much, too soon, as he watched the Doctor snuggle back into the blankets, nearly burying himself under the coverlet. "Honestly," he sighed. "Could you just have answered the woman nicely? She did lead all the police searches for your miserable arse."

One dark eye opened, swivelling to look at him, before snapping shut again with an expression of smug contentment. "Nope."

Pete sighed, rubbing a hand over his face, dead certain he'd just felt twenty more hairs fall out, just from the stress from all this. "For God's sake, why not?"

The Doctor let out a shuddering sigh of his own, looking more worn and ill, despite his words. "What, tell her I nearly ripped a man's mind apart like it was nothing? Almost made it burn, like my own planet, while his wife got caught in the crossfire? Hardly imagine you'd want me to tell her all that, Pete Tyler."

Pete just stared, unconsciously finding he'd stepped back, not sure if it was the content of the words, or the way those words were said so matter-of-factly. "You..."

Two eyes popped open to meet his again, a slight smile playing around those lips, but the eyes... those were tired, regretful, and a bit more open than he'd ever seen them before. "Yeah." The last was drawn out and a little ironic in tone.

Pete cleared his throat, wondering how the hell to respond to that. "Self defence, really, I suppose. Meets all the legal criteria, I dare say."

"Does it?" The soft reply wasn't baiting or sarcastic, merely curious. The Doctor heaved himself up, into something approaching a sitting position, when Pete nodded. "Certainly."

Cocking his head to the side, studying him like a new specimen he'd found under his microscope, the Doctor said in a low voice that wouldn't have carried to anyone else listening, even if they'd been there to listen, "And doesn't that scare you, knowing what I am? Knowing what I could do, if I was pushed to it?"

Pete swallowed, remembering when he'd first dealt with the arrogant Time Lord, recalling that the other had been more for concealing this side of himself. Better the truth, than an all too pretty lie, he thought. He decided for nonchalance, shrugging lightly, but raising his chin and giving the Doctor a challenging look in return. "Should it?"

Unflinching and still giving him that cold, flat look, the Doctor gave a small smirk. A hint of teeth flashed as he did, before his face was once again expressionless and voice even as he murmured softly, "If you'd half a wit in your head, you would."

Pete raised a brow, crossing his arms over his chest, refusing to bend or to bow. "And Rose? What
about her?" he asked sharply, leaning forward slightly.

The Doctor's eyes warmed to something almost human, looking almost gentle as he said evenly, nearly without emotion, "I'd destroy everything on your miserable little planet, just to keep her safe. Wouldn't worry about that one, mate. Dab hand at raining destruction, me."

Pete sucked in a breath, unable to argue the sentiment, though hearing it said quite that way, by someone he had a horrible suspicion meant every single word and probably could do, at that... God, he should've sent Jocelyn around to the shops. The whiskey bottle was done for, the Pimm's was for an entirely different sort of occasion than this... and really, was it too late to escort him back to his ship, wish him 'bon voyage, don't come back for the next invasion'?

"Do you think she'd even let you?" he merely said instead, congratulating himself for holding up so well under pressure.

"She wouldn't," the Doctor said firmly, raising a brow and smiling. The oppressive mood was broken when he settled back again. All tension ran out of him as he flopped onto his back, wincing slightly as he did. "'S why he left me here with her. She's the only one who could stop me," he admitted in an undertone, barely audible. "The only one who could make me want to. Stood between me and a Dalek to prove it once, too."

The Doctor suddenly raised his head, looking more exhausted than before. Showing how weak he actually was in that moment, as he visibly fought to keep his eyes focused and shivering slightly with the strain of it. "You'd do well to remember that, Pete Tyler."

Nodding and planning on heeding that warning very well, Pete waited until the figure on the bed had fallen still again and their breathing had settled into the rhythm of sleep. Casting one last look around the room and letting his own pounding heart slow to a more normal rate, he turned away, only to be met by one Wilfred Mott at the doorway.

Seeing the look on the old man's face, he waited until they were down the hallway a bit, and away from other ears before he spoke. "You heard."

Wilf nodded, looking worried, but not overly so. He patiently waited for an answer.

"He's not lying," Pete said softly, clearing his throat and wondering what this would mean in future. "He really isn't what we all fool ourselves into thinking he is. Best remember that."

"He is what he is. Still him," Wilf replied levelly, a question in his wide eyes and a hesitant smile on his earnest face.

"Still, we forget. Fool ourselves into thinking he's one of us, just because he looks like he could be anyone on the street, and he's not. He's not," Pete repeated firmly, wondering how well the Doctor had ever explained the tenuous connection to this previously normal family.

Wilf nodded, seemingly unfazed. "Lad still needs us, needs his own granddad, don't he? Maybe it's up to us to keep him human, keep him from going a bit wrong. Stop him from going too far to get him back." He paused, looking at Pete sharply, reminding Pete of a mother hen with a prize chick. "And you... what're you planning to with him?"

Pete took his question at face value. "What do you mean?"

"You lot deal in aliens," Wilf prodded, waving a hand about to indicate that they were, indeed, inside Torchwood. "What're you going to do to him, now that he's not so cuddly and manageable as he was?"
Pete could only sigh. The old man had hit the nail on the head exactly, since the cuckoo's egg had finally hatched and all that. He wearily smiled, already dreading the future and all it likely held.

"Damned if I have the slightest idea," he admitted, knowing that was the God's honest truth there. All he knew, was he'd never had a handle on the situation before and less of one now. He'd have to hope Wilf was right, and that Rose really could sort him.

That night, getting into bed, Pete mulled over the entire conversation in his head, unable to let it go. Settling in beside him, Jackie gave him an arch look, wondering what had him so upset and bothered. After debating, he finally told her, ending his frustrated tirade with, "Doesn't that terrify you, having him with Rose? After all, she's your daughter, your own flesh and blood. Don't you worry, having him near her after all he's already done, what he's capable of?"

Jackie huffed, rolling over and pulling the duvet up around her ears. "Sounds like someone woke the ghost of old Big Ears back there, didn't they? Old him was always like that, before he changed. It's nothing new."

"But..." Pete was speechless, thinking his own wife was just as mad as the rest of them.

Jackie sighed and rolled over, looking at him earnestly. "It's what any parent wants, someone who'd tear heaven and hell apart for their little girl."

"But he would, Jacks! He honestly would, that's the problem," Pete sputtered, disbelieving his own ears.

Jackie merely smiled, patting him on the cheek lightly. "Oh, you'll get used to it, don't worry. It took me a bit to get warmed up to the idea, myself."

Pete sat up, staring at her as she just rolled over and calmly proceeded to try sleeping. How in hell could anyone sleep, knowing that? He tried again, "But..."

"Shut it, 'm tryin' to sleep."

Right. He was surrounded by lunatics. Nutters, all of them. Maybe she was right, he should just let go, relax, and get used to it. After all, there were group rates on padded cells and straightjackets down at the asylum, weren't there?
Rose still hadn't come back when he woke again, but he was far from alone. The whole crew of well wishers was back, hovering around his bed anxiously, greeting the opening of his eyes with warm smiles. When he asked, Jackie reassured him she'd probably gone home to grab a shower and a change of clothes, nothing to worry about. But that was the thing, easy for others to say there was nothing to worry about when they weren't currently stuck full of IV lines and feeling as wobbly as a newborn foal. Slowly, as he started to drift off again, people started to disperse.

Oddly, Pete hadn't come back. The others either hadn't heard that conversation, or were pretending not to have. At one point, Jackie leaned in to say goodbye, startling him from the edges of somnolence, apologising for being a bit knackered herself, and muttering something about needing to get home to Tony. He waved off her apologies, finding his eyelids were heavier than before and the pain in his head had ramped up a notch. Shortly after, Wilf and Sylvia had done the same, telling him Donna had left already, uneasy around all those official types and the paramilitary dumbos wandering about at the end of the hall.

"You sure you'll be safe here?" Wilf whispered at him hoarsely, conspiratorially, jerking his head to indicate the guards that were out of sight. "Wouldn't put it past them to try some funny business, you know."

"Oh, doubt they'll try anything yet," he mumbled back sleepily, feeling a tickle at the back of his chest and stifling the urge to cough. "Imagine they'll wait a bit, before tightening up all the rules and regulations."

Wilf sounded unconvinced, saying reluctantly, "Well, we'll let you get your rest, then. If you need anything, anything at all, call. Don't worry about what time it is, or how minor it is, even if it's just you wanting to talk, just call."

"I will." He closed his eyes, wondering what he'd done to deserve all this, thinking he'd probably gotten too good at fooling humans after so many centuries, but he wasn't going to complain.

Wilf paused in the doorway, unwilling to leave despite what he'd said. "You had us scared, you know. Knowing someone would do that to another person, just because..." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "They don't trust you, you know."

"Funny thing, I don't trust me either," the Doctor said dryly, well beyond flagging and half asleep.

"Said you're not safe," Wilf pressed, pushing for a denial of a truth the Doctor was too far gone to care about at the moment.

"Safe as houses at the moment," he murmured, uncertain if he'd said it aloud or if it was only in his imaginings. "But give it a mo', 't might change."

He didn't even hear Wilf leave.

He was almost back to sleep, now that everyone had finally buggered off, when a sudden change in the room alerted him. Maybe it was a difference in air pressure, or the scent of leather, but when he opened his eyes again, he saw a few familiar faces. Percy was standing by the door, attention focused on keeping an eye out, while Edgar was cautiously approaching the bed.
Gingerly settling himself in the chair next to the bed, Edgar ducked his chin in greeting. "Still alive, boss?"

Almost too exhausted for words, the Doctor merely raised an eyebrow, closing his eyes in frustration and gritting his teeth before opening them again. "Get me out of here. I can't bloody sleep in this madhouse."

"You sure about that?" Edgar leaned forward, brow beetled in concern.

"Would I be asking otherwise? Bloody hell, they're always poking at me, hovering about, waking me up, and Rose... I've got to get out of here; get away, somewhere where we can talk. She's been wanting answers and I..." He rubbed a hand over his head cautiously, wincing at the sensation and the thickness of the bandages up there. He opened his eyes, avoiding looking at anything beyond the edge of the pillow. "I owe her that much, you know. She should know what she really brought home that day, yeah?"

Edgar looked at him blankly, uncertain what he meant. "I guess, but when do you want us to do this? Had a devil of a time getting in here, most of the routes you'd showed us didn't work. They've stepped up on security, you know."

The Doctor squeezed his eyes shut, running things through his head. Different scenarios, time frames, the ickle smidgeons of his remaining sense of the time lines -- all going into the vaguest of plans. "Just tonight, late. After midnight, once the streets are mostly clear and it's only a skeleton crew on deck here. Most of the nurses will have gone home, same as everyone else. Everyone who's been hanging around, they'll be going back home, now that they're satisfied I'm not dead."

"You're not far from it," Edgar pointed out, not so helpfully, earning himself a level glare as the Doctor finally met his eyes.

"Needs must, and all that. If need be, one of you will have to carry me," the Doctor said dismissively, glancing at the clock he'd finally noticed hanging on the wall. A few hours kip before he'd have to test the stability of his legs, locate some clothes, then... Allons-y.

"But they're all people that care. Shouldn't you--" Edgar hesitated, glancing over at Percy who was watching the exchange with an expression of boredom.

The Doctor sighed, wondering why people didn't get it, why they just couldn't understand the need to get away from the domestics. Get too close, start asking all those uncomfortable questions with their even more uncomfortable answers and things just got too messy, too painful. Like this -- all of this. "Too many expectations, too many explanations, it's just... I mean, how often are you running off to your aunt's house, sitting there and listening to her moaning on, about how you should've been a solicitor or a barrister, instead of running a garage and mucking about with common criminals and toughs from the streets?"

Edgar glanced away, nodding. "Can't fault you there. But still, are you sure?"

"Can't leave this to them to sort out. They're gonna let the police get involved and people are gonna get hurt."

"You already have," Edgar said sharply, keeping his voice low as Percy ducked back into the room, finger on lips to shush them.

"No matter, I'll heal. Others wouldn't be so lucky. Next time, who knows, other than there can't be a next time. None of it can happen again. Time for some of this stuff and nonsense to come to an end,
so we can all get back to what we were doing. Time for me to disappear for a bit, like before; for people to move on, go back to their beans on toast and forget about me, so I can get back to being me.” He paused, a wistful smile forming as he said, "Get back to working things out with Rose, let her get used to me again. Maybe even try doing domestic, if it doesn't kill me or half drive me spare.”

"And Rose? I'd have thought she'd be here." Edgar leaned back in the chair.

"She'll be back," the Doctor said gruffly, fussing with the blankets instead of meeting Edgar's eyes. "Any minute now."

Edgar stood up to leave, once Percy indicated that the coast was clear, looking back for a lingering moment. "Anything else?"

The Doctor thought through what he'd need for a moment before answering. "Stop by the flat in Wapping. Grab my mobile and my trainers, will you? My jacket and some fresh kit wouldn't go wrong either. Hell if I know what I'll get out of here with, but I doubt it'll be anything I'll want to hang on to very long."

Rose had indeed gone to take a shower and freshen up back at the flat, using the opportunity to gather her thoughts and unwind a bit. She had almost been kicking herself for leaving him like that, but figured it would've ended up being like a fight between two dogs over a bone- with her as the bone. Who knows, maybe he'd be more open and honest with Pete and the DI without her listening in. Maybe he'd actually spill some of the secrets he always held back, instead of smugly letting people get all flustered, trying to pry them out of him. But then, who was she kidding? How well did she know him? He'd be gleefully playing the enigmatic Sphynx until everyone gave up or he got bored and told them all to sod off.

It took longer than she expected, but it took time to untangle the mass of snarls that had gathered underneath, in the back, and more to find something clean that wasn't a utility uniform or too dressy for a hospital visit. Laundry hadn't been the only thing neglected, she thought as she looked around the flat. It already had an air of abandonment and dissolution, like the inhabitants had already moved on, but had neglected to take their stuff. Perhaps they had, she reflected quietly. Perhaps it was all a pipe dream, thinking they could do normal in a glass and steel monstrosity, watching telly and arguing over whose turn it was to do the washing up like everyone one else did.

Shrugging away such maudlin thoughts, she trotted down the stairwell to the lobby, fumbling in her bag for the keys to the SUV she'd borrowed from Torchwood's motor pool. It seemed odd the doorman wasn't about, but she had more important things to think about. Feeling more refreshed than she'd expected, she took the time to reflect that it was probably the glaring presence of the bulky, black vehicle that had let her get away from Canary Wharf without being followed. That, and the tinted windows that had left her anonymity intact when she'd passed the press barriers.

Once she was back, she went into the Control Hub, to check up on anything new the investigation had turned up. Nothing new there, but they were still going door to door in all the neighborhoods on the likeliest route between the park in Hoxton and the street in Finsbury, where they'd found the Doctor. Obviously, Pete wasn't going to pin everything on the Doctor suddenly having a miraculous personality change and becoming forthcoming, so they were asking residents if they'd seen anything suspicious. Good thinking, but she doubted they'd get very far unless someone had an attack of conscience and confessed.
People were being considerate, keeping their distance while she went through everything that had been gathered. It helped that the evening shift was on, so most people had already gone home for the day, but it was a relief not having to deal with the concerned looks and hesitant questions from people pretending to try to not nose in. Seeing a copy of the police report, complete with snaps and detailing all of his injuries, she paused, feeling sick looking at it. He'd been lucky, very lucky. How many more times his luck would hold out wasn't something to take bets on, either. Getting him out of the limelight and away from all the unfavorable attention was paramount. When she was done idly flipping through reports, she stopped by the canteen, getting a tray and a plate and loading it up with chips. Loading them down with vinegar and salt, she was on her way back to the lift when she caught a glimpse of battered leather from the corner of her eye.

Percy was stealthily creeping down the corridor, trying to tiptoe, despite his heavy boots. He was carefully holding one of the Doctor's gadgets, built from 'liberated' contraband. Contraband that would probably get any of the guys a comfy cell in Wentworth and a lifetime of learning the error of their ways if they were caught, and if it wasn't for the fact Pete would likely be more lenient than otherwise. It wasn't as if they meant any real harm, or were bent on taking over the world, either. Small comfort, if one had to deal with the cleanup, but hey, what else could they expect. Doctor, plus any possible circumstance imaginable, equals chaos. Not that hard to figure out, was it?

Immediately, she stuck out a hand, stopping the lift door from closing. Recognising the figure unsuccessfully trying not to loom over everything around him, but still managing stealth to a degree that was rather unnerving, she watched for a moment, biting her lip with apprehension. Rose was undecided whether to call him out, find out what exactly he thought he was up to, but decided she didn't really want to know. Better to hear it from the horse's mouth, yeah? Or the horse's arse, as the case might be. Now wondering what exactly the Doctor thought he was up to, and really worried that things were going to get even more pear-shaped, she said a little prayer and let the doors close. He couldn't get too far, could he? Not in the condition he was in and what, it'd been all of two hours, maybe three, right? At least Percy looked to have been leaving, so that had to count for something.

She wasn't sure what she expected to see when she made it to his room, but him, leaning against the bed precariously, as he disconnected himself from the IVs and various sensors definitely wasn't it. Barely able to hold his own weight weight, it was almost a comical sight if it hadn't been so heartbreaking and foolhardy. Him, wearing just a hospital gown, bare bum and legs unashamedly on display, unshaven and hair going in all directions... Not that she wouldn't have minded such a view normally, but under the circumstances, she wasn't any more amused than Queen Victoria had been.

"What the hell, Doctor?" she snapped, just barely catching him before he managed to go arse over elbow and rip the last IV line out. She'd just barely had the time to set aside the food tray before she'd had to go grabbing him from the jaws of certain disaster.

He grinned up at her crookedly, head resting against her chest heavily, almost drunken in appearance and eyes half closed in exhaustion. "There you are. Help me with this last one. Bit of a sticky wicket, this one. All the rest came out fine, but... well, you know."

"I can't leave you by yourself at all, can I?" she sighed, resisting the urge to dump him back on the bed. "All I did was go make myself presentable again, look through a few files, and grab a bite of something to bring up, since I doubt you'd eat anything on offer up here, and I find this! Have you completely lost it?"

He peered myopically at her, brow creasing and a small frown forming. "Uh oh, that's the frowny face. Things tend to go all squiffy and there goes all my happy, when Rose's got that look on," he said in an uneven singsong under his breath, somehow managing to get his feet under himself again to stand swaying over her.
Catching his arms and steadying him before he took a tumble, Rose gently pushed him back until he was sitting on the edge of the mattress. Once he was seated and the danger of further injury had passed for the moment being, she glared down at him. "Where do you think you're going?"

He looked up at her sullenly, mouth opening and closing before he raised his chin and looked as defiant as he possibly could. "Anywhere but here."

With his hair going every which way, where the bandage wasn't holding it down, and his bedraggled appearance and his tendency to lean slightly like he was struggling to remain conscious, he looked more pitiful than a force to be reckoned with. "Are you alright?" she asked, suddenly concerned. "Should I call a doctor?"

"I am a Doctor," he snapped, glaring through his fringe. "Just... everything is a bit weewawy at the mo', everythin's' spinnin' and I can't..." Even his voice was indistinct and slurred, as his eyes unfocused. He put out a hand to steady himself, grinning in triumph when he managed to stay upright.

As she thought wryly to herself. Couldn't even stand on his own two feet and here he was, already plotting his escape. She had to wonder what exactly her Dad had threatened him with, to get him in this state. "Why don't you lie back, get some rest," she coaxed, reaching for his feet to help him get situated again.

A bruised arm came up between them, surprising her with its strength. "No, Rose," he hissed, hints of fire flashing in his dark eyes. "I've got to get out of here," he enunciated carefully, words gritted out from between clenched teeth in a tone that brooked no argument. "Now."

"But..." Rose felt helpless when it came to arguing, knowing that if she didn't help, he'd do it on his own and damn the consequences. Stubborn wasn't even the half of it.

Rose managed to come up with a pair of trousers and a jumper from an unattended locker, helping him get them on. Honestly, going back to bed was starting to sound like Nirvana, but the clock was ticking down. Sounded more so, once the vertigo really started to catch up with him and the few mouthfuls of chips he'd managed had come up in an impressive demonstration of reverse peristalsis. Even then, Rose was there, brushing his fringe away from his sweaty forehead and helping him back up again.

"Allons-y," he said weakly after one of those times, wiping at his mouth with a sleeve and forcing one foot in front of the other stubbornly, while Rose gaped at him for a moment. Quickly catching on, she put her shoulder under his, giving him something to lean on besides the wall.

"You're mad. Completely nutters," she muttered.

"Yeah, but I'm your nutter," he joked tiredly, ignoring the way everything seemed to tilt and distort around him again.
He probably should check the readings on the earth's gravitational field, seemed a bit dodgy lately. When he almost had an overdose of said gravity, Rose caught him again, not even bothering to try changing his mind on this. Rose, always there when he needed her the most. Brilliant. So what if he had to stop and sick up in the occasional abandoned nook of one of the endless corridors? He was a man on a mission and he wasn't going to let something like infuriating part human frailties scupper things now. Nope, he'd a date with Torchwood's computer banks and Rose was, as always, a helping hand in times of need. Barely anyone was about, and most of them they were easily able to avoid. Part of why he'd timed things for when Torchwood was at its quietest. Once, Rose had had to shove him into a maintenance cupboard with no warning, but that wasn't too bad. There was a mop pail that came in handy, and a cleaner's rag for wiping his forehead. She just shook her head at him in despair when she popped back in to get him back on his feet again.

"Tell me again exactly why're we doing this?" Rose said through gritted teeth.

"Got to get to the computers," he replied, figuring they were too close to the terminals and had come too far to turn back now. He hoped, but he could only rely on her beneficence to help him go any further.

Instead, she almost dropped him, turning to look at him in disbelief and horror. "You're not thinking what I think you're thinking?"

"Depends on what your thinking I'm thinking and whether we're both not thinking wrongly," he managed to cheekily reply, floundering a bit, before she grabbed him again by the front of the borrowed jumper to keep him from dropping.

"No," she said fiercely, her face doing that weird scrunchy thing that was very reminiscent of her mother in the worst of her tempers -- scarily so. Briefly he wondered if he was too ill looking to get a slapping and tried for a more personable smile. He feared it looked closer to insane than convincing, but still, he had to try. "Rose, there's no choice."

Rose wasn't backing down, giving him a little shake to emphasize her determination. "No."

He tried sounding more reasonable, hoping she would be too. "People aren't ready for this kind of knowledge. You know that, I know that -- I should be proof enough of that." He pointed at the bandage wrapped around his head, trying to not think about what could be under it. Didn't even want to consider what they'd done to his hair, even. Nope, he'd wait until he had the strength to have a proper cry after and plan a suitable, fitting revenge. Hair remover in the water supply to the employee showers or just track down the home addresses of all of Torchwood's medical staff? Hmm, could work, either way. If Rose would let him get away with it, that is. Doubtful, at the mo. She wasn't looking very impressed with any of this.

Finally, after his single, lonely heart had nearly stopped from thinking she had lost all faith in him, she gave a tiny nod, acquiescing reluctantly. "Fine then, but no crippling the entire internet." At his raised brow and disbelieving look, she snapped, "And don't tell me you wouldn't, because you would. I know you."

Too relieved and dizzy to care that she had just made him toss out half his plans, he agreed readily. It took most of his remaining strength and all of his remaining focus once he got into the room and gratefully collapsed in a chair, almost overbalancing and ending up on the floor. With shaky hands and blurring vision, he swiftly made his way through the database. Stopping to wipe entire directories and scan others, he had to thank the combination of Donna's temping skills and the Time Lord ability to process information at a faster rate. Granted, he was a lot slower than he'd normally have been, and the sonic would've sped things up phenomenally, but he was done there within fifteen
minutes. After that, he was onto the world wide web and hacking the pertinent databases.

When he finally leaned back in the chair, every muscle quivering in exhaustion and barely able to see past the end of his own nose, he'd done it. Every single mention of him or reference to his existence in this universe, gone. Well, barring any off world ones that he wasn't even sure existed, but still, one John Donald Smith, no longer existed to anyone's reckoning. He'd even managed to put a post hypnotic suggestion in for anyone who did try looking him up. Good luck on that, he thought smugly, you'll just find yourselves unable to recall the last three hours of your lives, whoever you are. The press would have a field day, trying to figure out what the hell had happened to all their photos and files. Have fun trying to track me now. Wankers.

When she turned back from where she'd been keeping lookout, he was slumped down in the chair, head bowed, a grip on the edge of the desk the only thing keeping him from collapsing back all the way. Gritting her teeth, she approached, dropping down on one knee to peer up into his face. His eyes were closed, every freckle standing out like it had been painted on, and his breathing was shallow, hitching slightly like it even hurt to breathe.

"Was this really necessary?" she sighed to herself, not expecting an answer.

She found herself suddenly transfixed by a pair of weary, fathomless eyes as a hand came up to caress her hair gently. "It was... the only... way," he breathed softly, eyes crinkling at the edges as he gave a soft, almost dreamy smile. "Only way... for us to have any peace."

He fell silent then, barely able to assist when she shouldered most of his weight and got him on his feet again. For a moment, she considered taking him back upstairs into the medical wing, where he bloody well belonged, but knew he'd only resent her for it. Also, the thought of being within easy shouting distance once everyone twigged on.... Yeah, hopefully Percy and the rest were aware of this little idiotic plan and were ready to assist with the rest.

"Side entrance... one by the alley," he murmured once they were in the hallway, momentarily coming out of his stupor. When she went to confirm that he wasn't just mumbling in his sleep, he was already out of it again. For such a skinny bloke, he sure was heavy, far heavier than he looked. Silently cursing in her head, she kept dragging him along, admittedly thinking some very uncharitable thoughts about presumptuous bastard Time Lords of all ilks and across all universes. It was a sheer miracle no one came along and asked what the hell she was doing. Especially since she couldn't have begun to think up a reply that wouldn't have sounded as barmy as all of the excuses she'd thought of had.

Then, miraculously, the emergency exit signs were starting to appear, with the way clearly marked ahead. Beyond the last, with its 'alarm will sound upon opening' sign where anyone would see and hopefully take heed, was the door. The final door- and all she could hope was that someone had already got to disabling it, before a dozen response teams came crashing down around their heads and this made the conversation rounds by the bubblers for months. The embarrassment would be bad enough, but Pete would quite possibly kill them both. Or at the very least, yell loud enough to leave their ears ringing and possibly cause himself a coronary doing it. Right. C'mon, Percy. Please tell me you actually know what the hell you're doing...

Amazingly, when she braced the Doctor's unconscious form against her hip, so she could open the
door, it opened from the outside before her hand had even touched the latch. Edgar was standing there, frowning and looking uncomfortable with the situation. Decidedly jumpy, she noted, when he nearly leapt a foot when the door banged shut behind them.

Behind him, Percy was standing with a rucksack and holding the sonic screwdriver, of all things. "He's really got to let me borrow this more often," he said, with far more than a trace of envy.

"No time for that," Edgar said tersely before she could respond, grabbing the Doctor and easily throwing him over one shoulder.

Glad to be unburdened with his weight, she leaned against the wall for a moment to catch her breath, but Edgar and Percy were already hustling her along the alleyway to a nearby car park. Jasper was waiting there in a van, motor already running and the headlamps dimmed.

Edgar was extremely careful about the Doctor's head, grabbing a bundle of grease covered rags and forming a makeshift pillow after he settled him in the back. Rose and Percy piled in next to him. Rose automatically grabbed the Doctor's hand, in case he awoke and wondered where she was. She had no clue where they were going, but she had to hope this had been more than just a seat of the pants thing. Then again, if this was all the Doctor's idea, how could it be anything but?

"Guess he won't need all this yet," Percy remarked with an almost mournful sigh. "Shame, 'cos it was a bloody nightmare picking the locks to that flat. Especially with the neighbors, all of 'em giving me funny looks the whole time. And that doorman..."

"Wait..." Rose narrowed her eyes at Percy, accusingly pointing a finger at him as some of her earlier suspicions came back to haunt her. "Did you break into my flat?" When he only looked like the cat what got the cream, she pressed further, "While I was there?"

Percy only looked even more content with his prowess at burglary. Polishing his stubby nails on his hopelessly grubby shirt, he smiled to himself. "Best in the neighborhood, cat burglar. Mum made me quit once I hit 20 stone and kept breaking the railings on people's balconies."

Rose could only gape, embarrassed and rather horrified, hoping Percy wasn't some type of perv. He sniffed delicately, pointing a finger and saying with just as much accusation, "And you sing in the shower, girlie, and 'orribly off key, so don't you go getting all hoity-toity, now."

He winked before he moved to go lean over Jasper's shoulder while Edgar was rattling off directions and pointing out turns.

Rose could only sit there in the dark, glad the lack of light hid her flaming cheeks, and squeeze the Doctor's fingers every time they hit a bump and he stirred fitfully. Murmuring soothing words, she listened to his breathing and just hoped they got to where they were going soon. He needed a proper bed and proper rest, not getting bounced around in the back of a manky van, heading for god knows where.
Gail was half done in already, and the day was barely started. For most, it hadn't even started yet. They'd all be tucked in their beds, dreaming the quiet, simple dreams of the innocent -- or not so innocent. It was half on four and far too early to call it a day and go home. She was going through photographs of the more likely styles of rope that could've been used to restrain Smith, while trying to finish the last few swallows of her morning coffee. One looked very likely, matching weave pattern and all, but she wasn't quite sure.

"Pull up the report from three days ago," she called over to McAndrews, growing impatient when there was no response at first. After a few moments, she went to go look to see what the hold up was and found the PC sound asleep at her desk.

"The hell," she muttered to herself, rolling her eyes in frustration as she shook the younger woman awake. "Come on, Traci, I know this is far earlier in the day than normal, but it's no time to be faffing about now. Time to get back to work, finding out who kidnapped that John Smith."

The most disturbing thing was the amount of confusion in her eyes as the young PC woke up, gave herself a shake, and said, completely befuddled, "Who? What? I mean, how did I get here? I was back home, in my bed sleeping. My God, I didn't actually sleepwalk here, did I?"

Gail stared and blinked at the look of confused horror and embarrassment she saw. After much careful explaining, she managed to convince McAndrews that yes, she'd been there all along. That took a lot of doing, too. It was almost as if someone had gotten into her head and erased the memories there...

Then, the phones started ringing, someone turned on the telly in the squad room, and that's when she wondered if the whole world had gone a little bit madder than usual. Someone had apparently wiped most of the different press organizations databases overnight, leaving large numbers of gossip rags in particular without their daily edition. Gone before they had even hit the printers and already, newsagents from across the city were calling, presuming them stolen. Then someone called to report the Census and Vital Statistics Ministry had had their computers hacked, among with the NHS, and the lists went on and on.

Security breaches were all over the UK and Europe, with reports from Interpol, saying their files had been compromised as well. The first thought was terrorists, the second was an alien invasion underway, the third possibility was the anarchist groups. So far, no suspects stood ahead of the pack. No one had any idea who or what the hackers had been after, but they were all on standby for reports of identity theft. There were already alerts out for people to be on the watch for suspicious activity on their credit cards before it was even 6 AM. That was when Gail realised they had the beginnings of a real situation on their hands.
Pete was still asleep, dreaming of a world with no immanent crises and no PR scandals to deal with, when the phone rang. Considering how few had this number, the list of who it could be was very short indeed—especially considering the hour. He was awake instantly, mind battling back the fog, as he grabbed the phone on the bedside table.

"Report."

It was Jake, sounding rather calm but with a hint of humor in his voice that suggested he was trying not to laugh. "Good morning, Mr Tyler, the EU minister is on the phone, and so's the head of MI5, MOD, and the Americans are ringing through, as well. Worldwide attack on the government databases, apparently."

A glance at the clock showed it was half on five, merely an hour before the alarm would've gone off anyhow. Pete closed his eyes, thinking through the list of possible suspects. He tucked the phone between shoulder and ear as he carefully eased out of bed, careful to not wake his wife.

"Let me guess, they're calling to inquire about the integrity of our systems and ask if we can trace it for them."

"Got it in one," Jake reported, sounding far too cheerful for the hour. "As for that, nope and nope again. There's a half dozen techs down in IT that are now wandering about, looking a bit lost and have got no idea what they're looking for now."

Pete paused in trying to get his trousers on one handed, staring ahead as he tried processing that. It was raining outside. Perfect weather for a day such as this, apparently. "But..." he whispered, just as Jake went on, sounding more sober, "And there's a conspicuously empty bed up in the infirmary and a certain lack of a well-known source of anxiety and annoyance missing, as well."

Pete stood straight, forgetting about attempting to put on shoes as he finally got his trousers up, already starting to trot for his bedroom door. "What?! You've got to be kidding me, he was barely even able to make it to the lav. How..."

Jake continued as Pete rushed down the stairs, not even pausing as Pete transferred the call to his mobile.

"Oh, I wish I was. Housekeeping will have a field day if they ever catch up with him. That'll be when they're done burning him in effigy, I'd reckon. Sicked up in half a dozen corners, staggering and falling, all the way to the main storage hub, with Rose carrying him for a good part of it. Make a brilliant team, I might add. Coordinated effort all the way, right up until they disappeared off the CCTV system, out beyond Bethnal Green."

Shit. That was just... about the last thing he'd wanted to hear at this hour.

"I'm on my way in, now."

"Figured as much," Jake said dryly. "Already got your morning coffee waiting on your desk."

"What chances are there that they at least left a note, saying when they'll be back?" Pete suggested hopefully as he made it to the side entrance to the garage, grabbing the keys to the Mercedes off the peg on the wall.

Jake chuckled softly. "I'd think the fact he's apparently wiped all traces of his existence from every computer on the planet might be a good indicator of where his mind's gone. I'd say either the next major holiday, or the fifth of never for when he comes wandering back. Either way, your guess is as good as mine, boss."
Pete stopped, leaning against the roof of the car, pinching the bridge of his nose as he enumerated all the ways he'd love to throttle a certain skinny git about now. Jacks was gonna hit the roof -- he just knew it. He'd tell her later, after she had had the chance to wake up on her own and have her morning cuppa. Preferably, before she popped in to the infirmary to check on the pair.

He opened the door and slid in behind the steering wheel, already dreading the day ahead and feeling rather gobsmacked. "Any way we can make this look like a random attack, something not extraterrestrial in origin?"

"Already got a few folks with magic fingers on it, sir."

Pete fumbled with the keys for a moment before inserting one into the ignition, thinking things through carefully. "Right." He remembered the team he had had assigned to keep an eye on things in Hackney just a few days earlier. "Post someone to keep a lookout over at that garage. He's likely to show up there."

"Could do, but apparently the address has been erased from the onboard nav systems on all our vehicles as well," Jake added, sounding amused and a touch impressed. "He didn't go about this half-arsed, even if he is half dead."

Pete sighed. Shouldn't be too hard to track them down himself, he thought. Jackie would be expecting to hear from Rose before long, and ill and injured or not, he doubted the Doctor was suicidal enough to go too far away. He'd wait a couple days, see if a call came in or not, before he attempted it.

"What's the real damage?" he asked as he switched the call again, this time routing it through the car's audio system. He eased the car out of the garage, heading down the driveway. One of the security personnel waved as he approached the gate, not overly surprised at his early departure. It hadn't been too long before when he'd been coming and going at all hours, back when the stars had been going out.

Jake sounded almost smug as he said, "They'll soon be finding that there's no real damage, no real threats, just all and any mention of him is gone and so is almost all information on Rose."

Pete sighed, pulling out of the gates after looking both ways for oncoming traffic. Really, why was he not at all surprised at all of this? Then again, he'd considered doing the same, but had figured the Doctor would've had a conniption over the dubious morality of the act. Apparently, the Doctor had had less qualms about it, after all. "So, he's purposely disappeared himself. And Rose, too, for that matter."

"Like a ghost. A ghost what's already gone through and purified the machines after himself. And as for Rose, anything that even hints at a scandal is gone. Anyone that didn't know any better would think she was naught more than the very boring and bland Vitex Heiress."

"If we could but hope," Pete said wearily, trying to imagine what things would've been like if things could've been normal for once. Probably very boring, and lonely, too, since he'd only become a family man after the mundane went out the window, after he'd met an alien that had fancied himself to be an Interdimensional matchmaker. Time to put away such frivolous things, Pete admonished himself. I've got more important things to focus on, like cleaning up another mess.
They took the long route around, heading out as far east as Dartford, before turning back and driving back into Hackney just as it started to rain. It was almost three am when they made it to the flat. During that time, the Doctor barely stirred. Other than once, he'd moaned in discomfort and turned onto his side, snuffling against Rose's hip. She gently lifted his head on to her lap and he went back to sleeping quietly, as if this was a normal occurrence and he regularly caught a kip in the back of a moving vehicle. Then again, she reflected, he rather had, except this time he knew he was in safe company.

It was like a homecoming of sorts, coming back to the old flat again, with the coral humming away in its corner when they came in. Percy had thrown the Doctor over his shoulder, settling him on the bed, while Edgar and Jasper were warily eyeballing some equipment by the door.

"What's all this?" Rose asked, coming back from making sure the Doctor was comfortably settled. He'd not even twitched when she'd settled the duvet over him. Percy had gone on to check the rest of the small flat over, mentioning that there had been some Torchwood agents poking about a few days back. He'd pulled a dingy looking piece of paper out of his pocket, consulting it before adjusting the settings on the sonic. It was slightly disturbing, watching a biker gang handling alien tech with little fuss. Well, other than the way Edgar and Jasper were eying the gizmo by the door.

"Some thingamabob he rigged awhile back. Said to bring it out of storage in case of emergency," Edgar said gruffly, looking at her and obviously hoping she knew what it was.

Recognising the bits and bobs of a Atraxi force field modulator, combined with a 51st century stun ray and a common FM radio that was barely recognizable, sussing out what it was was rather easy. Of course there was a big, red, shiny button on the side of it. There had to be, knowing him. She'd also spotted her old TARDIS key hanging from the doorknob outside when they'd come in, so he'd intended to rig a perception filter on top of all this.

"Please tell me we're not going to end up getting blown into ickle pieces if I push that button, even if that's what was in his instructions he'd left," Jasper hissed, sounding urgently worried.

Rose gave a rueful half smile, shaking her head in negation. "He may be half barmy, but that? No, we'll be fine. The neighbors might have a bit of a headache, if they come too near," she added with a frown. "You might want to yell from down the hall, if you want to come back. You're probably not going to be able to find the door and you bloody well won't be getting in, unless one of us disables it."

"Right," Edgar muttered, shaking his head in despair. "S'pose all that paranoia's paid off, then, considering."

"Yeah." Rose bit her lip, looking away for a moment. Things had gone so spectacularly wrong, so fast; almost too fast to comprehend. It'd take a bit to process it all, just sort things out in her head and figure out where to go from there. He'd not been lying when he said he didn't do domestic and sometimes, in the darkest hours just before dawn, she wondered if he mucked everything up on purpose. Time would only tell, but they both had a lot of talking and figuring things out ahead.

Percy came back, looking satisfied and well pleased with himself as he handed the sonic over to her. "He'll be wanting that back, eh? Didn't find nothing anyone's left behind to cause trouble or some such. No one's listening in, or the like," he said gruffly.
"Terry and Nigel dropped off some food, should be plenty in the cupboards. The Singhs sent enough curry and naans from the restaurant to last a few days," Edgar told her, making her realize that this had been planned further in advance than she'd thought. "Woulda been more, but these two useless lumps were helping themselves until I caught 'em," he added, jerking a thumb at the other two and glaring from under bushy brows. He paused, looking slightly bemused. "Crispin had offered his service piece, the one he'd brought home from the war, but Himself said no guns." He focused a sharp look on Rose, raising his chin a bit as he added, "I'd say he probably don't trust himself, when all's said and done. With the temper he's got, don't blame him on that, but if he'd had protection in the first place."

Rose interrupted, "No, he's right." She remembered the him, long ago when he was all leather and icy blue eyes and had been less forgiving as he was once again. Weapons were the last thing he needed. "No guns."

They left soon after, leaving her alone with him in that dinky flat. It was really late and she was exhausted; still almost too wired to sleep, though. She looked in on him, an unmoving lump under the covers, dimly lit by the glow from the street lamps coming in through the window.

Moving closer, she could see he was sprawled out on his side, knees bent and one arm hanging off the side of the mattress, like they'd left him. They'd laid him out that way to keep from aggravating the cut on his back. While it wasn't as red and angry as it had been in hospital, when she'd checked it earlier, it still wasn't looking right. Maybe if she could prop him up in the shower somehow, the warm water would help to clean it. Or at least, she hoped it would, since she wasn't sure she could clean it the way Owen had without gagging. Also, she didn't think she could handle listening to him scream like that again. Needs must and all that, but she really didn't want to go through that again.

She'd pulled the 'borrowed' wool jumper off him when they'd got him into bed, noticing his skin had been getting a little red around his neck. Funny that, apparently wool made him itch now, since he'd reached up to paw at the collar once or twice when they'd been making their way through Torchwood's corridors. Itched and never said, never complained once, even when he'd been paler than the wall next to him and trying not to heave his guts up at the time. He could be so stoic one moment, but drive her half mad with all the whinging the next.

Kicking off her trainers and peeling down her jeans, Rose carefully crawled into bed beside him. Not that he'd noticed or even changed his rhythmic breathing, but she felt relieved she hadn't woken him. A bit of rest, some time away from all the pressures and maybe he could finally begin to do some healing. Healing from far more than just this episode. They both could do with a bit of that. That and some serious talking about their problems, instead of ignoring it or running away. Even if avoiding the issues was what they did best.

When the Doctor awakened, it was raining. Even the dim light from the overcast skies was too much as he buried his face in the pillows, fumbling around for the duvet. The pain in his head was down to a low throb and the ache in his back was just there, waiting for him to move wrong, or for someone to start prodding at it in the name of sanitizing the wound. But all in all, he was feeling a bit better, not quite so poorly as before.
He couldn't help but wonder where Rose was, since the lack of soft breathing nearby and extra body heat was one of the first things he'd noticed. He wouldn't have blamed her if she'd just handed him over to the boys and went back to trying to salvage a normal life, one without him in it. Wouldn't blame her in the least, what with her putting up with him through all this and him shouting at the world because no one was really listening. Talking, gossiping, making him the scape goat, but they'd not really listened.

Other than Rose -- she'd been listening, but he had no idea what to say or how to say it so her listening would work as well as it could. He'd once had so many words, lifetimes of them -- libraries full of encyclopedias' worth, even -- but they all seemed to fail him when it really counted. Well, he could've said sorry, he'd a lot of experience at that, but he figured she'd probably explode and then her turning into the spitting image of her mother, complete with the slapping, would be immanent. Then again, maybe he deserved it, for all he put her through. But then, no maybes about it, he was an arse.

Apparently he'd groaned aloud at the thought and she'd been near enough to hear him, because he heard a rustling noise from the other room. One that turned into approaching footsteps.

"Doctor?"

She sounded so hesitant, so hopeful. Why did they always sound so bloody hopeful, like he could solve their problems and save the day? Never said he was a hero. Rather the opposite, in fact, and he'd told them so before, but no one bloody listened. Quite right, too -- he was a complete idiot.

"Rose."

He turned his head enough to open his eyes, surprised how much effort that simple movement took and how little energy he seemed to possess.

"You're awake."

"Yeah."

The Doctor wasn't sure if that was something to celebrate or regret. The drummer had started up again, he had to use the loo, and from the smell of things, his need for a shower was dire. He smelled of dried blood, manky cellar and the former contents of his stomach. On top of that, he was hungry and he wasn't sure what was more terrifying: the thought of food or the thought of wearing it, after it had been forcibly rejected. Then again, the idea of vertigo wasn't too high on his list of things to look forward to. But then Rose was there beside him, sitting on the edge of the bed and brushing his fringe off his forehead. She was seemingly immune to how disgusting he was.

"I reek," he warned her, just in case she hadn't noticed.

Rose shrugged. "According to you, when you're in a bit of a mood, all of us apes did back then."

He smiled ruefully, remembering that particular conversation about human body odor, due to their shoddy biological responses to stress and temperature differentials. Oh how the mighty had fallen. "I was a bit of a bastard back then."

"You still are, but that's nothing new, yeah? I've mostly gotten used to it." Rose singsonged teasingly, smoothing his hair back and feeling to see if he was still running a temperature.

"I deserved that," he agreed, shifting enough so he could sit upright. The room spun a little, distracting him from the way Rose moved back, seating herself on the low bureau beside the bed. She was careful to not knock anything off the top. It was still cluttered with spare couplings and a
soldering iron he’d left there before. He bent his knees up against his chest, careful to keep his weight off his lower back. Settling back against the headboard, he pulled the duvet back, despite the chill against his skin. The fever must still be ongoing, albeit not as bad as before.

Closing his eyes was the only option for dealing with the dizziness, as he waited for the semblance of stability to reassert itself. That or for inertia to grab hold again. Inertia and the other principal laws of physics had been so wonky lately. He was almost surprised they’d made it this far, having recognized the room he was in. Hackney -- he’d thought Edgar and them would try for further away. Out of the city, at the very least. Right about now, people would be discovering what he’d done to their computers in the wee hours of the night. Oh, right, and Pete had probably gone through the roof by now, too.

Cautiously cracking one eye open, he looked over at Rose, who was still sitting next to him, picking at the frayed edge of the duvet. "How bad is it? What's the damage?"

Rose looked down at her hands, wearing a half smile. "Oh, the usual. All the government agencies were in a panic, the newsreaders were nigh on going into meltdown, and everything was in shambles."

The Doctor winced. "And Pete?" He almost didn't want to know.

Rose looked up then, smiling mischievously before she ducked her head again. "As you can guess, he's a bit narked. Sent a text, said you get to explain it to Mum. Then, told everyone who was asking that it was a fault in the programming, no nefarious intent behind it all."

"Clever," he commented, without any sarcasm.

"Jake's called, seeing if we needed anything."

He raised an eyebrow at that, unsure of what to say.

"Had Crispin bring over his laptop, so I could take a look for myself. Sure enough, it's all gone, all of it. You don't exist and I'm just some bog standard heiress. I'm known for charity work, apparently," she continued, voice a trifle cool.

Hearing the accusation still unspoken, he swallowed, throat bobbing nervously. "I did it for us."

"A ditzy, goody two shoes version of bloody Paris Hilton," Rose reiterated, eyes flashing dangerously.

"Rose, I did it for us," he repeated, putting a hand on the mattress, so he could lean forward slightly. He ignored the way the world seemed to falter in its rotation for a moment, the way time seemed to slow around them. "So we wouldn't have to keep looking over our shoulders, wondering who was coming after me next and would they hurt you to get to me." Rose just blinked at him slowly, fists clenching and unclenching as she waited for him to go on. "You're in danger, just being near me, Rose. As big a target on your back, just because..." he continued hoarsely. "They were going to come after you, just because they thought I was dying, thought I wasn't going to be any use for their cause."

"The Earthers," she prompted, obviously hoping for answers, now that he was verifiably in control of his faculties. He looked away, unwilling to confirm or deny it. It was all too complicated for a pat answer such as that. "You can't even tell me the truth."

This time the accusation was stark, plain for anyone to hear. Especially him. Knowing it wasn't going to help, but not wanting to just leave her with no reply, he admitted softly, "Some things the
world isn't ready to hear."

"But not me. Doctor, I'm not a child. I'm old enough to decide for myself."

His head came up, eyes burning as he said, "Yeah, but maybe you shouldn't have to decide that." He shook his head, wincing after doing so, but soldiering on. "Just wanted you safe, like you once wanted for me. Wanted it so you could walk in the light of day, without people judging you because of me. Didn't want me hanging over your life, like a bloody shadow, forever."

Rose bit her lip, eyes shining, as she was starting to get the implications of what he'd done, what he meant. "But what about you?"

"Oh, don't worry, I don't exist," he said airily, waving a hand, trying to lighten the situation. "Not to that lot out there. Merely a story that will be forgotten in a year or so. You lot are the wonders of the universes at that, forgetting things when you want to. When you must."

"And us?" She was sounding hesitant again, hanging on the cusp between heartbreak, anger and tears.

He bobbed his head, looking away for a moment, hoping he didn't sound too desperate. "Wherever you want, it's all up to you. I could go, if you want, or...."

Maybe it was his magnificent Time Lord brain going senile or something. He had had a knock on the head, that was bound to effect judgment somehow. But, there it was, he was leaving the choice up to her this time. Telling her she could go back to her life, rediscover the little everyday things that made up a normal life; leave him to muddle his way through before he withered and died like the rest of the people on this miserable rock. He was giving her the choice, the one his counterpart hadn't. Sure, it would kill him, if she packed up and left and his lone heart was stuttering in his chest, ready to fail if she said bye. After all, what else did he have? Sure, he could finish getting the TARDIS ready, but what fun would that be, travelling on alone?

His head started to itch. He absently reached up to scratch at it, finding that, inconveniently, it was under the bandage.

Seeing that, Rose huffed, "C'mon then, let's get you cleaned up." She reached out a hand. Grabbing it eagerly, savoring the feel of her hand in his, he let her pull him to his feet, swaying unsteadily for a moment. Finally standing, he took the moment to look down at her, noticing the way she was avoiding his eyes. Maybe he was tempting fate, but he had to know where they stood. He took a step closer. "Rose?"

Rose looked up at him, as if startled by his proximity. She studied his face, the moment stretching far longer than was natural, it seemed. "'S just..." She looked away, before she seemed to make up her mind, giving him a no nonsense look. "Let's start again." At his apprehensive eyebrow raise, she clarified, "From the beginning." She gave him a grin. "My name's Rose."

Relieved, he could only smile. Well, more a dozy grin, but still, he was a very happy part Time Lord at the moment, since he'd dodged a bullet there. Feeling almost giddy, and remembering that night, oh such a long time ago, he took her hand and said, "Well, in that case, nice to meet you, Rose Tyler. I'm the Doctor... Run."

He paused, closing his eyes as reality and the passage of time caught up to him, along with a momentary bout of dizziness. Once he was more certain that the nausea wasn't going to amount to anything, he opened his eyes again and added ruefully, "Though, I think I'd probably not make it very far, if we did attempt that at the mo'. Making the trip to the loo's about all I can manage at this
"You better not get sick on me," she warned him, squinting at him for signs of immanent illness.

"Think it's passed," he muttered, carefully breathing through his nose.

Rose rolled her eyes good naturedly, reaching out to steady him on his feet. "Told you you should've stayed in hospital."

"Weeell, bit stubborn, me," he drawled, smirking.

"I gathered that, ta."
The Doctor rested his forehead against the slick, cool tiles, legs quivering slightly as the water pounded against his back. It was uncomfortable -- extraordinarily so -- but it was an improvement over making Rose deal with cleaning the wound herself. At most, she'd have to slap a plaster on it after, since he didn't think he could manage it on his own. Reaching would be an issue, especially with his stiff and sore shoulders. So far, he'd carefully gotten the bandage off from around his head, cringing when he'd felt the shaved area. No, he'd not summoned up the courage to go near the looking glass yet, quickly ducking into the shower before he saw his own reflection and ended up feeling any more miserable than he already was. Shampoo the mess -- yes, he'd done that, as soon as he'd unwound that infernal mass of gauze they'd blessed him with. It probably wouldn't have gone over well with the medical team at Torchwood, but sod it. The bloody thing itched so bad, and between that and the constant pounding in his head, it was driving him mental.

A wave of nausea overtook him when he moved to grab the soap, leaving him with a moment where he was uncertain he'd be able to stay upright. Briefly, he thought of calling for Rose, but realised she'd been through enough lately with him. Let her be, he thought. Nine hundred years, I can manage a shower on me own, yeah. Can manage this much, then get on with sorting this mess out. Get on with making things up to her, dealing with...

His hand was on the bar of soap when he swayed again, legs starting to buckle, leaving him to catch himself on the rod that held up the shower curtain. Breathing a sigh of relief, he hung there for a moment, feet weakly scrabbling for purchase beneath him. A sudden creak came from the bar, one that had certainly never been designed for such activities and was now protesting its use. He was staring up at it in wary distrust, muttering, "Shit," just in time for it to give out on him.

Rose must've heard all the commotion, because the door was opening and she was there, face a picture of shocked worry and concern as he sat slumped against the side of the shower stall, half in and half out. He was too tired to attempt getting up yet. Tired and... embarrassed. Yes, that was the word he was looking for. But embarrassment only stretched as far as what felt like burning ears and cheeks, since coming up with anything else to do would require more energy and motivation than he currently possessed.

"Are you alright?" she asked, coming to check him for damage.

"Oh, just spiffy," he drawled, letting his head fall back against the wall again, wondering how he'd get himself untangled from the yards of rubberized cloth.

"I mean, did you hit your head?" Rose was pulling up his eyelids, remembering well her emergency care course and his recent injuries.

"No." He didn't want to pull away from her touch, but he hated all this -- hated the wobbly limbs, the incessant headache, the feeling of weakness. He'd wanted them to start over, get to know each other again while he got used to a stationary existence, but not like this. Not with her having to be his carer when he'd already done a bang up job of making her life more difficult. Way to go, Theta, think she'll ever stop thinking shegot the wrong end of the stick for not choosing the one with two hearts and a more impressive constitution?
It isn't fair, she thought, looking down at his flushed face, with the water dripping from his chin. A moment of dexterous movement is all that saved him from drowning, as he started to slide sideways, tipping his head forward, away from the water.

"Rose Tyler, always saving my worthless arse when I need it most."

While his tone wasn't sarcastic or ironic, his words were almost indistinct, voice softer than usual, almost self derogatory.

"C'mon, Doctor, let's get you out of here," she sighed, unsure of what else to say.

"Somehow, I don't think I can." He smiled at her crookedly, but gamely making a feeble attempt to get up, almost falling over again. With some foresight, she had stayed within earshot after she'd helped him along to the shower, where he'd been staggering and swaying the whole way. Good job she had, since he'd taken on a sleepy look before he'd even managed to slough off the 'borrowed' pair of trousers and stumble into the loo. This wasn't that much of a surprise, really.

"Thanks," he slurred, the mumble almost lost as he ducked his head, either too tired or too embarrassed to keep looking at her.

The way his eyelids started to droop more worried her, giving her just enough of a warning to reach out in time. She caught him, pulling him into her arms before he did himself an injury, just as he let out a soft snore. Another one, that is. Couldn't have him whacking his head again, could they? Might end up with something worse than someone who had no sense of balance and a sudden tendency to fall asleep in the oddest of places.

Like now, when she was wondering how she'd ever manage to get him out of here when he was wet and leaning against her slackly, her grip on his shoulders the only thing keeping him somewhat upright. Long limbs and clean lines were all well and good when one was eyeing someone they fancy a lot, but it was something else entirely when you're trying not to dump them on the floor or drown them. Worse yet, when you're trying to figure out a way to get them out of a shower. Especially when they're barely responding when you shake them back to consciousness, and then, only long enough to blink sleepily, mumble and drift away again.

Frustrated and worried, she got up to shut off the water, crouching down again and calling his name as she carefully pried an eyelid open. "Come on, Doctor. You're going back to bed."

That finally got his attention.

"What?" He blinked at her owlishly, eyes slightly unfocused. "Why? Where am I?"

Rose resisted the urge to sigh or scream in frustration, instead plastering a reassuring smile on her face. "You're in Hackney, luv, now let's get you dried off and into jimjams, yeah?"

It was interesting, to say the least, getting him unwrapped from the shower curtain and into a better position to attempt standing. Somehow they did it, with him clumsily wrapping his arms around her from behind, like she was his personal zimmer frame. Erotic it was not, even if he had his chin on her shoulder and he was almost plastered to her back, soaking her clothes through to the skin.

Getting to the side of the bed, he simply let go, managing to flop on top of the duvet. He lay there, bare as the day he'd woke up on the grating of the console room floor and unashamed of it, already fighting sleep. Turning his head, he cracked an eye open, saying, "Think I can manage without the jimjams, 'm roasting here."

"You're probably running a fever again." Rose shook her head, disagreeing as she looked at the cut
on his lower back. It wasn’t as red and irritated as before, but it still didn't look right. Apparently, he’d managed to clean it, since when she leaned over to look closer, he mumbled, "Just needs a fresh dressing on it."

She raised an eyebrow at that. "Did you think to grab any, because I didn’t."

"Percy should have done. It was on the list." He blinked up at her, shifting enough to turn his head.

"Right." She glanced around the room, looking for the rucksack they’d dropped somewhere the night before. When she turned back, he was attempting to get up and would’ve if she’d not given him a gentle shove. "Let's not tempt fate, yeah? I'll go find it."

Surveying the mess in the room, she couldn't see any sign of the bag. That's what you get when someone's spent centuries being looked after by a sentient time ship and then plonk them down in a regular flat on earth, she thought. Housekeeping skills get a bit lax. Grabbing a towel off the top of his laundry pile in the corner, she tossed it at him. "See if you can manage to dry off before you soak the bed, too. Ta!" she called over her shoulder as she left the room.

The rucksack had been left by the door, right under the jerry rigged defense system. Scooping it up, she went back to find he’d gotten the towel wrapped around himself, covering the more interesting bits on display. Once she got a bandage on it, she looked at his head more closely.

"Do you want me to redo that one, too?" she asked, leaning close enough to smell the shampoo he’d used. Coconut- he’d grabbed hers again, the one she’d left here from before. She pointedly didn’t laugh at the strip of missing hair, more focused on the line of stitching and obvious swelling around the edges.

"No. 'T itches," he mumbled, rolling onto his right side carefully.

"You should eat something," she told him, seeing how his eyes were half closed, slipping towards sleep again. "You'd feel better." He made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat, sounding unconvinced, before reaching behind him to fumble around for the part of the duvet he was not lying on.

"When was the last time you ate?" she asked, feeling exasperated.

His eyes opened into a squint as he thought about the question. "Um, six, no, seven days ago?" He paused. "I think," he added wearily. "I haven't exactly been keeping track, it's been... Yeah."

He’d not eaten since the night they’d argued, she realised, suddenly concerned. No wonder he looked like shite and could barely stand on his own. Sure, he’d had fluids and some such through the IV back at the infirmary, but that clearly wasn’t enough, not with him having an infection and other injuries.

She got up hastily. "I'm bringing you some toast and a cup of soup -- think there's a tin in the cupboard," she said on the way through to the kitchen.

"A proper cuppa, too, if it's not too much of a bother? 'S full of tannins," she heard from behind her, letting her know that no matter how worried she was about his condition, he was likely to come out somewhat normal in the end. Normal for him, that is. If he was still enthusiastic about tea, as he’d always been since he’d worn this face, that bit of his personality hadn't changed. That didn't mean she wasn't still worried about how the bonk on the head had effected him, because she was. Once she had the chance, she was going to be ringing Owen, finding out what symptoms she should expect. Oh, and when she should put a stop to this and haul him back to hospital, where he belonged
-- where they had people who were experienced with this sort of thing.

When she went back in, steaming mug of alphabet soup, toast with jam on it, and a mug of tea all balanced on a tray, he was sitting up against the headboard. He ate quietly, after mumbling a thank you, finishing one piece of toast, swallowing down most of the tea, and managing a couple of mouthfuls of soup before he tried to set it aside. She had to take the tray before he dumped it, getting an apologetic smile in return. "Sorry."

"It's okay. Rest," she said, tucking the blanket around his shoulders. He might've been asleep before he'd even shifted down to lay flat again, she couldn't be sure. All she knew was he was breathing deep and even before she'd even turned away, heading for the lounge to find her mobile.

Right. Weird alien mind control effecting people's memory or no, she was not giving up, Gail thought, as she flashed her badge at the man behind the security desk with a tight lipped smile. When he let her by, she gave him a curt nod, telling him she knew the way to her destination. Indeed she did, since she'd been there before; only once, but that was enough. Her memories of that had not been tampered with.

It was after normal hours, with fewer people about as she walked to the lifts. Most of the few she passed were heading out, brollies in hand, prepared for the wet trip home. It was still pouring out when she'd gotten here, the first taste of the autumn rains to come leaving puddles in the streets. Surprisingly, the outer office wasn't abandoned. A tired looking woman was sitting there, handbag already in hand and a Mac thrown on over her business suit. The woman, with a sign on her desk, saying 'Jocelyn', rang her through, after letting Pete Tyler know he'd a visitor.

When she let Gail through to his office, he was waiting, with his feet resting on top of his desk, as he casually lounged in his chair with a snifter of brandy and the decanter nearby. "Drink?" he asked smoothly.

"I'm still on duty," she reminded him, arching a brow questioningly.

Pete sighed, bringing his feet down to rest against the floor. "I don't normally do this, but if you were in my position, you'd probably be hitting the local about now," he explained.

"I imagine I would," she replied, settling in the chair in front of the desk and fixing him with a steady look.

He leaned forward to rest his chin on the palms of his hands, elbows resting on the desktop. "I suppose you've got questions."

Gail nodded. "I do."

Pete sighed. "Join the queue with the rest of us, then, since I reckon we'll all be in for a wait."

Gail nodded. She'd expected something like this. "Imagine my surprise," she began. "When I was trying to sort out some evidence and lo and behold, the computer file's gone. Not only that, but my PC only has a vague recollection of the last few hours before that and an even vaguer memory of
who 'John D. Smith' might possibly be. Color me impressed, when it's the same way with everyone else down to the station, despite the fact there's a set of bloody clothes in the evidence locker with his name on them."

Pete nodded ruefully. "Tell me about it. It's no better on my end. Worse than that, I think, because my daughter left with him when he scarpered."

Gail gave him a look of surprise. While she'd expected to get the run around and empty excuses of confidentiality, open honesty was a shock. "So he's gone, then. After all that, just gone."

Another nod. "Buggered the systems, set the rest of the civilized world into a panic over their credit cards, and faded into the shadows," he said, glancing away.

"But how? He's not even been aware of anyone's identities and possibly not even his own."

"Oh, I doubt that," Pete sighed. "He was very much aware of who he is. It's us that's had it all wrong."

"Where is he? He couldn't have gotten far." She looked at Pete suspiciously, thinking there was probably a six foot tall bloke, bundled up in a bed, back at the Tyler mansion. It didn't seem too unlikely, now that she thought about it.

Pete must've read her expression, as he laughed softly before taking a sip of his drink. Making a face at the taste before swallowing, he said softly, "Not hardly. That would be him, willingly being in a position of having to listen to someone, for once. Not that I wouldn't have dragged him back here, so he'd be under proper care, instead of languishing about in a manky flat."

"So he's in the immediate area, then? Wapping, or thereabouts?" she guessed. When Pete didn't say yea or nay, she continued, "The people who kidnapped him and almost killed him are still out there," she pointedly reminded Pete. "Even if he's not concerned, what's to say they won't try again?"

Pete smiled grimly, his eyes still flat and unamused. "Remember a couple months ago, the riots and chaos that broke out with biker gangs running amok?" At her nod, he set the drink aside and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "They'd be stupid to even think about it, since I imagine right now, there's probably a shed load of very angry, very large men on the lookout for whoever it is. And to top that off, the only person who knows who they are just wiped every trace of his own existence from every database on the planet. If I were them, I'd be lying low before someone finds them, since I'm not so sure he's still the forgiving type, after all this. And as for his friends, not in the least."

Gail sat up, mind already going through possibilities and the procedures the police would use in case of more riots... or worse. That most likely excluded Wapping, then. "What do you think he'll do?"

Pete smiled again, looking even grimmer and a touch tired. "That's the thing, isn't it? We'll all have to wait and find out, because damned if anyone knows but him."

Gail swallowed, wondering if there was death and destruction to come. "Is there any way to talk to him, make him see sense, so the case could be handled through the proper legal channels?"

Pete laughed a bitter hacking laugh as he shook his head. He looked at her again, eyes serious as he said flatly, "Madam, the sooner you get accustomed to all this, the better it will be. When you're dealing with someone that's the closest thing to a god that you'll ever possibly see, one that regularly goes wandering around Piccadilly Circus, you don't try 'telling' them anything. You offer your two pence, give them advise, and if they won't take it, you hang on and duck when necessary. Learned
that the hard way, I did."

"A god? Surely not," Gail scoffed. "Pull the other one, it's got bells on." Smith being part alien, that she could believe. Ancient -- that idea was growing on her, remembering the odd look in his eyes, way back when he'd first been arrested for assault and battery. It'd been more startling when he'd been half out of his head back in the medical unit, but she'd chalked that up as an effect of the head injury. But him, a being of that much power? Not hardly. She'd seen him bloody and unconscious, battered almost to death. Gods don't die. They didn't bleed. They didn't wander around London like lost puppies, causing mayhem wherever they went.

He looked away again, staring into the middle distance. "Give someone a millennium or so of nearly free rein, unlimited resources, technology beyond our primitive comprehension, far superior biological systems to ours, with higher endurance and different abilities, and the difference is hardly noticeable."

"Right. Do you know where I can find him?" Gail asked, getting to her feet. It wasn't a surprise when Pete made an evasive denial, but she'd already made her mind up. The only way to get anywhere with this was to go direct to the source, too. And hope he'd not taken leave of his senses. Then she remembered Smith was pretty daft himself, so apparently madness was contagious.

Once she was at the door, she heard Pete speaking softly to himself. He was barely audible as she paused, listening to him murmuring, "And to think, we got the version that's only half as potent. Saints preserve us, I don't think my sanity could handle the full-test version if he was always like this." She waited, unsure if he was speaking to her or not, and clueless on how to respond if he was. Pete finally picked up the glass again, raised a toast to someone who wasn't there and finished off the last inch or so in one swallow. "On with the show, then. On with the show."

Somehow, it was chilling, hearing that much resignation in the voice of a man known to have the President's ear, and one of the few who'd survived the Cybermen with their fortune and power intact. She didn't understand the half of what he'd said, or know who he'd been talking to then. But if everyone was going to start talking complete nonsense, she'd have to try tracking Smith down herself to keep the investigation going. She wasn't going to let this case go unsolved, not when she knew who had the answers. All things were once again pointing to the same man -- or alien, as the case may be. She knew he'd had a bolt hole in Hackney before, somewhere around that garage, so she'd start there. If he'd been comfortable there before, with that many people in the neighborhood willing to protect him, that was the most likely place he'd go, she figured.

On to Hackney. He had to be there somewhere, he just had to be. And then, she'd find him; find him, and make him talk. Well, tomorrow, that is. It was already late and she was exhausted. Best to get a good night's rest, go in with a clear head and a firm resolution, before trying to beard the lion in his own den.

Rose woke before he did the next morning, waking to another day of rain. He'd barely even stirred when she crawled out from under the arm he'd thrown across her waist in the middle of the night.
After using the loo, she went into the kitchen and made herself some toast and a cuppa, going into the lounge to finish waking up. She had just picked up an old gossip rag that the Doctor had left lying about, having gotten herself somewhat comfortable on the sofa, when she heard a commotion outside the flat. A very familiar voice was yelling her name at ear shattering volumes, and from the sounds of it, had already roused the neighbors. She hurried to the door, disabling the shielding as she did, hoping to put a stop to it before it attracted any more attention.

"What do you mean you can't find their door? Don't be stupid, flats don't just disappear! What kind of landlord are you?"

Sure enough, her mum was berating Edgar, glaring up at him through too much mascara, and wearing jeans and trainers, like she had done back in the proper universe. She also had a large bag hanging off her arm, one that looked heavy and like she was considering using it as a weapon. Blinking her surprise, since she'd not seen her mother dressed like this since shortly after they'd ended up here, she stopped to look at Edgar, who was looking flustered and apologetic.

"Mum," she said to forestall the next barrage of words and let poor Edgar slip away, as he was trying in vain to do. "What're you doing here?"

Jackie spun around, hiding her own look of surprise with one of indignation. "Looking for you, of course," she huffed, pushing her way past Rose into the flat. "The nerve, hiding the door from your own mother."

Rose rolled her eyes, giving a glare at Edgar's retreating back as she closed the door. So much for lying low, if even her mum could find them. Perhaps this plan hadn't been as well thought out as she'd believed. She crossed her arms over her chest, watching her mum poke around curiously, seeing her pause when she saw the coral in the corner of the lounge. "I got that, Mum, but what. Are. You. Doing. Here?"

"Couldn't just leave you here to deal with him alone, could I? Nothing worse than a man who's feeling poorly, I'll tell you that much. You'll never hear such whinging in your life, like a toddler who's stayed up past their bedtime." She went on, smoothly reaching into her bag and pulling out a thermos. "I brought some food and tea. Wasn't sure if you had anything in." She snorted when she looked back at the kitchen, with its cupboards that were still mostly bare and missing half the doors. "We've got food, Mum--" Rose tried, before being interrupted as Jackie glanced around, looking for him, of course. "Where'd he run off to?" she whispered loudly.

"He's sleeping, Mum. Or, he was," Rose sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose and shaking her head slowly in frustration. It was a miracle he'd not woken, with that racket going on outside. Then again, maybe he had and he was pretending, hoping she'd just go away.

Jackie was already moving through the lounge area, stepping around the piles of books, papers, and spare parts the Doctor had left scattered. "Not much for housework, is he?" she said critically, eyeing the mess critically.

Gritting her teeth and forcing a smile, Rose reminded her mother that he wasn't exactly in any condition to be cleaning at the moment, but Jackie wasn't paying attention. She was cautiously approaching the baby TARDIS.

"So that's it, then," she said, stepping close enough to poke it. "Doesn't look like much. How long before it's blue, like it's supposed to be?"

"Oh, about nine and a half months, give or take a few weeks, barring accidents, solar flares, or a
sudden magnetic pole reversal. Major fluctuations in the electromagnetic fields tend to play havoc on the growth rate."

They both turned, seeing the Doctor leaning against the doorway to the bedroom, looking like he'd just rolled out of bed. As well he had, but it was painfully obvious that it was too soon. At least he'd managed to put on a pair of joggers and a t-shirt, Rose noted gratefully. Didn't need Mum getting an eyeful again.

"That's it?" Jackie remarked, looking disappointed. "Seems like an awful long time to grow a bloody rock."

"It's a dimensionally transcendent time ship, not a 'bloody rock', as you so quaintly put it," he admonished softly, muttering, 'Humans' under his breath. Rose shot him a look, and he flushed, eyes flashing, stepping away from the wall for a moment before reconsidering and leaning back again, arms crossed over his chest.

"Looks like one to me," Jackie muttered before switching gears. "So you'll be off after that, then."

"Yes, Jackie," he said patiently, before Rose could say anything, sounding pained as he added, "And it's not 'supposed' to be blue, that's just a shell, like a disguise. Like the front door was supposed to have." He shot a glare at Rose, even as she was mouthing 'don't blame me' at him.

"Perhaps that's for the best," she replied primly, looking back and forth between the pair of them.

"Mum," Rose sputtered, catching a glimpse of his raised eyebrows and the apprehensive look on his face.

"Well it's obvious, innit? He may not eat doorknobs and safety pins, but he's just as much an alien as the other one, ain't he? Can't exactly fit in," Jackie retorted. "One heart or two, he's pretty much useless and complete rubbish at living a normal life, Rose."

He wasn't protesting and she couldn't defend him on that point, since it was obviously true.

"I mean, look at him. Already forgot what a razor's for, the place looks like a rubbish tip, and even Tony knows what 'stranger danger' means," Jackie continued blithely, as Rose watched him start to look a bit more than annoyed. Any moment he was going to start in, and right now she wasn't sure she could deal with them arguing. Wasn't sure it wouldn't do him harm, since bed rest was one of the things Owen had recommended. That, and a calm environment.

"Near as I can tell, the only thing he's figured out is how to get his leg over with my daughter and mess with her head," Jackie finished, glaring at him as she moved closer to poke him in the chest accusingly. "It's bad enough you went swanning off, but did you have to leave her like that? She was unconscious, lying in a hospital bed for three bloody days! Thought I was going to lose her too, you prat."

Rose cringed, watching him go paler than the wall he was propped up against, remembering that they'd not gotten around to discussing anything yet. "Mum, leave him alone. He's supposed to be resting -- head injury, yeah?"

Jackie turned the glare on her then. "Don't give me that excuse. It's not like he'd all his marbles in the first place. An ickle thump on the head isn't going to make him any dafter than he already was to start with."

"Mum!" she said, more firmly and louder that time, watching him as he blinked slowly. He seemed like he was in a daze as he slowly forced himself to stand straight, eyes unreadable and face carefully
"Doctor--" she began, but he was already pushing past her, heading unsteadily for the door.

The slamming of the door as he went out seemed to echo. "Now look what you've done," she snapped, looking around for her shoes, ready to head after him. She was still in her jimjams, and he'd not even bothered to put on shoes. "Why'd you even mention it?"

"Well, someone had to," Jackie reasoned, sounding embarrassed. "Since obviously all you two do is shag, row, and cause trouble for your father..."

"Just leave it, Mum." Finished getting her trainers on, Rose stood, rushing into the bedroom to grab his.

"Where're you going?" Jackie asked, sounded bewildered.

"After him," Rose said flatly, almost to the door. Like always, she thought. "Can't leave him like that. He could have a spell, or something. Dunno, never dealt with someone with a head injury before."

Not that any of this was a surprise, really. She'd been dreading bringing up this particular topic since he'd first woken up back at Torchwood's medical wing. And it certainly answered some of the questions she'd had. Running was in his nature, and going from a life like that to one like this, it'd require some adjusting, wouldn't it? As for the adjusting, that hadn't gone well at all, had it? More like the digging in of heels and loud protests all the way, than it was adjusting, wasn't it? But this, none of it, could really be enough for him, could it? Give it a week after he was feeling better and he'd be back at it, him panicking over something minor and looking for a way out.

Just, this time, she didn't think she could handle it, if he did. Couldn't take one more go around of him dodging questions, shutting her out, and constantly ignoring the issues. Sure, that's how they'd always dealt with such things, back when they were off travelling, by avoidance. Your planet and people are all gone? Let's have chips! Snogged some French tart? Ooops, let's go falling into a parallel world.

But that was then, this was now. Now, she was older, more experienced. She had spent more years trapped here, defending the Earth and that time between its development and when the Dimension Cannon had finally started working, than she'd ever spent with him. She wasn't that same, naïve nineteen year old who'd stepped into a spaceship with wide eyes. Just like he wasn't the same as he was before. She'd already crossed worlds to find him, only to end up, stuck back here again. This time, she didn't think she could go through that again. For one thing, she didn't think she had the energy. If he left her behind again, this time, she wouldn't be chasing after him. Other than this last time.
"Atkinson scores, goal for Tottenham!"

It was only a recording of last night's match, but he'd missed the original broadcast, having been down at the warehouse doing inventory. Shouting and cheering, Bryn momentarily came up out of his comfortable chair, settling back just as the sound of the front door closing was heard in the dim living room. Reaching for a cricket bat he'd stashed beside his seat, he fumbled for the remote, clicking the telly off.

"Edna?" he called cautiously, glancing around the room for another weapon if need be. They'd put up the blackout curtains after they'd returned from their failed attempt at increasing their wealth, trying to keep anyone from looking in. They hoped to go unnoticed by the rest of the world for awhile, to avoid discovery. Other than that, they'd been attempting to get back to a normal routine, ever mindful of that alien freak's threat. Well, he had. Edna had been secretive since then and he'd a feeling she was up to something.

Rising, he went to the doorway, pausing for a moment before he looked into the kitchen. "Edna?"

She had been unpacking a canvas bag by the table with her back to him, pausing when he spoke, before nonchalantly returning to what she'd been doing before he'd disturbed her. "Isn't there a footie match on that you're supposed to be watching?" Her tone was clipped, betraying that she'd been more startled than she was willing to let on. Looked like she'd done more than just the normal shopping.

"Doesn't matter, I'll watch it later," he replied with a shrug, coming around to peek at what she had. Several guns, another mobile that was similar to the one they'd disposed of in a sewer drain, and something else that was clearly off-world contraband lay on the tabletop. "What's all this, then?"

"What do you think?" Edna turned and gave him an annoyed look, before picking up the weapons one by one and checking them over.

"Edna--" He sighed, looking up at the ceiling for a moment in frustration. When he was certain his voice would be steadier, he tried again. "You've got to let it go."

"Are you stupid? He could come back, come after us. We both saw the same thing." Indeed, they had. Someday, he hoped to move past the nightmares that haunted him every night, learn to ignore the feeling of someone else watching him from inside his own head. "And you think that's gonna help?" he asked quietly, curious instead of derisive. "Against him? You saw what he'd done to entire planets. Imagine what he could do to us."

"T'was all just a fancy, a hallucination. All of it. Still goes to prove what Mr Issacson said is true. They're a threat, all of them." Giving a nod of satisfaction, she set one gun aside, reaching for another. "Don't you think it's odd, all that searching for him they did when we had him, and now, not a word. Not a single blip after that one report saying they'd found him alive in Finsbury, and it's been three days since then."

"Could be dead," Bryn proposed, since he'd been hoping that much all along. No victim to give away their identity -- that'd be so much simpler, a relief. No more waiting for that knock on the door, the police raid in the middle of the night.
Edna dismissed that with a sniff. "That'd have been all over the telly, too. No, there's something fishy going on and you've said it too. Been strange around here the last three months, even before that mess in Shoreditch. It's like everyone's waiting for something to happen."

Grudgingly agreeing, he nodded. "Edgar hasn't said anything about him, which is odd enough. You know how deep in with that lot he is. Worse yet, all my clients are getting jumprier. Even those who aren't worrying about the coppers breathing down their necks. Prices are going through the roof, too. Less of the pretty baubles and more of the shite like what I'd sold to Miles."

Edna gave him an appraising look. "Never did spill who'd sold him the first one, did he?"

"No," And that was worrying. Could be the person who'd killed his brother had been after something specific. "Unless he told whoever it was who killed him. Whoever that was, I've my suspicions."

"There's far bigger fish than us, swimming in this muck," she reminded him archly, moving to the third gun. "But we're the one's who've put targets on our backs."

He pointed at the last piece in front of her, the plasmic blaster from Telos he knew had come through the usual channels, already wishing he'd never gotten involved with this end of the smuggling business. Booze and guns from the Ukraine was one thing, and the twee people liked to stick on display to show visitors another, but the stuff that was coming in now was something else entirely. "Having that sort of rubbish about is just going to make it worse, luv. I'd be more inclined to fuss about whoever sold you that, than him."

Edna barked a laugh, looking at him in disdain. "Are you mad? You're going at this the wrong way around, Bryn. Use the weapons they bring to drive them off when the time comes, simple as pie. But him, no, he gets inside your head, takes your world and turns it upside down. Until you don't know whether you're coming or going, or even know who the real enemy really is."

Wasn't that the truth, but he figured she was the one who had things backwards. He grunted, uncommitted. "Still..."

"That lot, they're like us," she explained patiently. "Just looking to get a bit richer, like us. But them, they're not trying to blend in, or acting like they're planning to stay, are they now? You're not going to mistake them for one of us, are you now?"

"No," he agreed softly, thinking of the few aliens he'd met in the past. None of them were anything like the bloke they'd had down in the basement a few days ago. For one thing, none of them scared him as much.

"And that's where the real danger is, luv," she finished softly, picking up the blaster. "This here, this'll protect us. Help us get back the other one, if need be."

"You're completely mad," Bryn sputtered, a slowly dawning horror creeping over him. He'd seen what that thing could do, what it could bring forth. That was what gave him the most nightmares, seeing the barrel of that thing from the corner of his eye in his dreams.

"You saw what I saw," Edna reminded him tersely, with a glint in her eye. "Think it's bad enough when he is what he is, imagine what it'll be if he sniffs it out. Whatever he is, he knew that thing well, when he showed us in our heads like that. You know he's got the other already."

"But he could be dead!" Bryn protested. "You saw what he was like. Even after what he did, he was half dead already. He couldn't have survived that. Did you ever stop to think, that maybe, it's been
He really was rubbish with all this.
"Thought it'd be safer that way. For you, I mean."

She visibly steeled herself before repeating herself. "Why, Doctor? Why did I end up in a near coma, just because you got hurt? Are we connected somehow, in our heads?"

He swallowed painfully, wondering the answer to that himself, fearing the answer. "I don't know," he said softly. "There's dozens of possibilities. Latent psychic abilities on your part, or my own telepathy broadcasting uncontrollably somehow, due to the injury itself. Quantum entanglement on a basic level -- or even the baby TARDIS, perhaps." He scrunched up his face, thinking it through and discarding a few more less likely ones. Sighing, he grudgingly admitted, "Basically, I don't know. I'd have to run a few tests to figure it all out. Solve the problem, as it were."

"And you're not up for that yet," Rose said knowingly, but without rancor. She looked up at him through lowered eyelashes, almost coyly but more understanding of the situation. "Cos of your head."

"No," he replied. "All this, the meta-crisis, it's so very new, untried. Never been another like me before and I, I don't know what to expect. I've not tried much of anything, really. Too scared to find out how much is missing -- or just gone, I suppose. Everything I have tried, like my time sense, it usually ends with me getting a splitting headache. Already got one at the mo', ta," he joked halfheartedly. Never mind the fact he could never be certain if pushing too far would mean things might start coming apart, like it had with the Donna in the proper universe. That was something else that was his fault, too. It was a tense moment where he could feel all his pride and dignity railing at him, but he didn't care. If she wanted answers, then she could have them, if that was what it took. She deserved that much and he couldn't loose her, too. "Guess that's what it all boils down to, in the end. I'm scared. I'm scared and I'm a coward." He made a derisive laugh, almost choking on it as he tried to contain it. "Coward any day, me. That much hasn't changed."

Rose swallowed, nodding silently. She wasn't going to speak up now, not when it'd likely mean he'd change the subject to something else and never speak of it again.

Summoning up the words wasn't exactly the problem, it was finding the bottle to actually say them, admit his thoughts. And speak them, he had to. "It's just... it's all just slipping away... Time -- every second, every minute of every day's one less left. Always marching on, getting closer to the end, and I'm just watching it all go by so fast. Too scared to put my foot in, too scared to try anything, 'cos this time, it counts. It all counts. There's no do-overs. No going out in a blaze of light, coming back to try it all over again. Just... this."

He ducked his head, trying to calm his breathing, listening to the sound of his heart thumping away in his chest. Still, she didn't speak. Probably didn't know how to respond to all that, how to reply to that much bare-arsed truth, poured out like a pail of ditchwater dumped over one's head like a nasty surprise. There it was, the worm in the middle of that nice juicy, red apple, sitting proudly in the greengrocer's stall, waiting to be discovered when some unsuspecting toff bites into it.

Looking up, he searched her face for a sign that she was still listening, that she wasn't going to shut him out. "Forever-- that's what I was thinking of, when I was coming up out of the dark, back in that cellar. The promise I'd made, trying to come back here to you, it's all I wanted, back there. Spend it with you, I said. If you want. Still is." Rose finally met his eyes, face solemm as she turned over his words in her head. He quirked a cautious half smile, eyes burning as he said, "Your mother's right. I shouldn't have gone off like that, and fitting in, yeah... not exactly gonna work, is it?" When she still didn't say anything, he sighed, turning and bending to reach for the shoes to put them on, shoving his feet in carelessly. Moving stiffly, he wasn't bothered if it was going to chafe terribly without socks. That didn't matter none, now did it?
"You're still you, then."

The words startled him, making him pause with the left shoe still untied. He looked up, hesitantly nodding, licking his bottom lip before speaking. "Still me," he murmured, unable to dare to hope or to feel, letting the numbness take hold and sweep through him.

"'S all this, the carpets, the doors, the domestics-- still terrifies you." Rose was watching him carefully, voice even and steady. Too steady for his comfort.

"Absolutely shitless," he agreed, the gathering emotional distance pausing to take stock then.

"You, with all the bad habits, like running when you should be staying still, and staying when you should've been gone. Leaving people behind when you say you won't."

Uncomfortably rubbing the back of his neck, he studied the scuff marks on the bannister, worn from decades of hands gliding over it as people went down this very flight of stairs. Barring disaster or neighborhood gentrification, this building would outlast him, even. "Hit the nail right on the head," he drawled ruefully, feeling deep shame. She knew him all too well. "Creature of habit, I suppose."

She continued, ignoring what he'd said. "'And that's what I went looking for," Rose said flatly, emotion starting to creep in to her measured tone. "All that time, going through one fucked up hell of a world after another, seeing the stars going out everywhere around me, looking for you, to warn you. You. And the Void was dead, dead. Do you even know what that means?"

"That's the kind of emptiness that could drive a man mad-- or a woman. The sort of emptiness that'd eat at your soul, if you looked at it too long. Stare at it too long and... well, mustn't think about that. It's not pleasant, innit?" he replied softly, understanding. Pride swelled in his chest, thinking how brave she'd been, how strong she was to have withstood seeing such horrors. Many people wouldn't have been able to do what she'd done, least of all him. He'd already seen that yawning emptiness before. Knew it well, in fact. Seen it gaping, deep and dark and ever hungering to consume. The same as what was nestled down inside himself, if truth be told. And she was the only one who'd been able to fill that space left hollowed out by the war-- the war, combined with too much guilt, too much death, and everything else on top of it, really. He was too tired to run and too old to stop-- always the conundrum. And she was always there, waiting for him, his precious girl. He didn't deserve that, the universe never had been that kind.

Rose nodded, letting out a breath and pushing her hair back behind her ear, begging him with her eyes that accused him from their depths. "So when I went through, every jump after that first one, I went with my eyes shut, hoping that when I opened them, you'd be there."

It was too much, all of it. The dimension jumps were something they'd avoided talking about this whole time. Cannons, beaches, the implications of the duplication, all had been off limit topics. Unspoken agreement, of course, but still. They hadn't talked. Jackie really was right, he thought. Rose had gone through so much, and what had she gotten in return? A malfunctioning, part alien copy of the one she loved? Someone else to make better, as if she hadn't already gone through that before? And he didn't want to tell her that sometimes you couldn't fix what was broken, because that was just the way things are, just the way the biscuit crumbles.

"'Cept you weren't. Never, until it was too late and everything went pear-shaped on us. On one world, you were already dead. Dead, because you gave up, just gave in to everything, wouldn't fight anymore. Like you told me not to do."

Closing his eyes with a grimace, he thought it was like a punch to the gut, but he couldn't deny what she'd said. She knew him too well. "I know, Rose, and I'm sorry." Hollow words, really, but all he
"Just gave up," she repeated. "Like you have done, since you got here."

"I did," he admitted softly, opening his eyes again, "and I have. Centuries of losing everyone and everything I ever cared about, everyone that mattered, watching them all walk away, forget, go on with their lives. So many people I've known, so many I've lost, just couldn't... You all break my hearts in the end. Well, just got the one now, but you... you came back. For me, even. I saw you in the street that night and I'd thought, just this once- just once- the universe was being kind."

"Looks like we were both wrong," Rose said with a trace of bitterness. "It's not so kind, after all."

"Story of my life, innit?" he said with wry humor, shuffling his feet. When she looked up at him again, he swallowed and barged on with what he'd been about to admit. "It's just, I've touched many lives in all my years. Most of them, well, they would've been better off if they hadn't met me. 'Cos who's to say the monsters and the catastrophes didn't follow me? And I'm not worth it, really, I'm not. Back home, on Gallifrey, at the Academy, the name they called me... it means 'death' in some languages. Even in my own in a metaphorical sense, really. Fitting, 'cos it's true. Death and destruction follow me wherever I go; always have."

"Didn't bother you back then, when we were travelling," she replied softly.

Letting out a quiet laugh, he kicked gently at the step he'd been sitting on not long before. Now it seemed like ages ago and the blink of an eye, both. "Back then, I was so, so very cocksure of myself. Thought I was invincible, or nearly so. Would've done anything to protect you, 'cos I could and 'cos you were you. Rose Tyler, the shining light in the dark for the last of the Time Lords."

"But it's not true, is it? You can't protect me from everything, can't keep me wrapped in cotton wool, Doctor," she reminded him. "Can't keep saying goodbye, either."

"It's the one thing I always seem to be doing, innit? But you, you being my light in the darkness? Oh, that much is true. So very true, indeed. As for the rest, well, not so much. Not anymore, at least. And that's what scares me. Danger comes calling, just because of who I am, and what I am now, apparently. I don't mean to, I hate saying goodbye, Rose, but I'm not a very nice man. I've hurt many people, many times over. Many. I've even hurt you before, I know that. I'm just afraid that if I get too close, if you get too close, all that darkness from me will spoil you. Take all that light and hope and kill it dead. Kill it all and leave you just like me." He reached out a hand to touch her cheek when she looked away, gently turning her face back so she would look at him. "I couldn't bear that. I just couldn't."

"Doctor--" She was watching him with a touch of uncertainty in her expression and her eyes were shining with unshed tears now, but still he went on. "Perhaps just I'm afraid that I might lose you again, or maybe because I'm not sure I already haven't. And that's the thing, Rose Tyler. Here's me, terrified to accept things as they could be and as how I always dreamed they could be, -the life I never could have. And so, so spineless about letting you go. Because I can't, I can't. You're all that's holding me together, the only thing keeping me from falling apart, or wafting away on the winds forever. All this, the holding on and the letting go, I can't do either properly, it seems."

Rose held up a hand, trying to end his rant, but he had to get the words out; felt he had to go on, before they ate him alive or burned a hole through him, like the pain in his lower back was trying to do. It was an echo, a mirror, flesh and spirit, going in harmony for once. "Both prospects terrify me equally. Letting go would kill me and I fear the holding on would harm you. Would kill me, that. Never meant to hurt you, you know--"
Rose jumped up and put a hand over his mouth, muffling him. He pulled back, raising an eyebrow in offence. "Oi, that was rude! Trying to make a heartfelt confession here..."

"Doctor, shut it. Through all that avalanche of words, I think I've been able to sift through and finally figure out what you're going on about."

"Even ruder!" he retorted lightly, eyes frantically searching for signs of immanent rejection as he did, just before she clamped her hand back over his lips.

"Doctor, you could have gotten that done in a fraction of the time, if you'd just said five little words."

She raised a brow in answer to his own. "Just five. Can you guess what they are?"

At his hesitant nod she moved her hand, waiting for his reply. Tugging at his earlobe, he thought carefully, trying to remember all he'd learned from travelling with humans over the years. "I'm a complete arse, Rose?" he hazarded, hoping he was right for once. Hard to tell, really. It was a factual statement, that.

Rose shook her head, smiling slightly. "Close."

Pulling from the depths of his experience, sorting through trillions of possibilities in millions of different languages and narrowing it down to the likeliest, he tried again. "'I love you, I'm sorry'?"

"Bingo," she said with smug satisfaction and a tongue touched smile, giving his chest a gentle shove, before turning to walk back up the stairs. When he didn't start up the stairs after her, she turned around, rolling her eyes at him. "What're you waiting for? You need to eat something before you get any skinnier."

"Right-o. Allons-y!" he chirped, more relieved than he could've said. He followed after her, cautiously optimistic for the first time that he could remember in ages. And then, he remembered Jackie was probably still in their flat, waiting for them to return.

Bloody hell.

As he was following Rose down that narrow hall back to their flat, his vision seemed to dim for a moment. A sense of vertigo reminded him that he wasn't exactly up to par, by anyone's standards. So much for the advanced healing rates he thought glumly, wondering if for once he'd get lucky and be able to go back to bed without any fuss. Walking past the small window just before the turn off to the front stairwell, a small red auto caught his eye. For a instant it fascinated him, making him pause to study it, watching the driver pull up to the kerb near of Argo's shop. He didn't recognise the driver or the car, but something about it seemed to jar something, a memory, perhaps.

He was glad then that no one had really pressed him about what had gone on in that cellar. Pressed him about what he'd seen, what he'd heard- not that he could really remember the half of it. Most of it was fuzzy, indistinct. Half blurred flashes in the fog, that all disappeared when he tried to capture them to sort out any kind of continuity or meaning. Just like now, when a bog standard Peugeot was somehow the most interesting thing and his subconscious was trying to infer some kind of significance to it. Vague connections were trying to be made, but no, he was too old and too thick. Head was far too full of stuff.

"Doctor?"

Someone was calling him and he turned a little too fast, making his surroundings spin crazily. They caught him by the arms, steadying him and looking up at him with open concern and worry. One of
those fascinating and slightly primitive humans, she repeated his name, more cautiously this time, perhaps having glimpsed something that he usually tried to keep hidden. For a drawn out moment that felt longer than it probably was, he couldn't quite remember who she was. But he had to admit she was very familiar-- very much so.

"Are you alright?" She reached up and pushed his fringe off his forehead, out of his eyes, and for a moment he couldn't quite remember that being there either. Casting around frantically for a name, the right name, and needing to reassure her, he stepped back. The world seemed to wobble on its axis again, and suddenly it was all so clear. Flat in Hackney; garage down below, that he helped out at and tinkered around a bit; the meta-crisis. "Rose, I'm fine. Just a bit tired, is all." He really hoped that wasn't just a lie.

Back inside the flat, Jackie was fluttering about, making an effort to be helpful and clear up some of the clutter. When she tried to apologise to him, all the while looking him over suspiciously, like she expected him to go swanning off for parts unknown again, he wearily waved her away. Ignoring the questioning looks that were being exchanged behind him, he shuffled over to the coral in the corner of the lounge.

A faint hum could be heard when he knelt down and pressed an unsteady hand against the rough surface. So low, it was almost like he was imagining it, but he doubted it. Couldn't have, unless he'd gone so far around the bend that he was simply imagining the slight glow that seemed to pulse with his heartbeat. "There you are," he breathed, feeling the slight nudge of another's presence against his mind. It hadn't been just a fevered dream, wrought by subdural hematomas or incipient cortex trauma, as he'd initially thought. Well, not that he'd actually thought about it. More like avoided thinking about it entirely, but it had been there, hanging at the edges of his thoughts when he wasn't busy worrying about everything else.

Relaxing to rest his forehead against it, he let out a sigh, breathing slowly at a measured rate. Words just couldn't... but she was there. Really there, and for once it didn't seem so bad. Maybe the knock on the head had done it- he'd have to run some tests, do a scan with the sonic.... but that would have to wait. He was completely knackered, had been flagging hard for days now. Weeks it seemed like, really and oh... he was probably scaring Rose. And her mother. Rose was looking at him with worry again and Jackie had an eyebrow raised, looking apprehensive. "I think he's finally lost it," she muttered from the corner of her mouth, still watching him.

"Mum," Rose protested, shooting her a sharp look, but plainly wondering the same thing herself. "Are you alright, Doctor? Has something gone wrong?"

"Oh no, I've found it, Jackie, not lost it," he said with a grin, slowly rising. Turning to Rose, he gave her a hopeful half smile, stepping forward to grab both her hands with his. "Found the connection and for once, something's actually going to go the way it should."

Rose blinked at him, uncertain, giving his fingers a cautious squeeze. "Yeah?"

"Yup," he said, popping the 'p', feeling a bit of his old enthusiasm creeping back. Amazing what a bit of human adrenaline would do, even would keep one on their feet long past the time when they should've been getting intimately reacquainted with their pillow. "Give it nine months or so..." He saw Jackie start at that length of time being given and suppressed a smirk. "And it'll be back to how it belongs."

Rose nodded slowly, eyes never leaving his. "Is it?"

He nodded back, letting the grin show. "Oh yes. The Doctor and Rose, in the TARDIS..."
"As it should be," she finished with a squeal, jumping into his arms.

That almost finished him right there, but she quickly caught herself and pulled him to lean against her for support. She was thoughtful enough to not make it obvious that he'd have gone arse over elbow otherwise, as she hugged him tight. More grateful than he could've expressed, he still winced when she murmured, "We're going to have to get you all patched up before we even start making any plans, you know."

"Right." He made a face at that, again cursing his sudden affliction of fragility. Sodding meta-crisis. If he'd been what he was before, a quick kip and he'd have been fine. That was, if he even would have been effected like this. Still, could be worse. If he'd been completely human, he probably would have been dead...

"Can't have you falling asleep at the controls, ending up god knows where or when."

"Yeah," he drawled, thinking that being asleep anywhere would be absolutely brilliant. When he cracked a sudden yawn, feeling his jaw pop, he froze, blinking. Well that was new, yawning. Couldn't say he liked it, either. Good way to dislocate something.

Rose pulled back, looking up at him earnestly. "Keep forgetting I've got to get you back to bed where you belong."

Jackie was watching them with a smile, shaking her head slowly and rolling her eyes. "Kids," she huffed, muttering, "Not a lick of sense these days." She went into the kitchen, coming back with a tray of toast and jam and nodding toward the bedroom as the Doctor was rubbing his face wearily. "Is he gonna make it on his own or are you going to have to lug him there again?" she asked Rose.

Once he'd gotten settled back in bed, tiredly picking at the bread and dipping an occasional finger in the jam, Jackie ducked into the room and stood there watching him for a moment. Rose was taking a shower, so it was just them for the moment. No one to run interference if need be, he noted with rising panic. Enough of an adrenaline surge and he might just manage the energy to run to the loo and take refuge in there with Rose. Surely she'd protect him and hopefully Jackie wouldn't follow....

"I know what you did back there," Jackie said softly. "Saw the CCTV, I did." He'd figured as much, with her comment about Rose carrying him. "Scared us all, you did, thinking you were dead or somethin'. Didn't know how I was going to tell Rose when she woke up."

He squirmed a bit at that, looking away and setting the jam jar aside on the night stand. Shifting down, he settled against the pillows more comfortably. If he could fall asleep, maybe she'd go away.

Jackie sighed. "You know, wiping it all from the computers, that's only gonna do so much. People aren't going to completely forget, you know."

"Give it time, and most of them will," he replied in a low voice, eyelids getting heavier by the second.

"And Pete -- well, he'll not be forgetting, either."

His eyes popped open at that, heart speeding up and mind churning. Was that a warning, a threat? Had he gotten Torchwood out after him, instead of getting everyone off his back?

Jackie clucked at him disapprovingly, looking satisfied at his expression of alarm. "Could've sprung that on him slowly, get him used to the idea slowly, you know," she complained, lightly smacking his arm.
"No, I really couldn't." With a snort, he rubbed where she'd hit him before he turned onto his side. Pulling the duvet up over his head, he murmured, "'M tryin' to sleep here. Serious head injury, need rest for a good recovery and all that."

Listening to the thrum of his heartbeat and feeling the faint humming presence in the back of his mind, he let himself drift. Quirking a half smile at Jackie muttering, "Typical," before she left, he fell asleep.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Have you ever wondered what happens when you start writing after reading Robert Frost's poetry while listening to Nine Inch Nails? Yes, you read that correctly, Nine Inch Nails is really good. Unfortunately, it sorta inspired parts of this chapter, insanely enough. Prepare to be educated, if you ever look up the lyrics to "Closer". You might find you recognise parts of it. Thankfully, not the more familiar chorus. ;-) 

I'll post a smut warning for the last half. So for anyone who's opposed to activities between two consenting adults- what the hell are you doing on here?!

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Physical evidence. It was all they had left, and all they had to go on. A few paltry photographs, a set of bloodied clothes from the evidence locker, and some written out witness statements from the residents in and around the area in Finsbury. That was it. Pete Tyler's one little hint had led Gail to borrowing McAndrew's little Peugeot on her day off, circling the neighborhoods around Hackney until she had narrowed things down a bit. She'd finally recognized a garage with a purple bearded cross-dresser out in front, and something told her she couldn't be too far off the mark. Considering the people passing by on the pavements and the driver of the delivery van across the way hadn't batted an eye at the bloke, she figured where else could a half alien lunatic and his girlfriend possibly fit in? This place was as good as any.

For an hour or so she sat there, watching a small greengrocers' and a shop that specialized in Indian cuisine. Once, she'd gotten out and walked down the street to the newsagent's, bought a paper and went back, trying not to be obvious in the way she studied her surroundings. Most of the residents seemed distinctly working class, with some obvious criminal types scurrying about. All of those seemed to spot her immediately, giving her knowing looks before flipping the two fingered salute as they continued about their business. It was painfully obvious that they all were well aware of her presence, her being an outsider, but no one stopped to confront her, not even a blue haired pensioner. She in particular had looked like the nosy sort, but the old woman had shuffled on her way, after staring at her long and hard for a few tense minutes. That had been a strange experience, coming right after she'd started scanning the building nearest the garage for any obvious signs of her targets. It wasn't as if she expected a billboard to be up there, listing the identity of all the occupants, but she expected something. Something other than sun faded curtains in narrow windows, stained bricks and a thoroughly depressing atmosphere of hardship and poverty.

Though she had to say it was rather suspicious, the quality of the car that was rolled out of the garage at one point. Expensive and sleek, it was a recent model and far too shiny to be in the budget for the people that lived around here. Making note of the number plate, she decided to check the list of reported vehicle thefts. Area like this, with it's high crime rate, drugs, theft and smuggling had to be a mainstay for a lot of the locals. Beemers just weren't in the cards for the incomes involved in this sort of neighborhood. And that, that was the crux, wasn't it? Hard to imagine Pete Tyler's little girl moving from such posh environs as the building in Wapping to slums like this, but that was the point.
This was the very last place anyone would expect and probably the last anyone would look. Other than her, that is. As for him, for someone who didn't really belong anywhere, anywhere was just as good a place to start. Especially if the one place he was almost guaranteed to be was with Rose.

At one point, she could've sworn that she saw none other than Jackie Tyler exiting the especially rundown building abutting the garage and made particular note of that. The building itself was only slightly more dilapidated than its brethren, with a formidable sense of deterioration in its cracked and broken cornices, crooked casements, and the boarded over windows on the ground floor. Visible signs of scarring from bonfires set by vagrants showed by the alley in between it and the next equally derelict block of flats. If she'd ever seen an area more deserving of the wrecking ball and redistricting, she honestly couldn't remember when. This place would've looked like the areas still abandoned after the destruction caused by the Cybermen if it wasn't for all the people. People that seemed to be trying a little too hard to pretend to be going about their normal daily activity. Very peculiar, that. It wasn't too far a stretch of the imagination to keep her eyes peeled for a tall, thin figure smirking at her from behind a raised curtain. That would be entirely believable, and in character for him. But no, not even a glimpse of messy brown hair or a toothy grin to be seen anywhere.

Still, she didn't stay too long, after getting hard stares from a few rough looking customers that were hanging about on the far corner. She'd been rather doubtful that they'd enough respect for the law to give her a pass, so she'd returned the borrowed auto and gone home. It was disheartening, going back to her empty flat and pouring over the small amount of hard copy files on the kidnapping case. Other than memories, the only proof that Smith even existed was a file that was all of two centimetres thick. That, and one photo she'd found from a tabloid, dated a month previously. Right after the incident in Tescos, if she recalled correctly. Intuition alone had led her researching political extremists, thinking that the public opinions regarding extraterrestrials was as strong as things hinted at, it could've been one of those who'd gone after him. Just as she'd been looking in on when he'd been missing.

After all, if she could remember him and what he looked like, so would they. If she'd managed to narrow down his location to a single neighborhood, what's to say they couldn't manage the same feat?

Pete was just starting to relax, to settle in and start thinking of a plausible enough explanation for when someone inevitably asked where Rose was. Jackie had come back, all aflutter and raving about the state of the neighborhood they were in, saying ASBOs and pikers roamed like pack animals and really, it was worse than it had been back in Peckham. It had been with smug satisfaction and an ickle bit of revenge that he'd given her the address in the first place, just to get her to stop harping on about the matter. Had to stop her fretting somehow, didn't he? She'd said the Doctor wasn't in any better state than they'd thought, but well enough that she reckoned they'd manage if she popped in to check on them often enough.

Not that she seemed to take into account that her 'little girl' had been launching herself across worlds to find the ruddy nuisance that she was currently happily holed up with. Reminding his wife only served to get himself one of those looks and a warning about his lip. Just couldn't win, could he? Sure, he could've gotten an extraction team in there, grabbed the pair, and had one safely ensconced in the mansion under her mother's watchful eye and the other back in the intensive care ward where he rightfully belonged, but still- all he'd have gotten was a bigger headache. Plus, he was worried that the one who'd end up screeching at him the loudest might be Rose, if not the Doctor. That one
certainly had a set of lungs on him, as he recalled from when Owen had attempted treatments on some of his injuries. And all the yelling, it was just getting tiresome.

Of course, since he had full confirmation of where they were, it was fully in his purview to share that information when Wilf and Sylvia came a-knocking. They'd been just as worried as Jacks had been, especially Wilf who seemed to suspect that it had all been a ruse and Torchwood currently had a new occupant for their dissection rooms. Honestly, what was with people assuming that if someone dealt with aliens that you were bent on world domination or the exploitation of alien races? No matter how many times he'd tried explaining to people, no one ever listened.

And then, then that call came in; the one from the surveillance team he'd had over in Belfast, that had woken him in the middle of the night. How he was starting to dread the thought of a ringing phone, rousing him from his bed in a state of alert and ready for the next disaster. And disaster it was, wasn't it? One more complication to add to the mix, when they still didn't know who'd grabbed the Doctor and held him for three days. Potentially worse, too, because it held some really nasty implications with it.

In short, Dougal Chambers was gone.

He'd disappeared, and they still couldn't find him. More accurately, someone had stormed the safehouse around midnight and spirited him away. No witnesses left alive, only the silent alarms had alerted the standby team, all of which had been off duty at the time. As for the ones who'd actually been on duty, well, that was five families who'd be getting the worst possible news. Five letters of condolence that he'd be writing personally, because that's what he always took upon himself to do. Part and parcel of the job, all of it, even the unpleasant bits. If you were responsible enough to send someone into harm's way, you were therefore liable to look into the faces of their grieving loved ones and explain why.

That part never got easier, had it? Not even after the wars with the Cybermen and the explanations were simple and everyone just was relieved that someone was out there, trying to protect them. Now, with those days far behind them and the tide of time enough to fade the memories of the danger and immediacy of those days, he was half expecting to be met with doubt and cynicism. It had certainly been long enough for the extremists and reactionaries to get an audience, hadn't it?

So far, he'd been able to keep Chambers' identity out of the media, knowing that'd be more flames for the fire. Instead, he had an extra team monitoring the internet chatter, to go with the one currently monitoring Isaacson's every movement. Bank accounts, wire taps, physical whereabouts- all were carefully kept track of. If the man so much as sneezed, Torchwood would know about it. The Doctor might not have spoke a word about who'd been involved, but Pete had his suspicions. Had done since that night they'd brought Chambers in in the first place. Probably should've tried taking that bloody TD gun then, and then he would've had some leverage on getting some lips loosened. Then again, he reflected, that probably would've just resulted in ransacked archives, to go with pillaged computer databases. Would've had a matched set. Forget the Spanish Inquisition, you never expected something like the one-man Raid of the Visigoths, sacking his personal version of Rome.

Right, now I know how people on other worlds have felt, facing an alien invasion. Thank God there's only one of him, the universe probably couldn't survive more. And now I know why the other one dumped him off here. Lovely pressie. Too bad I can't turn around and hand him off to someone else, like on Boxing Day. Then again, that certainly wasn't Christmas, was it?

Still, for the sake of peace and possibly his own sanity, he figured he should do something to maintain goodwill between them. Call it a kind gesture, or perhaps a bribe, he had an idea about something that might keep the Doctor occupied and well out of his (thinning) hair for awhile. Keep
him on the opposite end of town, at the very least. Ah, diplomacy at its finest, most parliamentary of styles. Revenge by being nice. Fitting.

Such a whirlwind it had been, these last few days, in between him sleeping most of the time and people showing up. For all the fancy doodah at the door was supposedly able to mask their location, it had been closer to one of those revolving doors at the zeppelinport. First her mum, then Donna had come by, bringing a casserole in a pan from Sylvia. There'd been a pounding on the wall outside from beside the door and Donna shouting, "Oh come on. You can't bloody well hide the flipping door, I know where you live!" Since he'd been sleeping peacefully for the first time in the last thirty six hours, Rose had hurried to the door.

"Idiots," Donna had muttered fondly, before spotting her frazzled appearance and the fact she had felt like she was going to drop dead any minute from exhaustion, looking concerned at that. "Has he been that bad?"

Rose had nodded, setting aside the dish on the narrow counter before replying. "It's just... the dreams. He manages to not wake up, but it's not like he's gotten any rest over the last couple days."

"Dreams, about what?" Donna had raised a brow, darting a curious glance around the flat, obviously noting he'd not gotten up.

Rose had shrugged. She hadn't known then and didn't know now, either, but she had her suspicions. "Dunno. He doesn't remember them when he wakes up."

"Is that..." Donna mimed getting thumped on the head and looking like a poleaxed ox. "Or...' she twirled a finger beside her ear.

Good question, that. "Owen said he could actually have partial amnesia from the injury, and it's just the memories trying to come backt or it's because of the injury, stirring up past traumas. No one knows really. He's too different for them to be able to tell from the scans, and with no obvious impairment of motor function..."

Not like she'd been so blind as to miss the occasional blank stare he'd give her and the slightly bemused and terrified look before he'd blink slowly, saying her name after, as if to remind himself who she was. But that had only happened a couple times, thankfully. Not that she hadn't rang Owen as soon as she could without being obvious about it. Of course, Owen was Owen and he'd been fascinated, keeping track of the symptoms and comparing them to what would be expected in a human. 'Other than the coma leading to death part, very similar. Showed signs of a catastrophic hemispheric herniation at the beginning, and subdural hematoma. Quite fascinating really,' he'd said. 'Ring back if he suddenly develops worsening symptoms or carks it, yeah?'

"Did he say it?" Donna half-whispered. At Rose's blank look, she clarified, "You know, PTSD."

"Yes, but it's not like it's nothing we hadn't already twigged onto ourselves, is it? Figured that out a long time ago, back when... well, before. He'd had them then, and he's had them since he got here. Even before this."

Explaining regeneration and the Time War- well, she wasn't sure how much he'd ever told Donna about that. One was a topic guaranteed to confuse even the most believing of individuals, the other was one he would do anything to avoid. Not that she could blame him, if she was in his place.
Seemed like the meta-crisis or the events on the Crucible had either ripped the scabs off all those old wounds or they'd been festering all along, and being part human had added a new vulnerability. One that left him without that emotional distance necessary to keep him from drowning in it. That, or it was just him fully realizing his newfound mortality and drawing the parallels in his subconscious. Either way, he'd actually admitted she was the glue holding him together. A minor miracle in itself, it was. Something else about him that made him so different from the one on the beach.

"Ever thought about counselling?" Donna had suggested, and seeing her offended look, she'd hastily added, "For him, obviously."

"Right. Like there's anyone who'd listen to him for an hour without sectioning him."

Because different didn't cover the half of it, not when there'd been times over the last week when he sometimes spoke with an odd inflection. Times where his voice didn't quite sound like the versions of him she knew, or more hauntingly, more like the one she'd first known. That was the biggest difference between the two she'd stood between on that day on the damned beach: he could actually say it. Say it and mean it, in his own muddled, infuriating way, even if sometimes he reminded her more of her first Doctor, the one in leather. Hell, he'd even gone back to the leather, with the addition of t-shirts. Even seemed to have an unspoken abhorrence for the suit. Not that she could blame him-blue really wasn't his color. The other Him hadn't been kidding when he'd said, 'That's me, when we first met.'

Donna hadn't stayed long, only staying long enough to discern that she wasn't going to go bonkers and start losing arguments to tea cozies- not that they actually had any. The Doctor probably would've pitched a fit, balking at that much glaring proof of going domestic, as if a flat with mismatched curtains and laundry piled in the corners wasn't domestic. She'd glanced in on him too, checking to see if he was still alive, since there hadn't been a peep out of the back room in all that time she'd been there.

And now, hours later, he was spooned up behind her, holding her close, like he had done over the last couple of nights, and he was kissing the back of her neck. In a moment of near panic mixed with arousal and excitement, she wondered if it was really him, or if he was in another state of confusion again.

"Rose," he murmured softly against her hair, the London accent at least confirming that he was probably in his right mind. Well, as much as you could expect for him. At least he wasn't asking if she wanted a jelly baby again, then having to explain or wait for him to remember that they didn't exist in this universe and watching the confusion turning to disappointment flooding over his face after.

For once when the Doctor woke, nothing was hurting. Well, nothing was more than a minor annoyance that couldn't easily be ignored. Headache was still there, but as more of an afterthought or a halfhearted reminder. Plus, no sign of a fever or any half remembered dreams lingering on the edge of his consciousness. All a testament to the fact all the hours conked out had actually worked. Not quite the healing coma he'd have gone into before everything changed, but still, better than a normal human could've managed. Probably should've explained that one of the times he'd been conscious, but he'd been too hungry every time he woke up to think of it. Yup, just like the old days, that. Go down for a kip to recover and wake up ravenous, ready to replenish the resources lost. 'Course, he'd been too out of it most of the time, and he'd still had those odd moments of disorientation, but that seemed to have passed now. Hopefully passed, that is.

This time when he woke, he'd not been hungry for once. Mildly peckish, but nothing to fuss about.
He was more content to just surreptitiously watch Rose, who was contentedly reading a book, unaware he was even awake. Sometimes this much seemed like a dream, too much hope combining with fantasy, all aimed to leave him crushed when he'd wake up and discovery reality. But no, this was reality. Hard to believe as it was. She was still here, even when she should've long since kicked him to the kerb. Reality was so much scarier than the nightmares, in a way. In those, everything had already been lost, destroyed. Awake, it could still be there, looming just over the horizon in an unseen future, just waiting to take them by surprise. Even scarier, when he couldn't parse the possible meanings of the different timelines like he used to be able.

When she'd set the book aside and turned out the bedside lamp, he pretended to drowsily reach for her, wrapping himself around her. When he breathed in and mumbled her name, enjoying the scent of her cocoanut shampoo in her hair, she rolled to face him. Tracing the line of her cheek with one finger, he leaned in to kiss her, humming appreciatively as she opened her mouth under his. His hands were already fumbling with her top when he pulled back, pausing, all certainty fled. "Is this...?"

It was almost too dark to see her nod, but he felt it more than saw it, even if his eyes were rapidly adjusting to the dark. Felt it resonating with something deep within as he started kissing his way down her neck to her breasts, his hands exploring and re-familiarizing themselves with her curves. Her hand was tight in his hair, pulling him back up from where he'd been mapping the terrain around her navel. "I want you," she whispered, in a hushed tone, urgency straining her voice.

The effects of his injuries proved their lingering effects as somehow, he couldn't seem to manage as simple a task as removing her sleep shorts and knickers, dexterity having fled. Or perhaps it was the growing sense of time getting shorter, the need to experience as much as possible before the end. "Help me," he said pleadingly, trying to peel off his own pants and t-shirt hurriedly.

With a giggle, Rose shucked off her top, kicking off the rest before moving to pull his shirt off. Bare skin to bare skin finally, he pulled her close, lips ghosting across her neck as she caressed down across his shoulders and back, freezing when she felt the bandage low on his flank. "Are you gonna be alright enough for this?" she asked breathlessly, pulling away slightly as her fingers were tapping gently against his chest in apprehension.

"I'll be fine, Rose," he said distractedly, chasing after her to continue the kiss, hands resting lightly on her hips as he moved in closer. But she looked like she needed more assurance than that. "I'm fine, just... perfect, really. You make me so, make me think I'm somebody else."

"What?" Did she sound a little worried, slightly hysterical? And oh, she was giving him that look with the frowny face and beetled brow..."You make me better," he explained gently, brushing her hair back from her face, breathing unevenly, trying to make her see the truth of it as he hurried to kiss away her fears. "You're the the only thing that works for me, helps me get away from myself."

As he was kissing her, her hands were moving of their own accord, gliding down his sides and around to his bum. Lingering there to give him a firm squeeze with one hand, while the other hand was fisted in his hair, she pulled him with her as she dropped back onto the mattress. It seemed like it was a mere flash, an instant, or perhaps it was an eternity itself, but he was lying there, cradled between her thighs, waiting and wanting more. More, always more, 'cos how could this ever be enough; how could he be enough, compared to the one she'd lost? Staring up at her face, searching for her eyes in the dark, he moved down, capturing and savoring the taste of her skin, the smell of her arousal, deep and musky against his tongue, weighing it against memory.

When he'd been down in that cellar, this had all seemed so far from possible, that fate had caught on and decreed it never to happen again. Universe wasn't that kind, was it? Except when it apparently
was. Latching onto Rose's right nipple and suckling on it eagerly, he clung to her, an affirmation that
he was really here, that this wasn't all a pipe dream. A clever tongue traced first the letters of her
name, then his, using the omni-temporal tense, for this was forever, wasn't it? Just a drop in the
bucket, but once you were in the moment, time just stood still, didn't it?

Moving to the other, so it wouldn't be slighted, he was using her indrawn breaths and gasps as a
gauge for his performance. So far, he wasn't a disappointment, near as he could tell. He went to
move lower, wondering what she tasted like down there, if it was any different to feeling her
heartbeat hammering away in her chest, to see if he could get any new sounds of enjoyment out of
her, but she stopped him.

"Please." Her voice was tight, hands coming up to rest on his sides just under his arms, where he was
trying to keep his weight off of her. He looked up at her, chin resting against the soft swell of her
abdomen. "Stop teasing," she ground out, pulling hard enough so that he lost his balance, barely
catching himself in time to keep his nose from colliding with her forehead. Before he could even
recover, she had her legs around his hips and had snaked a hand down to line him up at her entrance.
"Now," she insisted with a touch of defiance, like she expected him to back out now.

Frankly, that would've been rather impossible, what with the hold she had on his bits, and more so,
the fact that the assembled hordes of Genghis Khan couldn't have held him back. Pushing away the
gibbering voices of all his myriad fears and insecurities— all babbling away about the dangers inherent
to this, all the risks involved and what if he accidentally made telepathic contact with her again, blew
through all the barriers in her mind like it was nothing— he set his jaw, shifted his weight to his
elbows, and pushed ahead.

She was so wet and ready for him, it was like coming home, or at least, where he belonged, really.
Home, he thought as he slid into her, the place where you shouldn't deserve. Don't deserve any of
this, but somehow I've ended up with it, he mentally added as he withdrew slowly and thrust in
again, eyes locked on hers and fingers twitching helplessly against the pillow on either side of her
head. They found their own rhythm, with him going counterpoint to the ever quickening beating in
his chest. That still felt wrong, off balance with just the one heart, but certain things served to distract
him from it....

Rose's fingers were still wandering, one set smoothing their way across his collarbone, while the
other traced the narrow trail of hair running down his abdomen. It tickled and his breath hitched,
muscles moving in reflex as he slammed into her harder than he'd meant. An appreciative hum told
him it was far from an unwanted result, and he repeated the action. Her eyes met his, pools of
darkness in the shadows. Smirking down at her expression, he grunted, "Like.. what... you see?"

"Always have, even when you were all ears and snark." With a grin of her own, she did it again, the
hand by his neck coming up to grip the hair at his nape. "Faster," she gasped, nails from her other
hand moving to skitter up and down his spine, spurring him on.

"Whatever my lady wants... she gets." Reaching down to grab her knee and pulling it higher against
his side, he slid ever deeper within her, enough to make Rose gasp and dig her nails into his shoulder
and side. Thankfully, it wasn't the side with all the scars; pain was mixing with pleasure, but it was
good. So good.

Molto bene, he thought, wincing when she left a mark on his scapula that'd probably be bloody in
the morning. This is brilliant. You sad, sorry bastard, look what you could've had. What you gave
away, he reflected with awe, hearing her moan in pleasure beneath him, her hips rocking up to meet
his every move. And Rose, she was moving more frantically, breath coming in harsh pants as she
chased her own high and he was determined to take her there. It might be ages before he could show
her the stars again, but he could do his best to make her see them, he thought as he reached down to stroke where they were joined. Her little gasps and moans egging him on, he sped up his thrusts, feeling a gathering pressure low in his belly.

"I love you," he gasped, ducking his head to kiss her sloppily, needing to capture the sounds she made, even as he was letting out his own happy grunts and groans. Being partially human had never felt so good as this, when he was shuddering and fighting his way to hold off long enough so she'd come apart before him. The urge to complete the connection was also growing, mind almost burning with the need, as his rhythm faltered, straining to hold back. But then she was crying out, her body clenching around him, furthering his need to follow her. Pressing his face tight against her neck, he kept going. Struggling onward, the end was almost in sight. With a groan that felt like it was ripped out of him, he came, body shaking and fists clenched in an effort to bypass instinct and desire.

He'd done it, he thought, trying to catch his breath. Managed to make love to her without accidentally causing her any psychic trauma. It had been an uphill battle, especially at the end when part of him had wanted nothing more than to delve into her mind as he was doing with her body. Wanted nothing more to join spirit as well as mind, to experience it all from the inside, but he hadn't. Found enough control to hold back, kept from harming her any more than he already had.

Soon she needed the loo, disentangling herself to go clean up or whatever it was that women did. He wasn't really paying attention, still busy trying to catch his breath, waiting for his heart to stop acting like it was going to explode, and starting to drift off again. He couldn't remember when he'd been so knackered, so worn out, but it was a good sort of knackered. Didn't think he'd ever get used to this, the exhaustion, the euphoria, the sudden urge to sleep for a week and get up to do it all over again.

"Shift, you're hogging the bed," he heard dimly, moving over to make room for Rose and immediately pulling her close again. She'd redressed in her jimjams. Doing the same felt like too much effort; too much work, when he could just lie there, basking in the glow. "Love you," he heard her murmur from where she was snuggled against his chest and he smiled, already half gone. He doubted the dreams would be back tonight.

As they fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms, his mind was still spinning, ever active because that was what it was wont to do, what it meant to hold that Time Lord consciousness in such a fragile shell. Here's me, thinking I got the fuzzy end of the lolly the whole time. Other than the part about only having 50 or 60 years to enjoy it all, that's a bit pants. Still, could be worse. Stuck here... it's not so bad, is it? Other than the loonies bent on killing me, the awful food, the lack of cricket... Sod that, sod it all, I've got Rose.

I'm right where I belong, with her.
Chapter 47

By the end of the week, there were other cases, other things to take up her time. The first one had been a nightmare. A family of three and their little West Highland Terrier had been found dead, in a blood bath on a council estate in Highgate. It was the kind of case they all dreaded, and they'd all had horrifying visions of the crime scene being replicated across the city. The same thought must've occurred to the other people in the building, judging from the gobsmacked and guarded expressions she'd glimpsed when they'd cracked their doors to cautiously peer out or had briefly twitched their curtains aside for a look. Expressions that had held more than just a touch of fear, mirroring the sickening twist of anxiety in her own gut. The scene was horrific, but she'd put aside her own visceral reaction, leaving that for when she had more time and when it'd be in a far more appropriate setting. For now, there was a murder to solve and a murderer to be caught and locked away.

Mercifully-- in some ways-- that search proved to be over faster than any of them had expected. Just as they'd started questioning the neighbors, a seemingly harmless pensioner had approached a PC, handed over the bloodied knife and said, "I told them to shut that worthless mutt up. Even asked politely, I did. But they wouldn't listen, none of them, even after months and months of the bloody racket."

That was the only bright side to the whole affair, not having to pick apart the deceased people's lives, looking for clues and weighing them against the evidence. It had left them all rattled, to say the least, but not as much as the next one, the one where things started to come together. That call came in on a cold and dreary morning, grey clouds hanging low and close, the chill of the autumn rains a threat and a promise both.

A body was found among the pilings under a dock, not far down from Canary Wharf. From where the body lay, she could clearly see the outline of Canary Wharf in the near distance, Torchwood's headquarters towering over the rest of the buildings. A young man, mid twenties to early thirties, bludgeoned to death with a blunt object. No signs of a struggle, so most likely taken unawares, she surmised. Victim had around fifty quid in small notes, but no identification. One of the lads said it looked like someone they knew, someone that if they were right, might have connections to several other still unsolved cases. Said blunt object was found a short distance away, when they were combing over the area. They'd be sifting through evidence for a week, what with all the detritus washed up on shore around the body. No idea how much might've already been washed away by the tide before they'd gotten there, but one glance had told her it wasn't the primary crime scene. The victim had died elsewhere before being dumped, probably by someone who thought the river would take him.

Death by tyre iron, she thought, as she trudged back to her vehicle, shortly after the body had been taken away by the coroner's van. It brought to mind the last time she'd seen a similar injury, along with the fact that that victim was still keeping schtum. Perhaps the perpetrator-- if indeed the cases were in the least bit connected-- had finally perfected the amount of force necessary this time? She didn't know, but she was already getting the urge to start going door to door in a certain neighborhood. She rather thought she'd narrowed her search down to two of the buildings there. Not that many doors to pound on, in that case. The hard part would be getting a straight answer out of him and something, call it instinct, told her there was a connection. But convincing her bosses would take a bit more than her gut feelings. After all, how many people had popped their clogs in such a manner in the last year alone? Plenty, if you went by the statistics and the area did have a reputation.
Arriving at her car, she was unlocking the door when a black SUV pulled up, two Torchwood inside, beckoning her to get in. Why am I not surprised, she noted drily, curiosity outweighing annoyance. Of course Torchwood would be sniffing about, sticking their noses in. This was practically on their doorstep, after all, and with the tyre iron...

The vehicle approached Canary Wharf, but diverted into a small lane running between the tower and a smaller building, pulling into an alley. It was a bit odd, going in that way instead of the more familiar front entrance with all the guards, but she assumed there was a reason. Buggered if she could figure out why, and the agents hadn't said when she asked, only saying there was someone who wanted to see her. As for that, she had her suspicions, ones that shortly proved correct.

"I take it you've already heard the similarities to another, as yet unsolved, case, hence the summons?" she said archly, when she was escorted in to see Pete Tyler.

It wasn't his office on the top floor, just a room that appeared to be a lab; one out of the many she'd passed along the myriad of basement corridors they'd used to get here. One of the agents who'd brought her in, a man with spiky, blonde hair, lingered. He hung back by the door, wearing a carefully blank expression that mirrored Pete's own. The fluorescents overhead cast everything in a cold, unforgiving light as she glanced around. There were no signs of CCTV cameras in this room and she'd not seen anyone else besides the two agents on the way in. Looked like this was supposed to be a secret meeting. Even curiourer.

"Just heard it's a murder by the docks. Rather close. Figured you'd appreciate the offer of some assistance on the investigation."

"I can manage," she said guardedly, still wondering what was really going on.

"Of that, I've no question, but the offer still stands," he said politely, giving her a gracious smile. "Plus, it's best to stay informed, wouldn't you say? Please, do enlighten us." Pete gave her a brief flash of a smile, waving a hand to indicate she should continue.

DI Evans didn't believe it for a minute that he wasn't far more informed than he was letting on, but she decided to play along. "The ID is still a bit wobbly, but we do have our suspicions on who he is. And well that we do, considering that area and its warehouses and docks are known for certain activities." She watched for signs of a reaction, but saw none. Pete Tyler was definitely not someone she'd want to play poker with, not and have any chance at winning. "Activities like smuggling of various sorts, illegal booking, and various other activities," she added pointedly.

"The things that happen practically on one's doorstep," Pete murmured softly, pretending to sound shocked. "Rough area after dark, I've heard said."

Gail shrugged, wondering what this had to do with Torchwood. "Been a lot of arrests down there lately for illicit trade with connections to organized crime. Not a few murders around there, either."

"We've had a few cases down there, ourselves. Things... turning up in the wrong hands. Quite a lot coming in on barges from across the Channel, too."

She nodded. She'd heard stories in the past. "Too much to keep up with, really. A lot of potential suspects tied up in this, including some that we'd probably both know."

"Doubtless, but it's not the one you're hinting at," Pete said sharply, his smile taking on a hard edge. His expression then sharpened, eyes narrowing as he cocked his head to the side, folding his arms across his chest. "Who was the victim?"
Gail sighed. All in all, this question was to be expected, if Tyler was actually fishing for information, instead of merely trying to suss what she did and didn't know. "It's still unofficial, but he was suspected to be Miles Holburn's runner and general errand boy, Lester Jones. No info on who he's been working for since. Mostly known for getting stuff done, but there were never any hints he'd done anything beyond some intimidation and delivery of illicit goods. Small scale, really. The only fingerprints on the weapon that killed him were his own, so whoever did him in wore gloves."

"And the weapon?"

She paused for emphasis on the reveal, hoping to jar him enough that something would slip. He wouldn't have sent two agents to bring her to Canary Wharf just for funsies; there had to be a point to all this. "A tyre iron. Possibly the very same fate someone else we all know happened to narrowly avoid, aye?"

Pete glanced up, face tightly controlled, but his expression was carefully unreadable. "A mere coincidence, most likely." He sounded more hopeful than convinced of that truth, though she could almost see the gears turning.

"I highly doubt that. Somehow, I've got the sneaking suspicion that if Smith was brought in and shown a photo of the deceased, he'd recognize them. Not like he'd be of a mind to say so, unless someone had him by the short hairs," she hinted heavily, hoping against all likelihood it would work for once.

Pete smiled tightly, shaking his head. "Similarities or no, it's not like the last time, when you lot thought he had the answers," he continued firmly, raising his chin, letting her know he wasn't going to assist on convincing or coercing a certain individual to start talking. "And maybe he does have some for other things, but I've got an ear to the ground, keeping watch on things over in Hackney. He's not even left his building. Probably still recovering from his injuries, I reckon." He exchanged a glance with the man standing behind her. "I think we're all just getting misleading glimpses of a far bigger picture, all of them from the wrong angle."

"He's still not told anyone who took him, has he?" Gail asked softly, unsurprised when he nodded reluctantly. "Not one word about what really happened, or why?"

"He's hardly the most forthcoming of individuals. For the now, I figure it's safer to let him be-- watch him from a distance, hope he doesn't do anything too daft, and step in if I have to. Someone's got to keep an eye on his arse and Rose will stick close by him, which is probably for the best, in light of recent events."

"What, him, scuppering half the world's databases, compromising international security and causing seemingly random bursts of partial amnesia in clerks and young constables around the planet?" She hadn't meant to sound sarcastic, but it just burst out, unable to contain her frustration. Pete Tyler seemed very competent and honest, just slightly naïve where Smith- or as everyone who knew him called him, the Doctor- was concerned. "Or the fact she's mysteriously taken to collapsing in the streets whenever he's not around? Any explanations coming on that, either?"

Pete didn't even flinch, much less let anything show on his carefully blank expression as he moved over to a monitor on a nearby table, turning it so she could see, while he motioned for the other man to come forward. "No," he said shortly, before abruptly changing the topic, like she'd not even broached the subject. "But if recent developments are any indication, you'll be wanting some of the information that we have."

Peering close, the monitor showed a picture of Dougal Chambers, whom she remembered well. The bodies recovered that night in Stepney all had turned out to be some particularly unsavory characters.
Exclusionists, she recalled. "I thought you had him hidden away somewhere," she said pointedly.

"Dougal Chambers disappeared from a safehouse in Belfast three days ago. With no sign of him since, and Holburn's associate now turning up dead..." Pete pursed his lips, looking pained at the admission.

"Too many connections to ignore," she said thoughtfully.

"Indeed there are," he agreed with a nod.

"What about Smith? He probably knows more about all this than anyone alive, other than the murderer."

Pete gave her a pained look, a grimace flickering across his features before he schooled them back to something more carefully bland. "Doubtless, but you know as well as I, that he'd only start poking around again. All the while, he'd be leading us on a merry chase and pretending he knows nothing. My daughter is rather fond of him. For her sake, I'd prefer it if he remained alive, uninjured, and out of trouble for the time being."

"They might actually succeed on killing him the next time," she snorted.

"I'm sure you understand why I have decided to leave the Doctor out of this, if possible. If it's not, I'd have to take measures to prevent any more incidents. I've heard he's not quite been himself since he decided to go home, a bit more of a temper than usual."

"But still, how did this happen? You had him in custody," Gail protested.

"We did," he stated flatly. "And then someone stormed the safehouse, killed the observation team, and took off with him."

Gail leaned a hip against the table, looking away from the screen that was now showing pictures of the scene at what she assumed had been the safehouse. Wasn't too safe then, was it?

Gut instinct told her these things were connected, but how? Just what did the murder of a man with a shop full of goods with dubious provenance, his assistant, and a Torchwood safehouse getting raided have in common? Other than the obvious choice- who she really wasn't sure she wanted to play verbal tennis with- she was drawing a blank.

Three days after he'd mostly patched things up with Rose and the near constant exhaustion had passed, the Doctor was half asleep on the sofa, having just got done splicing more wires together and harvesting some more resistors and a voltage regulator out of an old motorbike. Hadn't been out of the flat yet, and today was the second real day he'd been up and about since dawn, his usual hour. Rose was down at Argo's, helping with the bookkeeping.

Apparently, the bloke they'd had doing it before, had gotten nicked for a little burgling spree the week before, and Argo had been in a right state when he'd stopped at the garage to ask. He wasn't much worried for her safety, since Jasper had gone with her and Jasper could've instructed crumbling stone ruins and planet killing asteroids in the fine art of looming ominously. Very heartening, knowing she was well protected.
Alright, it actually wasn't, since she wasn't within his reach or even in sight, but being out of the flat for a few hours would be good for her. It'd give her a chance to do something other than fuss over him and give him the chance to... well, fret apparently. Bloody hell. He didn't want her to get the idea he couldn't manage on his own or seem too clingy, but it was unnerving, being alone like this. No one to talk to, no one to listen if he suddenly got a brilliantly clever idea, no one who'd even know if something happened... right, shifting the train of thought immediately.

Blimey, it sure was quiet. The TARDIS coral was faintly humming away in the back of his mind; the ice box was wheezing away like a consumptive on its last legs; the hot water heater had just kicked on, with a rattling in the pipes that sounded like a disaster waiting to happen... Right, not helping. The urge to throw on a coat and trainers was starting to become overwhelming, but no, he was practising self restraint and staying put. Staying here, on this sofa, and learning to wait patiently.

Admittedly, patience had never been one of his strongest suits, and he'd almost twitched himself onto the floor with his restless movements, but still... nothing to do but put his feet up, try to get comfortable, and just... wait. Even if the minutes were going by like they were coated in treacle and he could suddenly understand why so many humans ended up going stark raving mad... linear time was a bit naff.

Probably should find something to occupy himself, then. He could start on finding out why Rose had gotten such a large part of the psychic feedback during his time of great distress, but first of all, that would sorta require, well, Rose. And she just wasn't available at the moment. There was also laundry to be sorted, though he couldn't see why. It was perfectly acceptable in his thinking to just go digging through the pile, reaching in blindly and grabbing something to wear. More fun, too; never knew what you'd end up with. Everyday was like a surprise, that way. Even Rose seemed to have a similar system, though hers were slightly separated into piles. Wouldn't want a repeat of the incident when he'd mistakenly grabbed the wrong pair of pants yesterday and she'd laughed at him. But then she'd snogged him and had fairly dragged him out of her knickers, saying it was good it hadn't been one of her thongs.

Not that he could make sense of those, for that matter. What was the point of some bits of string and elastic that didn't actually cover much of anything? Still, they were rather intriguing to look at when she had 'em on. Made perfect tiebacks for the curtains in the lounge, too, though she'd been slightly cross when she'd seen them there that morning. Perhaps that was why she'd been so snippy with him before she went out. She wasn't exactly a morning person; it must've been too much sunlight flooding in for her tastes. It could even be the last decent day before spring before the dreary autumn weather and winter set in, and there she was, unappreciative of it. Humans, absolutely no appreciation for how fickle fate and meteorological systems were. A shame really, but he'd closed the drapes, let the flat subside back into gloom again, and made her some toast and a cup of tea once it looked safe enough to approach after she'd had her shower. Hopefully she'd be in a better mood when she got back.

As for his own system of organizing-- or not organizing-- the same went for the rest of the flat. You could have everything all neatly organized, lined up in perfect little rows or, you could just go rummaging around and see what turned up along the way. Might even end up finding that library book, the one that was lost and now was a couple months overdue. Then again, maybe not. If it was all picked up around here, it wouldn't seem as interesting; wouldn't be so full of stuff. Worse, it could even end up looking... empty. Then again, it would just end up messed up again later, which meant he'd have to clean all over again and that, that would just be rubbish. Time Lords weren't supposed to be housekeepers. Minding the timelines, preventing interference on less advanced worlds, guarding the universe, running around and being pompous in very silly hats, stars above, yes. Mopping floors, picking up clutter-- there was a reason his people had invented sentient, self sufficient domiciles. Timelines be damned, he'd be getting right on that, soon as he got the chance.
Well, there had to be something else to do. He could take the time to see if he still had the knack at playing the spoons. Yes, he might try that. But then, it was sorta relaxing, just lying here. Ooh, a new experience. He could try laziiness on for size. He'd probably be brilliant at that too, best on the planet, even. Maybe he could just sit there and... vegetate. Vegetable, yeah. He'd have to fix the telly, so he'd have something to watch, at least. 'Cos just sitting here all day would be boring. 'Course, the sofa was, like as not, going to leave him full of regrets and lower lumbar pain before long, but that was when there was a knocking at the door.

A moment to sit up straight, every sense jangling and heart pounding in something he distractedly noted as 'fight or flight', and he was staring at the unopened door, wondering what sort of protection it afforded. Did he dare answer it and leave himself vulnerable to the possibility of another assault and kidnapping, or even call out, to inquire who was there? If he spoke, it'd give away his presence, whereas if he was silent, maybe they'd assume no one was home and just bugger off...

C'mon, Theta, what happened to your fire, eh? Did you get a little shook up by a couple of toe-rags who're off their trolleys worse than you are? No different than hundreds of other situations you've been in before, with unsanitary conditions and harsh treatment usually par for the course. Other than having no real guaranteed escape at the time and the real chance of actually dying breathing down your neck the whole time, what was the difference?

A cold sweat was beading on his brow and his throat had gone dry when he heard a voice calling from outside, sounding concerned. "You in there, boss?"

Percy. He'd been acting as a lookout; Edgar must've sent him up. Had something gone horribly wrong? Did something happen to Rose on the way to Argo's shop? A beat, then two, as he willed his pulse to a semblance of calm, scrubbing a hand over his face. No, Percy sounded calm. No need to send himself into a panic when no one else seemed to be in one. Right, he'd have to ponder this later, worry about whether he was starting to crack up even more. Yeah, he was rubbish on his own, but this was a new low, even for him.

"Hang on," he called out, hurrying to disengage the force field and perception filters on the door. There was absolutely no possibility that his palms were a bit damp, nor did the brass doorknob initially slip through his fingers on the first try. No, not at all. Just a quirk of his dodgy, mixed up perceptions, all due to a head injury, right? Or possibly another quirk of the metacrisis, sodding nuisance. He also didn't nearly knock himself silly when he opened the door just a tad too quickly. Coordination was still on the blink... "Yeah?"

Percy looked him head to toe, blinking before saying, "Edgar was wondering if you were still alive, you've not left the flat since you got back."

And now he really was feeling daft, getting in a tizzy over nowt. "Oh, er, resting," he tried out, having a go at a little confidence in there with, "Just been... resting, yeah?" He really hoped it didn't sound as much like a query to Percy as it did to his own ears, but when he got a nod of acceptance in return, he chalked it up to his own paranoia. Ha, paranoia! Marvelous! Not. Back on Gallifrey they'd done paranoia, xenophobia, and manipulation extraordinarily well. Perhaps more of home had rubbed off than he'd originally thought?

Percy continuing to speak finally jarred him out of his thoughts. "What?"

"I said, Edgar wanted to know if you was up to looking over the shipment coming in tonight, down at the docks," Percy repeated patiently, speaking like he would to someone who was a bit daft, brow furrowed in concern. "You alright, mate? You're looking a bit peaked at the mo.'"

"Oh, I'm fine." He gave himself a shake, reminding himself to stop slouching in the doorway. Bad
enough he'd taken to answering doors in his vest and denims and wandering around barefoot. Still, wasn't like he'd planned on going anywhere, was it? Rose had told him 'no wandering off' and he wasn't sure if she was serious or no, but he wasn't going to argue. He'd already made her cross enough this morning, without giving her reason to be even more narked at him when she got back. "Never been better. Why?"

Percy snorted, giving him a sideways look. " Couldn't fooled me. So?"

He blinked. " So... what?"

This time Percy did sigh, starting to look a little annoyed with him. Possibly even put out, come to think of it. Was that a bit of a glare?

"The docks, man, the docks. Shipment coming in-- were you even listening?"

"Oh, just checking to see if you were," he said glibly, flashing a smile that he hoped wasn't too transparent. "Glad to see you were. Midnight, like usual?"

"Yeah, but come down before then. Boss wants to see you first."

"Lovely! See you then!" he chirped as he quickly swung the door shut and leaned against it, closing his eyes as he tipped his head back to thump gently against the wood. Right, soon as he got the TARDIS ready to go, he was gonna spend as much time as necessary to finish adjusting to all this... stuff. Stuff like a heart (ha, only the one) that insanely decided to vary its rate according to inconsequential external stressors, and a mind that monumentally failed at multitasking. No wonder Rose said he was a poster child for attention deficit... hmm, now where'd he leave the kettle? A spot of tea would be just the ticket.

By the time she'd gotten around to figuring out how much Argo would have left after he'd payed his three employees and covered all the deliveries for the week, Rose was well reminded why she wasn't that fond of maths. The numbers were starting to dance around on the paper, the cramped office was starting to feel claustrophobic and she could feel a headache looming from the constant sound of the big fridges compressors. Worst place for an office, since all that racket made it almost impossible to think straight- and God, how long had it been since she got here? Too long, most like. Way too long.

"Want a cuppa?" a voice interrupted. Argo was standing there, holding out a steaming Styrofoam cup in offering.

"You're a star," she said gratefully as she buried her nose in the rich scent of freshly brewed tea, closing her eyes in hopes the numbers wouldn't still be there, all madly running around behind her eyelids.

"I really appreciate all this, but you're looking a bit tired, lass." Argo gave her a sympathetic look.

Rose opened her eyes and nodded in agreement. " All these figures, just starts getting to me after awhile, yeah?"

Argo smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners. "I know what you mean. Go on, you might as well go back. You can finish the rest tomorrow, if you've the time. I've heard tonight's going to be interesting. You might want to catch a kip, before all the excitement starts."

She looked at him sharply. Something about the way he said it gave her a feeling of concern. "Excitement?"
Argo shrugged carelessly, suddenly looking like he felt uncomfortable. "Oh, it's nothing. Just
something I'd heard. It's probably nothing, I'm sure. Must be hearing things in my dotage. My Ellie
says I should retire, you know," he said in a rush, backing away.

"But--" she began to protest, suspicion starting to take over for concern.

"Ooops, sounds like a customer's come in. Ellie will need me at the till!" He ducked out of the office,
only to come back, moments later, just to say, "Do knock off early. For your sake, luv, you've done
enough for the day."

Still wondering what the hell that was all about, Rose shook her head, closing the book of accounts
and setting aside her pencils. Argo always had been a little funny, so it wouldn't take much to dismiss
it as that. But then Jasper looked distracted when she came out of the side entrance to the shop. He
was still sitting on an upturned steel rubbish bin, hunched into his cutoff with his beanie pulled low
around his ears as his only dispensation for the chill weather, but he was staring off toward the street.

"Jasper?" She peered at narrow section of cracked pavements and potholed macadam he was staring
at, seeing naught but Mrs Singh trekking by with a trolley full of shopping. That explained where the
Doctor's trolley from Tescos had disappeared to, she thought. He must've loaned it out, or given it
away. Neither would surprise her.

"There you are, ma'am," Jasper said, sounding relieved. There was a bit of barely restrained...
something in his voice as he asked, "Ready to head back, then?"

Giving him an assessing look, she nodded. As they walked the two blocks back to the building, Rose
decided to ask him what was going on. The garage was in sight ahead and now was the best time,
she reckoned, before there'd be people listening in, or interrupting. If there were some secret plans
that had everyone on edge, best she found out now before things went pear-shaped... "So, sounds
like you're all excited."

Distractedly looking around for any possible threats, like Earthers, paps, or even the police, Jasper
said shortly, "Sorta."

With a strained smile, Rose rolled her eyes, really wishing she could've ended up hanging around
people that actually possessed communication skills. "And?" A beat, two, while Jasper kept walking,
boots scuffing against the ground, seeming to not have heard her. "Oh, for the love of God, just spill
it!" she snapped, patience wearing thin.

Jasper glanced back, alarm creasing his heavy brow. He bit his lip, eyes flicking back to the garage
ahead. "I shouldn't," he said in a softer voice than normal. "Edgar wouldn't be too happy and
Himself... we sorta need him for this one, eh?" He hazarded a smile, obviously trying to convince her
to leave it alone.

It was clear as anything that whatever they had planned, they expected the Doctor to pitch in. Him,
who'd not even left the flat since they'd got here and last she knew, he'd been fluttering around the
place like a hummingbird on amphetamines. "Just great. What're you lot planning to get him into this
time?"

Caught out, Jasper looked evasive. "Nothin' much," he protested. "Just have him look at a few things
before we accept or deny the shipment, that's all. We won't let him get hurt, or nothin', promise." He
threw a pleading look in the direction of the garage, hoping for help that wasn't there, and looking
anywhere but at her.

Narrowing her eyes, Rose put her hands on her hips, leaning forward as she glared at Jasper,
wordlessly daring him to try being coy as she ground out, "What shipment? You lot work in a garage, can't you go look at petrol filters and drive belts without him?"

"Um, not quite that kind of shipment..." Jasper started backing away, hands held up in a placating manner. "More the sort... the sort we don't talk about in front of the entire street, yeah?"

Finally fed up and quickly coming to some conclusions of her own, Rose stomped a foot. "I can't believe this." She shook her head before pushing past Jasper, patently ignoring him calling after her as she entered their building. He was right behind her on the stairs, huffing breathlessly as he tried to catch up. "Wait! I'm not exactly built for runnin'!"

Still ignoring him, she was even more frustrated when she clearly saw the door to the flat, unmasked and visible to all. Had the Doctor gone out and forgot? Was he already getting himself into another mess. A hand caught her shoulder, gently but firmly turning her around.

Jasper was flushed, breathing still uneven. "Just, please... He can't stay hidin' away in there forever. 'S got to come out sometime and he's the only one who can identify the stuff."

"What sorta stuff?" Rose wasn't feeling very gracious at the moment and was resisting the urge to stomp on Jasper's foot. She was a trained Torchwood agent- knew a dozen ways to disable a humanoid being and get away safely, she did. If he didn't give her some straight answers and do it now.... well, he'd be sorry. As it was, there was a certain six foot idiot that was gonna get the rough side of her tongue if he didn't play it straight, too.

Checking to see that Mrs Murphy wasn't peeking out her door or one of the Singh's kids wasn't coming up the stairwell behind them, Jasper hissed, "You know, things. Alien... things. He's the one that makes sure there's nothing anyone can get hurt on." His eyes studied her, silently asking her to go along with it. "Keeping everybody safe, yeah?"

Her voice was flat, suspicions thoroughly confirmed. "You're involved in smuggling."

Jasper gave a nervous chuckle, relaxing slightly. "It's not such a bad thing, is it? The council's not much help, people gotta eat, you know. Tell you what, you wouldn't believe how much a Vinaldi hairdryer sells for." He let her go with a nod toward the door of the flat.

"Great, just great. Got any more earth-shattering surprises in store for me?" she snapped. "Am I gonna find out he's stealing cars with you lot or anything else of the like?"

Jasper looked scandalized. "We aren't thieves!"

"You're all involved in a dodgy enough business as it is, why not that," she retorted, thinking about the likelihood of them all ending up on Pete's bad side. God, how many agents did they have right now, busy covering the alien artifact smuggling in the country. No wonder that DI was so interested in him; it probably was a miracle that Interpol hadn't come knocking yet. "I swear, one of these days, I'm gonna kill him."

Rose turned away, reaching into her pocket for her keys, even as Jasper continued softly, "Just... it's the only time any of us ever see him like that, not frettin' about being to messed up for you to still want him, or all worried he's gonna let you down again."

Not looking back, she let herself in. Almost immediately, a blur threw themselves at her, long thin arms wrapping around her as a voice, that was entirely too enthusiastic for her liking, happily crooned, "Rose!" Disentangling herself from him, she looked up into the Doctor's brown eyes, noting they looked a little too bright, too manic. He hadn't gotten around to shaving yet, or, as she
further noted as she took in the state of the flat around them, much of anything else.

Right.

Steeling herself, and trying to ignore the fact that it felt like she was kicking a puppy, she turned to him with a serious expression. "Doctor, we need to have a talk."
It was a very pregnant pause that filled the room then. He could only guess what it was that Rose wanted to talk about. A hundred different possibilities, and none of them good. Was it the sex, was he not skilled enough to please her? Surely she could understand if he was a bit rusty on that, a few centuries and all that had passed since... and that was more a human thing, than a Time Lord thing. She'd be amazed at just how very many of his people's rules he'd broken, just by associating with humans. Much less how many taboos he'd broken just by falling in love. Yeah, emotional attachments really weren't done by that lot and well, he still felt awkward with the whole freely admitting feelings bit.

Could she be miffed because he wasn't Him? Not enough of the man he once was and she'd finally seen through the façade? He was trying, he really was, but it wasn't easy when you felt like your whole existence had been turned upside down, and every time he started to catch his balance, something else came along to knock him off center again.

Was it because he'd forgotten to replace the loo roll once again? All those... domestics, he just wasn't built for that. He was a wanderer. He was meant to be a traveler amongst the stars, not plonked down in an ickle flat, worrying about remembering to pick up the milk, sort the laundry, and all that rubbish. There was a reason no TARDIS had ever come with window drapery, furniture covers and the like installed. And to think, just a few more months and his TARDIS would be ready and they could dispense with all that bollocks. Whatever it was that he'd done --or not done --- he just couldn't bear to see the disappointment shining in her eyes like that.

"How could you?" She was glaring daggers at him. Oh, that was so not good.

Fidgeting uncomfortably before resorting to stuffing his hands in his pockets to still them, he shuffled his feet, awkwardly curling and uncurling his toes as he hunted for the proper words. "Rose, I'm sorry... believe me when I say--"

But she wasn't listening to him, cutting him off with, "I knew you were beyond just a bit daft, but this-- this is unbelievable!"

Desperation was almost crushing him as he struggled to make the mental leap. She couldn't still be feeling stroppy about... that, could she? After all these hours, her temper had to have cooled off a bit by now. "If this is about earlier, I promise to never ever touch your knickers without your permission ever again. Even if I told you never to say 'never ever', I will now."

He knew he was babbling but still, he had to try. But did that mean there'd be no...?!

Rose paused, giving him a baffled look. "What're you on about? What do my knickers have to do with this?"

Unwilling to further remind her of the incident from earlier that morning, lest it reignite her ire, he decided to play coy. Coy was good, coy was safe. Far better than outright panicking or scraping and bowing. "What're you on about?" he replied cagily, tilting his head to the side and sticking his chin out slightly.

She narrowed her eyes at him, not taken in by his innocent act. "I'm talking about the smuggling
you're apparently involved in."

"Oh, right!" What a relief that was. Easy-peasy, that. Nothing even worth panicking about, really. He even chanced a half smile, almost sagging as some of the tension left his frame. If that was what she was all het up about, well, at least it wasn't one of his worse failings. You know, the ones he wasn't completely sure he could actually do something about, like his identity. I'm Him, but I'm not, he thought. Not anymore, that is. Him, he'd have run from the thought of all this-- and look, he did. He actually did. Not because he didn't want it, but because the wanting, it terrified him too much. No one should ever long for something that strongly, even knowing what it would cost them. And here he was, stuck between wanting to run and being too terrified of what he'd find out there-- what he else might find that had changed about himself.

"I know you're one for flouting the rules, but bloody hell, Doctor, do you have a death wish or something? Have you got any idea how dangerous all this is?" Rose stepped closer to him, searching his face as if she was looking for something. For what, he didn't know, but her scrutiny was bordering on unnerving now. "Rose, I've only been doing the same sort of thing I was at Torchwood, just without all the bumf and palava involved. No bosses breathing down my neck, no chain of command to adhere to, just..."

"But it's not safe. You're still putting yourself in danger. All those people, you might've wiped the databases, made it so you don't officially exist, but you do! And they're gonna remember it. Someone will, and if you're out there, getting involved in shite like this..." She shook her head, briefly closing her eyes before looking at him again pleadingly. "You're gonna end up getting hurt again, or even killed. 'Cos what's to say the next time you'll be so lucky, that you'll manage to get away before it's too late. What then, Doctor?"

"Since when has safe actually been something that either of us worried about? Since when did our surviving trump saving the world, or the day, or whatever?" he scoffed, waving a hand dismissively. "You're gonna end up getting hurt again, or even killed. 'Cos what's to say the next time you'll be so lucky, that you'll manage to get away before it's too late. What then, Doctor?"

"Since when has safe actually been something that either of us worried about? Since when did our surviving trump saving the world, or the day, or whatever?" he scoffed, waving a hand dismissively. He gave her a pleading look. "What happened to that girl who made jokes while we faced down a Lupine-Wavelength-Haemovariform in Scotland, eh? 'Danger's just the bits in between', right, Rose?"

"She got lost somewhere between 'I could spend it with you if you want' and you nearly getting yourself killed twice since that ruddy beach, Doctor. What do you think happened to her?" she retorted angrily. Turning away, she sighed. Of course he'd bring those past adventures up. But that was then and this was now. Back then, the idea of her own mortality hadn't sunk in and when they'd been using the Dimension Cannon, it hadn't really mattered. If you were going to die for something, make a stand, it had to be for something; it had to matter. Lately, it seemed like all he'd done was throw himself into one thing after another, with her left scrambling to pick up the pieces after him and always chasing after him.

"Rose..." Trying not to sound too pleading, he stopped to gather himself. Time Lords didn't beg, didn't harken to the demands of lower species or so he'd been taught, but blow that for a game of soldiers, this was Rose. For all she'd put up with, she deserved more, deserved better than this. "It's just... you know how the economy is here. There's people around here that need the help and the council's strapped for lolly... they've got to come up with the money somehow. No one's getting hurt... that's where I come in, actually, and you wouldn't believe the demand for hairdryers from Vinaldi. People buy them and put 'em on shelves, like so much twee! Can you believe it? So much bric-a-brac and just one'll feed a family of four for nigh on two years. Or pay for Mrs Murphy's cancer treatments for a month." He stepped forward, standing close behind her, wondering if she was even listening. Not that he knew what he'd do if she was shutting him out. 'Course, what else could he expect if she was, what else did he deserve. A lot had happened over the years to tarnish her faith in him. "Rose?"
"What's with you lot and hairdryers?" she snapped exasperatedly over her shoulder. "Jasper gave me the same line just a minute ago."

"Um, they're... nifty... and er, safe? Well, safe-ish. Drop one in the tub while you're enjoying the suds and that's it, finito, but really, who does that? I'll have you know, that throughout all of known history in the entire universe, and believe me I know my history, not one planet ending disaster has been caused by a hairdryer. Though, wouldn't put it past this one, but still, they're safe, right?" he hazarded, to no reply. "Rose?"

After a long moment where he thought his heart was going to beat its last just from the waiting, Rose finally turned around to face him. Her expression was inscrutable as she looked up from beneath her lashes at him. She wasn't crying or anything, so that was one thing, but the tired way she spoke wounded him just the same. "I get it, Doctor, really I do."

"Yeah?" He searched her face for something, anything to give him some hope, but he still was left feeling off-kilter. Oh, he'd made a dog's dinner of this, hadn't he? Should've explained it before, back when it first started. He'd been so bored and feeling so out of sorts then, he had had to find something to do. Something that was familiar and he could actually pull off, without some new part human frailty weighing him down and that didn't carry too many unpleasant memories with it. Eliminated most things, that. Couldn't just go sauntering in to the nearest UNIT base and apply for the scientific advisor position, could he?

Well, he could've set up a lab and started synthesizing the cures for cancer and all that, but for one thing: the sodding timelines. If he went around poking his fingers into those sorts of things, changing the future of the human race ahead of its time, what then? The Shadow Proclamation wouldn't be too impressed with that, would they? And right now, with no way out, no way off the planet, doing something like that would only make the people around him targets. People like Rose, who while he was certain she'd stand by him, he didn't think she'd be overly enthused about being called as a material witness against him at trial. That had already happened once to poor Mel, back in the day. Especially if a troop of Judoon showed up to escort Rose there. That wouldn't go ever well. Like a lead balloon, most like. Yup, considering the last time they'd showed up, it had caused a bit of a shake up in the national health system, disappearing hospitals and all that... Well, that was another universe, but still. Didn't want to go dancing along too many parallel lines and testing the walls of too many gingerbread houses, did he? He'd already pushed things far enough as it was...

"Yeah," she repeated slowly, staring fixedly at his chest, as if she was unwilling to look in his eyes then. "You're just... helping people, like you always have. And looking for trouble wherever you can find it, like normal."

Gently, he reached out and grabbed her chin, forcing her too really look at him again, hoping she'd see how earnest he really was. Thoughts, so many thoughts went through his head in such a brief span as he looked into her eyes, willing her to say something. Anything would do, even if she started screaming at him or something. Anything but that look of worn out acceptance. So he offered a figurative laurel branch. "This is the last time, I promise. I'll tell 'em no more, they can just go back to smuggling the liquor and cigarettes, like everyone else is doing, and leave me out of it. I'll go back to just twisting spanners and all that."

"And what about Mrs Murphy?"

He blinked, swallowing around the lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat. "Dunno, really. I'll have to figure something out, I guess. Always do, don't I?"

"An' what would you have done, what would happen if you still..."
had the TARDIS?"

"Would've popped ahead to New Earth, most like. See if they've got a hospital like there was back in our universe. Provided it wasn't run by scheming cat nuns, of course. If it was, weeell..." He shrugged. Deep within, if he had to admit it, mortality terrified him like nothing before. If you only had the one chance, and finally had something to really live for, 'everything dies', while a simple, honest truth, scared him to bits. So easy to just say that, when death was more a possibility than a certainty. So easy to be glib about it, when it wasn't you or someone you knew. 'Course, if it had been Rose, he wouldn't have cared if Pete Tyler's fortune was all spent or every cash point on this stinking, measly little planet was emptied, much less would've cared about preserving the current rate of human progress. For her, he'd do anything. Even this. "Whatever you want, I'll do it. Walk away from all this, go play quietly in an underground lab somewhere... I'll even take up macrame, if that's what you want. Did I ever tell you I can knit? Not as well as Mrs Nostradamus-- witty little knitter, she was-- but still..."

Rose rounded on him, cutting off his rambling. "Just one thing, Doctor, if I let you do this, can you promise me that you'll be safe?"

He drew up, surprised by this sudden change of mind. "What, me? Of course. Edgar and the boys'll be armed, I'd imagine. I'll be safe as houses, really."

Rose blinked at him, setting her jaw. "Sometimes, houses burn down with the people in them, Doctor. Sometimes, a lunatic breaks in in the middle of the night and kills the whole family. Sometimes, everything that's supposed to be safe and easy goes horribly wrong."

Raising an eyebrow, he rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. "That's a bloody morbid way to look at things, Rose. But I do have to admit, you're right. Seventy five percent of all accidents and fatalities happen at home, you know. All those insurance statistics and stuff, it's not complete bollocks, you know..."

"Just promise me you'll be careful," she demanded, interrupting him again. "That you won't do anything stupid," she added, paying no mind to his look of affront.

Putting on his most solemn expression and placing his left hand on his chest, he said, "Upon my honor as a Time Lord of Gallifrey... cross my hearts and hope to die without regeneration..." He blinked at her earnestly, hoping to whatever gods that possibly existed and might happen to be listening, that she wouldn't realize how much of that statement was entirely invalid. One part was veritably dubious and the other was, well... at best, an unavoidable certainty. No 'hoping' was going to make that one any less likely, was it now?

With a slow, reluctant nod, Rose seemed to accept this. "Good, 'cos I'm coming with you." As she turned, heading off to take a shower to get the grime off from being in Argo's office all day, she reminded him he should stop gaping like a gobsmacked guppy. "Before you start catchin' flies and all that."

The clock's ticking was getting on her nerves as she was finishing typing up the days reports. Nothing new on Lester Jones, and apparently he'd been out of contact with his family for some time, so that'd been a dead end. Couldn't interview his most recent employer either, unless she got ahold of a psychic medium. It was highly doubtful her boss would be thrilled about a séance in the squad room, so that was also out of the question. She'd tried getting in contact with Miles Holburn's
brother, but there'd been no answer at the contact number the man had left when he'd claimed the body a month back. Going around to the physical address listed was on the docket for tomorrow, in hopes that it wasn't a false one. Buggered if she knew what they'd do if it was, but she'd still try.

Gail was getting ready to call it a day when her mobile rang. It was Pete Tyler. "There's rumors of a deal going down tonight, in a warehouse not too far from your crime scene. Be here by nine, if you want in on the action."

"Did some little birds come sing in your ears, then?" she asked drily, eyeing the much hated clock warily. It was half on eight and she was already knackered. A shower and bed sounded like so much luxury at the moment, what with a day spent down by the docks or at the morgue with a dead body and the paperwork. The never ending paperwork- it was the bane of her existence, really. She hated all the tedious hours spent hunched over a keyboard, under the harsh glare of a computer screen. Modern detective work hardly seemed like proper investigating at times, not with all the sitting involved in it these days. Still, it was better than handing out citations for illegal parking all day.

Pete chuckled. "Only if you start calling the energy scanners we've got on hand 'little birds'. Picked up a signal three days back when it was crossing the Channel. Figured we'd wait and see where it was going before we made a move. It's been stationary for the last six hours in a warehouse off Bradfield Road, not far down from the West Silvertown station. Reckon that's where they'll be making the sale."

"We should probably find out who the buyers are, too. One of them might know who killed the Jones boy. Those smugglers all tend to be a tight knit group, don't they? That is, if none of them's the one that did it," Gail mused, half to herself. "How many people are you expecting to show up?" she asked, reaching for a biro and paper to make notes. If there was going to be a crowd, they'd be wanting extra manpower; probably extra vans to haul off anyone they arrested, too.

"Not much more than two dozen, I'd hazard. We're playing it safe and coordinating plans for thirty showing up, just in case. CCTV has shown definite signs of activity around the location, but only three or four people have been there. Two brought it in, one met them for the exchange, then they left. Looks like there's a broker handling the whole thing. The picture quality isn't the best- very grainy, but the photos of the pair have already been sent to Interpol for a comparison."

"Hopefully, they've got some lousy photos that match yours," Gail joked.

"It'd make both our lives a lot simpler if there were actually people that had faces like that in real life," Pete returned wryly with a chuckle. "A blurry smudge only a mother could love, eh?"

There was a lightness in her voice that matched the resurgence of hope and something approaching excitement as she said, "See you tonight, then?"

"Bring your sidearm, we'll probably need it. Don't worry about protection, we'll bring spare combat gear in case things turn ugly."

"Ta," she said fervently, hanging up.

Sitting back in her chair, she stretched and grinned, thinking this might be the missing piece to her case. Who knows, she might not have to go tracking down Bryn Holburn's home address. If they were all lucky, they'd find whoever had done it at the warehouse tonight and they'd confess just in hopes for a judge's mercy. Right, that'd be the day-- same one that livestock took up flying and hell froze over. At least it'd be some guaranteed excitement for once.
Despite the late hour, Percy was just finishing up an oil change on a red Citroën in the far bay. Looking up from where he was running over the game plan with Jasper and Nigel, Edgar gave them both the once over before nodding gruffly. "Not gonna pop your clogs on us, then?" he asked the Doctor, albeit with a teasing air.

Grimacing, the Doctor bobbed his head, giving Rose a quick glance before he said, "Meh, rather think you're stuck with me for the time being."

"Good job you're somewhat useful on occasion, then, eh?" Edgar teased back, before passing over the sheet of paper he'd been showing the others. "What do you make of this, then? Holburn sent over some snaps of the goods the seller's sent over for us to take a peek at first. See if we're really interested in it before we commit to showing up tonight."

Rose didn't miss the way the Doctor momentarily froze. It had been fleeting, blink and you'd miss it, but there'd been some sort of brief reaction before he'd camouflaged it with a nonchalant shrug and the indifferent way he said, "Oh let's have a look at the bobbins, yeah? Doubt that's even what's actually there. Half the time these photos are rubbish. Can't hardly tell the difference between a hawk and a handsaw in most of 'em."

Grabbing the paper, the Doctor scanned it, while Rose leaned over his shoulder to see if she recognized any of the stuff. She also decided to test his further reactions to gauge how much he was going to distance himself from them. "Are you sure this isn't anything that could pose a threat?" she asked, seeing nothing that looked like much more than the normal space debris left over from a crash site. Someone must've gotten to one before Torchwood did, or some of the field agents were getting lax, she thought. There were even scorch marks. She turned her eyes to his, hoping he'd reassure her that this wasn't actually worse than what she was thinking it was. That she wasn't doing something extremely foolhardy and dangerous that could end up getting people hurt or killed. Bad enough it wouldn't be fun, having to explain all this to Pete if the coppers caught wind of this one. "No radiation sources or things that could explode or anything of that sort?"

There was a slight delay, but that could be chalked up to him being distracted. Squinting and turning the paper this way and that, he held the tip of his tongue behind his front teeth before replying, "Doubtful. See the meltage on these bits? Section from the forward thrusters to a Jathaa Sunglider, looks like. Hard to tell, really. Though, I've got a better chance of becoming the next queen of England than any of this does of flying again. Too much damage," he said, pointing to a large, lumpen shape at the edge of the photo. "Doubtful the fuel cells would've survived, either-- probably burned up when it crashed. And this here--" He pointed to some scattered objects laid out near the engine parts, focused entirely on the photograph. "Those are merely... trinkets. Before the crash, this was probably a run of the mill trading mission. Wouldn't have expected to end up like this, poor bastards. All this, well, it's likely the leftover junk from someone's lumber room on another world out there." He looked up, wrinkling his nose. "Seen any of these over here before?"

Knowing what he meant, Rose shook her head. "Most of the alien contact we've had started after the stars were going out. Everything else we dealt with was from the or cleaning up after the Cybermen."

He nodded, brows lowering. "Right. Something else to blame Davros for. And to think that arrogant idealistic toff said I was in the wrong. Ha! Preventing a worse disaster than had already happened, more like. Idiot," he muttered under his breath.
Edgar and the others watched them with open fascination, not saying anything though. They were used to the odd things they both said occasionally and knew that asking for an explanation would only result in more confusion. Oh, the guys all knew that they didn't really belong in this universe and that the Doctor wasn't quite human, but the whole part about there being two of him, they'd left that part out. It still confused her enough as it was; explaining it would've been impossible. How could she do it and make any sense, when it barely made sense to her at times?

Clearing her throat against a sudden thickness that had appeared there, she nudged him with her arm, startling him. "There could be bodies out there. Families left behind back home, wherever that is, still wondering what happened to their loved ones."

He glanced at her, eyes soft, looking sympathetic- and unreadable beyond that. "No way to tell, really. Unless we can somehow find out where this all came from. That's rather doubtful, for the now. Could do a scan later, but for the mo..."

"We'll try then, later. They deserve to know, yeah?" She gave him an encouraging smile. Outwardly, he was on point, hitting every beat right on time, but for someone that really knew him... everything was off.

He nodded, turning back to the paper with renewed interest. Eyeing him carefully, she noticed the tightness around his eyes and his slight frown as he squinted at the rest of the typical, likely harmless space debris. Really, she had to get him in soon to get a pair of specs, whether he liked it or not. And yeah, she was obviously going to figure out what the hell that bit where he'd blanched when Edgar mentioned that bloke had been all about earlier. The overly cheerful smile he flashed at her when he noticed her watching him didn't fool her one bit. Not then, and not shortly after, when they were in the back of the van, heading through the city.

He was as evasive as ever when she tried gently inquiring what was wrong, just as she'd expected he would be. All that did was make him try to be all the more convincing with the charade he kept up. But travelling with him on the TARDIS and being around him all these months here hadn't entirely been for naught. Rose didn't miss the distant look in his eyes the whole time, or the way he seemed to be on autopilot. Sure, he would seem to laugh at the few jokes Percy made or the banter between Edgar and Jasper. But his smile seemed too stiff, too brittle, to be real and the way he turned his head, pretending to follow the conversation, seemed to be more of an afterthought than actually paying attention.

By the time they were passing the East India docks, he suddenly seemed to snap out of it. The light coming back into his eyes as he did and him giving her a shy half smile, eyes bright. It was authentic at least, and she couldn't help mirroring it, even as she was trying to suss what was really going on. Either he'd come to some momentous decision, or he'd firmly taken whatever was eating at him and buried it deep. Compartmentalization was something he'd formerly excelled at, and still did in a weird, jumbled sort of way. Either way, she was going to be sticking to him like glue, just in case he had something astronomically stupid and reckless planned. And 'reckless' might as well be his middle name, for the way he always acted lately.
Chapter 49

Gail pulled her car around to the back car park of Torchwood Tower, the rendezvous point agreed upon earlier. Several black vans were waiting, with nearly a dozen agents scattered about, getting psyched up for the mission. She didn't see her sister, but then Sally had said today was her night off. Pete Tyler was watching with a half indulgent, half distracted look on his face. When she exited her vehicle, he gave her a brief nod of acknowledgement. "Bit Baltic, innit?" she said by way of greeting.

Pete smiled, agreeing as he pulled his coat tighter. "Beats the global warming from a few years back, eh?" He turned, signalling to the others before heading to the van. "We've already got a team in place, surveilling the area."

Gail hurried along, trying to keep up with his much longer stride. "Any signs activity around the warehouse yet?"

"An unknown vehicle circled the building a couple of times earlier, then left. Would've run the number plate, but whoever it was, they're clever."

"Covered it up with cling film and petrolatum?"

Frowning, he explained shortly, "You could say that. Bastard put a perception filter on the ruddy thing. If it wasn't for the heat signature from the exhaust, we'd never have caught it. Bad enough we didn't even get a proper visual on it."

Suddenly it seemed like the man wasn't even speaking plain English anymore, Gail thought. "And what's a perception... filter?" She stumbled with the unfamiliar term. "What exactly does that mean?"

Pete gave her a look that betrayed the frustration underneath his calm, collected exterior. He let out a sardonic chuckle. "Means we're not dealing with amateurs on this one. Whoever this is, they've got some serious tech and this has gone from a standard op to a Priority Two. Possible alien threat," he clarified at Gail's flummoxed expression.

"My god," she breathed, feeling her heart clench. "If that's priority two, what the bloody hell do you call priority one?"

"Confirmed alien incursion, with confirmed danger to human lives," Pete said with a hard glint in his eyes. Gone was the smooth, cajoling tones of a successful businessman who'd made his fortune the hard way. Instead, there was the man who'd salvaged the remnants of a broken organization and rebuilt it to stop the Lumic's monsters and anything else that was a danger to mankind.

For a moment, her world seemed to wobble on its axis, her whole reality taking a massive paradigm shift. She was a detective, bent on tracking down murderers. She'd only opted in on this one with the hope of finding who'd killed Lester Jones and Miles Holburn, not chasing down aliens in the middle of the night. Looking around, Gail saw all these people in riot gear, all ready to go do this, to go walking into a situation with an unknown threat. And for what, she asked herself. Was it the adrenaline rush? Did they get off on this somehow? God, she remembered the days when the UFO
nuts were a joke, something to laugh at. Not a couple dozen people kitted up like they were on a military op. Now, even if the spaceship coming down in Luxembourg and that incident in Shoreditch two months back, it hadn't seemed real. Mass hysteria and hallucinations, right? Lumic's metal men, those were from earth. The stuff of nightmares, but still, from earth. This, this was a whole other...

"Are you with us, or would you like to step out now?" Pete asked, peering at her closely and interrupting her reverie.

"N-no, I'm in." Gail pushed her hair out of her face, taking a shaky breath and trying to calm her pounding heart.

"Are you sure? " Pete raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I mean, we'll still share all information with the Met. Your superiors have all been briefed ahead of this and this wouldn't be a slight on you or your record. It could very well be dangerous- for all of us. We aren't sure what we're really dealing with. We could be walking into anything. Anything."

So many eyes were on her now, judging her, wondering what she was going to do. All waiting to see if she was going to turn tail and run, and she wasn't going to give anyone the satisfaction. What would Sally think, she mused to herself. What'd she be saying if she knew I was here doing this? If this is what it took to get some bloody answers, so be it, then. Raising her chin and giving him a look of determination and defiance, Gail shook her head, saying steadily, "No, I'm in. Let's get this dog and pony show on the road, yeah?"

Pete gave her a broad smile before tipping his head back and calling, "Come on people, let's do this!"

They were a few blocks away from their destination when Jasper pulled the van into an abandoned lot, pulling up beside Terry in his little green Vauxhall. Edgar rolled down the window beside him.

"Anything?"

Terry leaned over to check his mirrors, uncertainty writ large on his features. "Not really," he said hesitatingly. "Saw an old van parked back there, but it looked like it'd been there awhile. Up on blocks, tyres missing, body half gone to rust. Worse than any of the wrecks that commonly grace our doorstep, but still..."

Jasper let out a derisive snort from the driver's side of the van. "And yet you sound like you've seen the ghost of Christmas past, your dead granny, or sommat. Flipping nancy-boy. You got that gizmo the Doc gave you, surely that's gotta give you some bottle--"

Edgar held up a hand, nodding to Terry to explain further.

"Tell me about it, almost got wiped out by a lorry in the roundabout on the way here. Bloody thing is dangerous," he whinged before shrugging. "Dunno, really. Just, the whole time I was there, felt like there was someone watching me." He turned his face away, clearly feeling embarrassed. "Like eyes on the back of my neck, made my skin crawl, you know," he added, voice rising slightly when he saw the looks he was getting. "You know what I mean, right?"

"Sure," Jasper drawled, sounding completely unimpressed. "Chalk that up another boyo being a pussy. Got spooked by something he couldn't see."

Nigel opened the side door, offering to go with Terry, to talk some sense into him and steady his nerves. "He always gets jumpy like this. Doesn't want to lose his job with the council, you see. Can't
afford the sack and shuffling paper's about all he's good for," he said apologetically.

Edgar agreed, waving him off. There was some more bickering before Terry drove off, with a reluctant promising extracted for him to stay in the area. Listening to the exchange carefully, Rose looked to the Doctor, wondering how he was going to react to this development. He was leaning forward in his seat beside her, eyes keen and interested, fully engaged for once. He suddenly leaned back, cocking his head to the side with an odd expression, like he was listening for something no one else could hear.

"What is it?" she whispered, trying not to catch any of the others' attention. If there was something really going on, he wasn't going to open up with an audience. Not that he was likely to without one, but with one, no. Pigs would fly and there'd be skating rinks in hell first.

He poked his tongue out, eyes distant for a moment before he blinked and turned his gaze upon her, an unreadable expression on his face. "Just... testing," he murmured.

"Checking the timelines?" she asked, slightly surprised. Last he'd said, he couldn't and even the trying had given him a splitting headache. Maybe he was getting better. The metacrisis possibly settling in some, she hoped.

Giving a half shrug, the Doctor glanced away, disappointment showing for an instant before being buried again. "Thought it wouldn't hurt to try."

As much as she wanted to comfort him, to wrap her arms around him and tell him it was alright, she didn't. God forbid he think she was patronising him or worse, mollycoddling him. Even if he most likely needed it, he'd not thank her for doing it now, what with Edgar and the rest looking on.

"And?"

"Oh, I got nothing. Zip, zilch, abso-flipping-lutely nada," he said far too lightly, giving her a cheeky ghost of a smile. "Time-blind as a newborn Kaglop, me."

Rose wasn't fooled, but neither was this the time. "I say we call it off, then," she said in a voice loud enough for the others to hear.

"What? No!" the Doctor immediately protested. "What about poor Mrs Murphy? She needs her treatment, and... and Jasper and Percy got a rent payment due on their mother's flat on--" He looked over to Percy, who'd been leaning over Jasper's shoulder.

"Last Wednesday," Percy supplied, flushing slightly. He added softly, "They'll be tossing me mum out before the end of this one, if'n we don't have it by tomorrow."

Rose gaped. If it was that serious, if these people all needed the money that bad.... "Look, my dad's rich, completely loaded. If I went and asked, he'd give you guys the bloody money. No need for you all to go risking your lives and possibly end up with time in prison if we're all caught, just for a measly couple hundred quid," she protested, hoping to be the voice of reason.

Instead, everyone turned to stare at her, giving her looks that ranged from aghast to horrified to thinking she was completely barmy. "I'll not be accepting charity!" at least two of them shouted nearly simultaneously, in highly offended tones.

"This could be a couple million quid, sweetheart. That's a bit more than anyone'll be doling out just for the askin'," Edgar added gruffly, with a kind but embarrassed voice. He gave the Doctor a stern look.

Taking her arm gently, he turned Rose to face him. "Look, we've got the stuff, we're fully prepared
for just about anything. Got disguises and everything. Would've brought more perception filters, but I've only got the one and weelll, bit hard to go buying something if the seller can't see you," the Doctor said cajolingly, face earnest and pleading. "Money appearing out of thin air tends to scare the bejesus out of even the most intrepid of merchants," he added jokingly. "And hey, we've got a trained Torchwood agent on our side, what could be safer? You and me against the world, eh, Rose?" He grinned at her.

For a moment, she wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him until his teeth rattled in his head. Shake some sense into his head, while yelling at him how monumentally stupid this was, but she couldn't, could she? How could anyone say no, much less her? Not with those big brown eyes focused on her like that, pleading, begging, like this was what he wanted more than anything else. "You have completely lost it, you know that," she snapped, sighing as she gave in. Really, if this was what it took to get him to start acting somewhat normal, she'd do it.

"Really?" he chirped, sounding disbelieving. At her silent nod, he crowed, "Time to break out the fancy dress boys, we're going in live!" His grin could've lit half the city, she thought as he added, "You too, Rose. Wouldn't want the paps to get wind of this one, aye? I'd have to go muck about with all their computers all over again, too."

Rose barely noticed when he was pulling on a wool cap, turning up the collar on his jacket and ruffling the stubble on his face. She was too busy shoving her own blonde locks under the shapeless cap and shrugging on the baggy, worn out parka that Jasper handed over. When he handed her a pistol, she didn't turn it down, checking the safety before putting it into the side pocket of the borrowed coat. When she looked over again, the Doctor was elbow deep in a rucksack, haphazardly shoving things into his pockets.

"What's that?" she asked, when she saw something she had never expected to see again. "Is that what I think it is?"

Tucking the temporal distortion gun under the open flap of his jacket and using his arm to hold it in place, the Doctor barely glanced up at her as he pulled out his sonic. Flipping through the settings before finding the one he wanted, he explained shortly, "Insurance."

Gobsmacked, she stared at him. "Insurance for what?" came her angry retort.

"In case everything goes pear-shaped. Here," he said, reaching into a pocket blindly and tossing her something. She caught it automatically, reflexes well honed. "Hold on to this."

Sucking in a deep breath, Rose looked down, gritting her teeth when she saw what was in her hands. "Is that it?" she protested, waving the Vortex Manipulator in his face. "Is this gonna be like the last time, with the Old Gods and you planning to get yourself all blown to hell?"

Dark eyes that leapt with a sudden fire met hers, his own teeth gritted as he said, "You never know when everything is gonna go wrong, Rose. And around me, that happens way too damn often. I don't want you or the others hurt and for once, I don't want me to be, either. No more gadding about like naïve little children, cavorting around and thinking everything is gonna be rainbows and flipping daisies. It's not, it never is. Not for me, at least."

It was a long boring wait. Surprisingly so to Gail, who'd expected a bit more excitement and less sitting, waiting for something to happen. "We've got movement," Jake called over the comms. "Got a
"Armed?" Pete asked tersely, peering closely at the video feed. They were parked around the block from their target, hidden in an alleyway. Jake and three others in their camouflaged vehicle were the closest to the scene, keeping watch and ready to signal for the raid. Until they could catch the smugglers in the act of buying and selling the alien goods, they'd be sitting tight. Unless things took a violent turn, in which case they'd be swooping in to intervene.

"Yes."

Gail exchanged a look with Pete, biting her lip in anxiety as he said, "Human?"

"Oh, very. Conventional weapons, too. Looks like Bryn knows 'em. Must have called them in for backup," came the reply.

"Whoever he's expecting to show up, he doesn't exactly trust them, I take it," Gail surmised grimly, getting a grunt of agreement from Pete.

"If they're using a perception filter, can't hardly blame him, can you? Whoever he's invited over, he's dealt with them before."

"Dougal Chambers?" she suggested, the first name that popped into her head.

"Doubtful. Other than the one piece of tech he'd had before, we didn't find anything else of the like. Even his henchmen had a pretty standard arsenal for a bunch of paranoid nutters."

"Guns, guns and more guns," threw in the agent who was relaying the entire video and communications feed back to the hub. Collins, Gail remembered. "But other than that, not so much as a Dogon Sixth Eye amongst the lot of 'em."

Pete confirmed it with a nod. "Also, Chambers was more afraid of being attacked by the Earthers, not making back-alley deals with this lot." Frowning, he amended, "Other than the brief dealings he'd had to get the item he'd had in the first place."

Surprised, Gail eyed him sharply. "He told you about his dealings?"

Pete smiled faintly. "He's the one that tipped us off to this individual in the first place. Before the attack on the safehouse. Wanted protection from the Earthers," he added softly.

The man seemed highly honorable. If he'd offered someone protection and then they'd been harmed under his watch, Pete didn't appear to be the type to take that lightly. It had to be bothering him still. "Do you think they're the ones that got him?" Gail asked in a hushed voice.

Pete looked tired as he said, "From what little information we've got, it's not likely. Everything we've got says the militant arm of the organization has been mainly focused on minor stuff, starting riots at pubs and the like." He grimaced in disgust. "All to be expected with people who usually spend their time causing brawls every time their favorite team loses a footy match. Not exactly organized, them. But is it possible?" He sighed, rubbing his hands over his face before continuing, "Yes. Yes, it's very possible. And that's why we're here. Because if that lot of lunatics are trying to arm themselves for the coming Apocalypse and planning on starting it too, we're gonna stop them."

The comms unit crackled to life again, Jake's voice tight with anticipation. "Got more movement! A van. Looks like two, no three-- no, five people getting out. Four men and... a woman?"
There was a pause, then Pete spoke up, "Anyone we know?"

"I'm trying to... oh shit." There was a really awkward silence on the other end then, that continued for a whole minute, even after Pete demanded, "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Um," came the stuttered reply finally. "Can you get on the private channel?"

"What? Why?" Pete glared at his handset.

"Look, Sir, can you just..."

Rolling his eyes, Pete barked, "For God's sake man, quit dillydallying and speak up."

There was another pause where Gail could imagine Jake on the other end, swallowing nervously and fidgeting in his seat. It was a very small voice that said, "Think of the last person you'd want to see here and who'd else would be right along with him. I'll give you three guesses and the first two don't count."

Gail wasn't exactly slow herself, but apparently Pete Tyler was a bit quicker on the draw, judging by the way he immediately turned red and fairly deafened her with his shout of, "Bloody hell! I swear by all that's holy, if I get my hands on that scrawny little idiot--"

"Gonna kick his arse halfway to Tipperary?" Gail added dryly, finally twigging on to who they meant. "Let me guess, this isn't exactly them on an undercover mission?"

Pete sighed, punching the side of the seat beside him in frustration. "No," he snapped, before pausing to give her a half hopeful look. "If you can catch him, he's yours. That is, if this doesn't go colossally, spectacularly wrong and he's still in one piece afterwards."

It was chilly, standing there by the warehouse, so close to the river in the dead of night. They'd met hardly any traffic with the route they'd taken, other than Terry. And from all appearances, the only people nearby were Bryn and whoever he'd brought with him to close this deal. The Doctor doubted he'd have come alone, considering. He had to wonder what the man was thinking and if this was some sort of trap, especially since Bryn would've known that Edgar and them were unlikely to show up without him. And he really didn't want to be here. So easy to agree in a moment of false bravado and think it all was jolly good fun, only to have the confidence vanish like smoke in the depths of the darkness that only came in the middle of the night.

Right. Couldn't act the cowardly old fool, not with Rose watching him so, looking at him with barely concealed concern. Had to play this careful, pretend like it was so much fluff and get on with it. So with his mind skittering through a myriad of paranoid fears, he forced a bounce to his step, an eagerness to his expression and all the enthusiasm he could muster. (Which was none, but he sure was good putting on shams, wasn't he?)

Closing his eyes for a brief span, he gathered his thoughts, willing his nerves into something more manageable. Hearing the others moving around him, he opened them again as the pounding beat of his heart echoed in his ears. Adrenaline coursed through his veins as he looked toward the door ahead, already trying to imagine what would happen next. The thrill of the unknown, the scintillation of possible adventure was calling him. Not that he could tell what would happen and that, that was the point. Times like this were when he felt alive, felt real, instead of merely shambling on like the ghost of who he'd once been. When he was pushing his chances like this or lying wrapped in Rose's
arms, that was when he was assured for a short time that this all wasn't just some feverish waking dream. You know, the horrible kind that bled the colors out of the world and left the remainder nought but a distorted blur of monochromatic greys. It wasn't like just after the war, back when he didn't really care whether he survived or not. More like he was pushing his boundaries-- their boundaries, anyone's boundaries-- just to feel a little less numb, a little more him. For all he'd told Rose he was still Him, still the Doctor, sometimes, in the darkest part of the night, when her deep, even breathing beside him was all that kept his fragile hold from breaking, he wondered. Wondered and questioned everything in those shadowed hours, even himself, before exorcising his doubts with the rising dawn.

As ever, it was her voice that called him back to reality. "Doctor."

Blinking, he caught himself and forced a smile onto his face that was almost real. Edgar and the others were also looking at him with open concern, eyes going from his face to the TD gun and back rapidly as they wondered if he'd finally gone off his onion. Well, that may as well be, but now wasn't the time, not when he could feel the pull of danger and adventure ahead. And that scared and thrilled him both, so much so. The excitement of it all and that niggling little voice, that deeply engrained survival trait left over from his earliest ancestors in the Dark Times that told him to run, to go fleeing home... Yes, both urges were there in spades, warring with each other and it was just brilliant, that maddening dichotomy. Molto bene, perhaps. That adrenaline rush couched in amongst the trappings of primal fear itself.

"You alright there, mate?" Edgar asked, brow furrowed as he leaned in to peer into the Doctor's eyes. "Not cracking up on us, are you?"

Seeing all the worried looks he was getting, he shook himself from his momentary mental wanderings. "Never better," he bluffed. Flashing a bright smile at Rose, he added, "Just doing some thinking, is all."

Rose looked skeptical, but seemed to radiate a certain hope. "Yeah?" When he nodded, she grinned back. "Got any ideas then, a plan, maybe?"

The Doctor shrugged, looking back toward the warehouse. He now knew what Terry meant, about the feeling of being watched. Didn't half make his skin crawl and set him on edge. "Might do," he mused. "Just... if anything goes wrong, and I do mean wrong, you know what to do, Rose."

Holding out his right hand, he wriggled his fingers at her, hoping she'd not turn him down this time.

Glancing down, she gave him an ironic smirk. "That's still sorta creepy, you know. Even more so, if you think about it. Considerin', you know, the jar."

He made a good natured sound of disagreement in his throat. "C'mon, you love it." Again he wriggled those fingers, raising his eyebrows entreatingly as he did. This time she took his hand, and he grinned. "Allons-y!"

Fluorescent lighting lit the inside of the warehouse, casting everything in harsh contrast between too much light and inky shadows. Several figures stood by the opposite end, near a stack of packing crates. Bryn and several others, the Doctor noted, narrowly avoiding flinching. Thankfully, Rose stayed close by his side, a steadying presence. Edgar motioned to Percy and Jasper to keep an eye out for any hidden surprises, even as they were approaching the people up ahead.

Deciding to hang back while Edgar and Bryn discussed business, he let himself zone out a bit,
revelling in the feel of Rose's hand in his. A gentle squeeze against his fingers and he glanced down, trying to center himself again. Rose jerked her head, directing his attention to Edgar, who was looking at him with impatience. Apparently he'd been trying to get his attention while he'd been in his brown study. Funny how time seemed to jump and skitter around at moments like this, when he was caught up in distraction and his inner musings.

Heart clenching as he did, he disentangled his hand from Rose's, giving her a meaningful look as he did. Hopefully, she'd remember and follow through if things did go a bit squiffy. "Right, er, sorry," he mumbled, stepping forward to inspect the goods. A few minutes to poke around and rummage through the pile, all the while keeping his head down, the TD gun hidden under his jacket, and one eye out for sudden movement.

Bryn was watching him with an odd expression set somewhere between fear, disbelief, and disgust, as if he expected him to suddenly blurt out what had gone on before in Hoxton. The man was clever enough to know he'd likely not make it out of this building alive if I did grass on him, he thought to himself. That was a thought both comforting and highly disturbing as he turned it over in his mind, hands distractedly turning over objects that were far from home. Vinaldian hairdryers there were not, but plenty of rubbish there was. "Better off sending the lot of this off to the scrapyard," he said finally, with an apologetic look at Edgar.

Bryn glared at him, fists clenched in anger. "But that's primo goods!"

Ignoring him, the Doctor turned to Edgar, continuing with, "It's all a waste of our time, really. Nothing anyone would be interested in, unless you took it down to the yard in Shoreditch. Might get a few bob for it."

Bryn stepped in between them, interjecting, "That's the best shipment in months!" He waved a hand at the pile of junk. "I mean, look at all of it. That's no ickle pile, there."

Turning his unimpressed gaze on the man, the Doctor arched a brow and retorted, "Quantity isn't an indicator of quality. If that was the case, the gossip rags would be beating out Shakespeare for literary regard at the Unis."

For a moment that seemed longer than it probably was, the two of them really saw each other for the first time since that back street in Finsbury. Judging from the hint of sweat on his brow and his increased respiration rate, the man was afraid. So very afraid and staring up at him like the hare before the hound, he was. Seeing that made his own fears diminish, heart rate slowing to a semblance of the norm as he allowed himself a slight smirk. The smirk, the chin held high and peering down his nose, yeah he could let some of the old arrogance take hold. "It's junk," he reiterated succinctly, crossing his arms over his chest with a sense of satisfaction.

A hullabaloo broke out, with Bryn's continued protestations and Edgar angrily accusing of having them on. He just stepped aside, letting it all happen without him. He'd already done his bit, identifying the shite. Once they got done with their petty squabble he could go home; go home, make passionate love to Rose, let down some more of his walls, and get back to trying to put himself back together again.

Bryn's henchmen were also standing aside, alert for any actual threat, but staying well out of it, as well. A quick once over confirmed that he didn't recognize them. Not that that meant much, that whole period he'd spent in that cellar were mostly a nightmarish blur, with faint memories of an unfamiliar and cold voice speaking unseen. Things like that, such murky recollections from the Time War were still surfacing occasionally. This one, he'd be getting unexpected brief flashes of this for years. But that was then and this was the now. As for this, let them have their fun. If there was going to be a confrontation, so be it. He was armed, armed better than anyone else on the sodding planet.
Let them try, if they wanted, if they dared. His fingers were inches from the weapon and he was standing between them and Rose.

But something was making the back of his neck tingle as all the hairs there stood on end the feeling of being watched returning in full. Nerves jangling, he looked to Rose, hoping she sensed it too. Of course not, not with her limited, purely human senses. She was oblivious, busy keeping an eye on the proceedings in front of them, watching for any signs of treachery, like he was. But there was something else going on, something else coming...

"Torchwood, freeze!"

"This is the Police. Hands up and nobody move!"
Chapter 50

Time seemed to slow around them, like it was suspended in treacle. Everything was crystallized into sharp edges, as first the sound of boots against the cement floors broke through and then, the sight of all those Torchwood agents filled his peripheral vision. So much was vying for his attention, what with the sudden threat of possible arrest on one hand and the really pissed off smuggler in front of him on the other. It was definitely turning out to be one of those days. Quite possibly he should've spared a thought for the probability of this happening beforehand, it being illegal and all that. Always stood a chance of the police popping in, but hey, the same plans should work. It certainly counted as things going pear-shaped. Bugger if he knew how they'd gotten wind of this in the first place. They never had before, so why now? Unless...

"I should have known this would happen," Bryn snarled accusingly, backing away from them, his surprise morphing quickly into disgust, with hatred writ large across his features. His friends moved forward to stand close to him and bring their weapons to bear. "It's your fault, Edgar, for letting that lot use you like this. What, they promise you immunity if you'd bring the rest of us down for 'em?"

"What?" The Doctor blurted, incredulous. How could Bryn think that? He was getting ready to fire off an indignant tirade just as they all had to momentarily cringe at the shout of, "Nobody move," from one of those sodding Torchwood nuisances. They all had their weapons raised, but they were keeping their distance, as if waiting for further instructions. That being duly noted, everyone else just took the opportunity to promptly ignore their presence.

"I didn't have any idea they'd show up here any more than you did," Edgar protested, raising a conciliatory hand. Getting caught between the filth and this lot wasn't exactly at the top of his list of wants. "Doctor," he hissed out the corner of his mouth as they all started to move closer together, "tell me you've got a plan for getting us out of this mess. Torchwood and all that." He jerked his head in their direction.

The way they were standing, all bunched up, made it easier to keep their eyes on all parties in the room. "I didn't call 'em," the Doctor protested in a sotto voice, while calmly eying Bryn. "You're the one who wanted me to come check out the shite he had on sale."

"You're the one who used to work with them," Percy protested. He nodded towards Rose. "She still does, doesn't she?"

"I'm on hiatus," Rose protested. "I only came along so he wouldn't get himself killed," she added, pointing to the Doctor.

"And I quit, remember?" he interjected. "Though, I'd have been given the sack by now, most like. I'm rather rubbish when it comes to actually following orders and having any respect for authority."

"We've noticed, ta," Jasper grumbled.

"Hands in the air, no one move," Gail snapped authoritatively, "Hands up!" came another yelled order from across the room, the voice sounding a bit put out that they were mostly being ignored. Though, the idiosyncratic commands did finally catch his attention fully.

"Hang on," he said, turning to face them in a casual slouch. "You tell us not to move, then you go
and tell us to put our hands up. So which is it? Hands up or don't move? Talk about your communication errors," he scoffed, scanning the group casually. He didn't make any move for the TD gun. It was safely tucked away, not absolutely necessary at the mo. Things weren't quite out of hand. "Ooh, and somebody's not happy to see me," he added musingly to himself. With a little wave, he added, "Hiya, Pete," before turning back to focus on the conversation between them and Bryn.

"Edna was right, should've killed him when we bloody well had the chance," Bryn growled, looking at him with open suspicion and disdain. "You've gotta be idiots, thinking he's not the one that called 'em."

"Why would I do that, when I don't want them here any more than you do?" the Doctor asked reasonably.

"Right, and I'm the bloody President," Bryn scoffed. He glanced at the Torchwood agents with a sneer. "One more move and I'll kill him. Shoot him dead, I will."

All those eyes were suddenly looking at him then. The Doctor flinched, knowing that at least one person there was going to put two and two together and, unfortunately, come up with four. That was the cat properly out of the bag, now wasn't it?

The Torchwood agents all halted, but didn't lower their weapons. One moved to the front, looking to be acting the spokesman for the group. Er, make that spokeswoman, as he recognized that DI who'd been following him around for the last month or so. Definitely persistent, that one, and not Torchwood. Very interesting, that. She was probably already memorizing every detail from the moment she'd stepped through those big double doors on the warehouse, all the better to come up with conclusions and plan asking more questions with uncomfortable answers to them. Ooh, and there was Jake, too. That was almost comforting. Would've been more so, if he didn't know that a certain Director of Torchwood was nearby and ready to give him a proper tongue lashing when this was done with. Right, he was just going to avoid thinking about the future entirely for the now. Less complicated, that way. Less worrying, too.

"You know I can't let you do that," Gail said evenly, barely sparing the time to even glance at the Doctor. "Put the gun down and we'll talk."

"No," Bryn shouted. "I'm not an idiot. The second I do, you'll shoot me dead." He moved over around to stand so the Doctor, Rose and their friends were between him and the agents. "$Try anything now and they're all dead."

Gail calmly raised a brow, seemingly unflappable. "Seems a bit drastic for all this. Smuggling, unless it's weapons or drugs, only carries a five year penalty."

"Call it me offering to do the world a favor, then," Bryn snapped, backing away further. Where the man was standing, no one could get off a shot without chance of getting the wrong target. "One less alien menace to worry about, yeah?"

Well, the Doctor could've got him easily, but that was a line he was hoping he wouldn't have to cross. The dangers of using that temporal distortion gun aside, the consequences didn't bear thinking about. Feeling Rose's gasp beside him, the Doctor surreptitiously blindly reached a hand out to pat her arm, the closest part of her he could reach without being too noticeable. She was tense, alert, not panicking, but looking straight at him. Like she knew what he was thinking or something. Yeah, they'd been in tighter spots, but still, he had to do something about this and do it quick, before he was forced into doing something he'd regret. He already had enough regrets, he wasn't going to waste them on the likes of Bryn Holburn. "Ooh, a proper standoff! It's been yonks since I've been caught in one of those," he crowed, forcing a grin. Inside, he felt like his heart was going to hammer its way
through his ribs and his blood had seemingly turned to ice. Yeah, it had definitely reached a certain level of pear-shapedness that he wasn't quite comfortable with.

"Doctor," Rose hissed warningly. "Shut it."

He bumped her gently with his shoulder, hoping she'd realize what he was doing. Using the gob to distract an enemy was one thing. Nattering enough to distract this many at once... blimey, that was a tall order. He could see Gail talking on a comm unit to someone, probably planning on getting a trained police negotiator in. That could take ages... or not. Either way, he didn't exactly feel like waiting around for everyone to finish their do. "Why? Isn't this fun? Here we are, caught between two disparate groups, with a certain horrible outcome if either one gets ahold of us. Can't even begin to decide which one's worse, either."

"Do you have to sound so bloody cheerful about it?" Edgar snapped, body tense. He kept nervously flicking his eyes between Bryn and the agents. Coppers arrest you, you just go through the courts and do your time in the gaol. He'd heard the stories whispered about Torchwood. That lot, mess with them and you might end up disappearing, never to be seen again, if the rumors were right. Sure they'd buggered about a bit with them before, but this... this might be a step too far. "Bit of a tricky situation here."

Nonchalantly, the Doctor shrugged. He could see Bryn's arm starting to lower slightly as the man began getting caught between trying to focus on too much at once. Question was, how long could he keep it up? "Pah, been in worse. Far worse. You couldn't even imagine it. I've been in more gaols than you've had holidays in the sun."

"Oh for god's sake, shut up!" Bryn barked, raising his hand higher and cocking back the pistol's hammer. Well, that answered how long before the man ran out of patience and got overwhelmed with frustration.

They all heard the sounds of multiple weapons being made ready. Bryn's pals swiveling the barrels of their guns the aim at them as tensions nearly reached a head. A hail of bullets was just moments away from flying when Jake signalled, holding up a hand. Reluctantly, the weapons were lowered.

Gail stepped forward, hands outstretched in a nonthreatening and entreating manner. "Mr Holburn, if this is about your brother's unsolved murder, I promise you we're still on the case. Just put the weapon down so we can all walk away from this. No need to escalate things further," Gail called, trying to get Bryn to engage in talks again.

"He's not exactly kidding," Rose muttered under her breath, reaching a hand out and twining it with his. "And he's the more dangerous of the two problems we've got at the mo'."

When that movement didn't bring a hail of bullets, he gave her hand a squeeze, marveling that her palm remained dry while his was starting to sweat. Shoddy human endocrine system. Uncontrollable reactions to external stressors were a certain sign of dodgy evolutionary quirks. How did they even put up with it? The sweating, the increased pulse rate that was making him feel a bit giddy...

"Really, you think so?" The Doctor pretended to consider it, before bobbing his head in disagreement. "Naw, he's probably less of a threat than they are. Bryn just hates me, while I rather tend to embarrass, annoy and frustrate the hell out of them. Far worse in their book, I reckon, and probably so much worse if they actually get ahold of me. One would merely kill me while the others, they'll try to set me down a notch or two, tell me the errors of my ways and tell me what a very naughty boy I've been." He gave a theatrical shudder. "Then they'll insist I come to tea, act all proper, follow the rules and get a haircut, the bastards."
He watched Bryn's face flush in anger, giving him a coy, innocent look as he carefully run a finger up Rose's hand towards her wrist. Towards the vortex manipulator on her wrist. Just a little bit further and his finger would be on the button, ready to get them out of here. But not just yet. Not with Bryn so close to pulling the trigger.

"Doctor," Rose hissed under her breath. "Don't antagonize him. Just gonna make things worse."

Her voice caught Bryn's attention and he turned to glance at her, sneering. "You tell him, sweetheart. Talk some sense into him, if you want him to go on breathing. And you, Cor, can't even begin to think what you are like. What, a proper human ain't good enough for ya?" he taunted her. "Can't find a real man to satisfy you, gotta go looking for a freak from the stars like him?"

Rose's lips tightened in anger and he could see her eyes flashing in rage. If things were a bit different, Bryn would be finding out about Tyler women and their tempers. That was probably luck on his part. Him, when they got out of this and Rose was ready to vent her anger, well, he'd not be so lucky. He gave her hand a squeeze in reassurance and as a warning not to do anything stupid. Not that she was, but holding her tongue wasn't always her strongest suit.

Unflinching at the insult, the Doctor stilled, assessing the likelihood of getting shot, calculating the trajectory in regard to Rose's location and his. Better it was aimed at him than her. Eyes darting between Rose, Bryn, and the agents, he was already scrambling for a plan. One signal to Rose, and they could be out of there. Then again, one move and someone could end up getting shot.

A sudden movement to his right caught his attention, Jasper nearly knocking him aside as he made a rush to get to Edgar. He must've finally realised what Bryn had meant about killing him when he had the chance. That, or the man was all in a bother over the whole situation. "You bastard," Jasper was growling, even as someone else got spooked and pulled their trigger....

....and time stood still.

Despite what she'd been told before going in, Gail couldn't quite believe it. Barely more than a week out from having the doctors at Torchwood's medical unit waffling about on giving an answer to whether the man would even wake up, much less be in the least bit functional again, and there he was. Standing next to Rose Tyler with a bunch of people that had enough criminal vibes for an entire prison, looking pretty much the same as usual, Smith didn't even act like she'd have expected him to. Sure, he looked a bit rough around the edges with a more wary set to his features than he'd had before the whole kidnapping business. He'd even been his infuriatingly rude self, babbling away to his friends and Rose while she was trying to talk Bryn out of shooting them all dead, starting with the geek with the gob.

It had seemed odd, the way Rose barely seemed to acknowledge their presence, like she didn't even know them. It didn't quite jar with the bits she'd been told, about the girl being one of Torchwood's most successful agents. Would someone who'd been their top agent go about pretending they didn't exist like that, she wondered in the back of her mind, while reminding Bryn that so far, he'd only committed a very minor crime. But Rose did, or seemed to, until Gail happened to glimpse Pete making some urgent gestures and Rose moving her hand in a subtle 'don't worry, I'm fine' gesture. Apparently there was some kind of subtle communication going on there and judging by the cool and collected way Rose seemed to be reacting, there had to be some sort of plan. Maybe they were
there on an undercover op and what had gone on before was just an act that was part of their cover story. It didn't make sense to Gail. But then, almost nothing had, not since she'd left home that morning.

Then, everything seemed to happen at once. Even though part of her mind was secretly telling her that there'd been an indeterminable pause between one of the large bearded biker types moving, a bright flash with an inaudible pop, and all hell breaking loose. She couldn't have even said who fired the first shot, since it all had happened so fast, even while her mind tried to adjust to the fact that the five people who'd been standing between them and Bryn Holburn's group were just suddenly gone. By the time she'd caught up with the new reality around her, Bryn and his associates were down on the floor, semi-conscious and being secured with restraints by agents.

"Set to stun," Jake explained with a friendly grin, patting his weapon fondly. "The boss doesn't like it when we kill 'em, tries to make sure they survive to either get kicked off the planet or go off to gaol. Saves on the mess, too."

What made the biggest impression was the unflinching equanimity on everyone else's part in regard to the fact that five people had just disappeared. "Bloody nuisance did it again," Pete muttered, turning away with a gesture of frustration couched in half-admiration. "Just like last time. Get him in a tight spot and he just disappears!"

"Did what?" Gail had handled many arrests, but none had been anything like this one. "How?"

"Vortex manipulator," Jake supplied. "The one thing we should all be glad he made off with. Unfortunately, it means they could be anywhere by now. Or anywhen," he added darkly, glancing at Pete, with a look of concern.

Gail had to gape at the man, eyes darting over to gauge Pete Tyler's expression, thinking someone had to be taking the mick. Aliens and all that--that was one thing. This, this was just running headlong into the realm of pure fantasy and science fiction, if not sheer lunacy. "You mean teleportation is real? It's actually possible?"

Jake laughed darkly before turning away to go help take the prisoners out. "If you think that's mind bending, just wait until the Doctor's got his ship ready. Then you won't even know what you have and haven't done yet," he called over his shoulder. When she looked at Pete in a bewildered hope for an answer, he just gave her an enigmatic look before getting on the comms unit.

Gail walked over to where the Doctor and Rose had been, marveling that there wasn't a mark on the floor or anything to prove what had happened. She was shortly joined by a mousy looking type in a lab coat that seemed to have just magically appeared or something, but she assumed the woman had been on standby during the whole operation, waiting for some signal that she herself had missed. If she'd thought tensions had been high during the standoff, that was nothing compared to when the woman shouted, "There's blood!"

"Get a scanner in here, now," Pete ordered, stepping forward to take command. There was a flurry of activity and more agents seemingly coming out of the woodwork, everyone rushing to determine whose blood was on the floor. Even while Gail was just trying to figure out what the hell had just happened. Feeling totally lost, she could only stand aside and watch, trying to put the pieces together while thinking that half of the puzzle had already been binned without anyone telling her beforehand.

"Not enough to be a fatal injury," someone opined.

"Not that we can even remotely begin to gauge that, considering they popped out of here like they did," someone else retorted.
"Any ID yet?" Pete was leaning over one of the techs, anxiety tracing every line on his face.

"The DNA is nothing that we currently have on file, sir," the small woman said cautiously, giving him a hesitant smile.

Pete visibly sagged with relief. "It's not Rose, then."

"No, and considering the fact the equipment isn't going mad, it's not him either."

"Find a way to track them," Pete Tyler snapped. "Whoever it was that got hurt, they're all likely to still be together."

Someone with an even odder looking sort of gizmo waved it about, getting a look of gobsmacked terror. "Um, I'm picking up massive amounts of temporal energy over in this entire area. This was more than just a vortex manipulator that went off in here. Something major."

"Christ," Pete swore, a whole new expression of anger and worry warring with one of outright fear. "What has he done now?"

Jake had come back, overhearing the entire exchange. "Could he have--" he started to say, before breaking off after giving Pete an unreadable expression.

"I can't even begin to guess, if he did. He was supposed to have dismantled the ruddy thing."

"He wouldn't... would he?"

"Who the hell knows!" Pete snapped, clearly frustrated beyond belief now. "Who could possibly fathom what goes through that man's head. Certainly not I, or anyone else here, for that matter."

Before Gail could even start to shape all the questions that came to her then, Jake added, "And if the reaction to that VM Rose said he had last time had the same effect this time, god only knows the shape he's in now. Especially since he's probably still dealing with that head injury."

"Great. Just flipping great." Pete rubbed his forehead, pausing as if he was counting to ten. "Start finding a way to find them pronto. I want a team in Hackney, since that's the first place he'll head for if he's able. And take a medical team with you." He turned to Gail, giving her a tight smile. "Tell me, how far along does the thought of throttling someone have to proceed before it becomes conspiracy to commit bodily harm?"

Gail swallowed thickly before giving him a wry look. "By now, even if that thought progressed to something more substantial, I reckon a judge would likely be inclined to be lenient and call it an unfortunate incident with undue prior provocation."

It was like a bubble had suddenly formed around them. One big, invisible bubble, where everything outside seemed to freeze except for them. Rose felt more than saw Jasper rushing past, distracted by trying to keep from losing her balance when she was pulled along by the Doctor's grip on her hand. He already had an arm around Jasper's shoulders, pulling him back against his chest. Edgar and Percy just stared, too busy trying to figure out what had happened and what was going on now to intervene in anything. She was staring at the Doctor, wondering just what he'd done. She could clearly see everyone who was more than six feet away seeming froze in impossible positions. It was like someone had put the film on pause; except this wasn't a film, this was real. Just as real, if
improbable, as it could be, with the Doctor holding Jasper in what was almost a stranglehold, what looked like muzzle flash coming from Bryn's pistol, and agents and cops halted in whatever they were doing. Some had their mouths open, clearly gasping in surprise or getting ready to yell something. Everything had just stopped, except for them. Jasper threw a bewildered look over his shoulder, the remains of his angry dash still showing in the way he held himself. "The hell--"

"Don't even think about it. He's not worth it," she heard him hiss into Jasper's ear.

Jasper started to struggle against him, his much larger bulk certain to prevail quickly, but somehow the Doctor hung on, with little noticeable effort on his part. "Let me go, you--"

The Doctor cut him off quickly, "Right now, you're about a millisecond from getting a bullet in the chest. You can thank some highly dangerous thingamabob later. In the meantime, we'd better hope I got the timing right or, well... I'm so, so sorry, but it's gonna hurt."

Pulling her wrist from his grasp, she rubbed it to ease away to discomfort left from being dragged along like a kite. Tell me that's not gonna be a bruise in the morning, she thought. Glaring a bit, she fixed him with a disapproving stare. "What's with--" Rose started to say, before being interrupted by the Doctor.

"There's no time, Rose. Can't keep a null time field open much longer than this, before the rest of the space/time continuum twigs on, and does something correct it. Explanations later, we've got to go now." His jaw was clenched as he glanced at her with an apologetic look in his eyes that served to soften the effects of his harsh tone slightly. She could almost swear she saw little beads of perspiration starting to form on his forehead as he said, "Everyone grab on to Rose or me and hang on," just as he grabbed her wrist again, albeit a bit more gently this time.

There was a flash, just as everything around them distorted, blurred, then went dark. They were tumbling and falling through nothingness, but somehow were staying together. It was almost like using the Dimension Canon, just worse, somehow. Like they were all just the pipedreams of some outside force or entity: figments dreaming they were real. Instead of being empty and dead, like the Void, this gave the impression of pure chaos and something that wouldn't quite meet the standard definition of "life" but was so alive. Alive, sentient, but nothing that could be described as kind and benevolent or cruel and evil. More like uncaring, whatever it was. Indifferent and just... there.

Blindly, she cast about for something, anything to orient herself against; lost in a place with no up, no down, and nothing to hold on to. Searched and reached, and found nothing. But that wasn't quite true, she could still feel him, lingering at the edge of her awareness. Just an impression, really, but it was enough to reassure her she wasn't alone. No, that wasn't quite it, she could feel the Doctor's fingers clamped around her forearm, gripping tight like they were made of steel. Gripping, but already slipped away; there, but not. Like the aftertaste of a strong memory, or déjà vu for something that hadn't happened yet. She could almost swear she heard someone screaming for their mummy, but she couldn't tell who it was or if it wasn't just her imagination.

Then everything seemed to reverse, something unseen pulling her back and reality popping back into existence around her. Equilibrium and balance completely thrown off, she would've fallen if it wasn't for the hands gripping her. Edgar was practically wrapped around her waist, gasping and sputtering still and Percy was hanging onto him, stunned into silence with eyes like saucers. She could so commiserate with the feeling, taking a moment to breathe and just appreciate the ability to do so and the feeling of knowing she actually existed. Or would have, if she could have, considering how tightly Edgar was clinging to her. Perhaps he got the message, arms slipping away as Rose blinked, trying to determine where they were.

The smell of grease and oil pervading everything: check. Flickering fluorescent lighting overhead:
check. Half painted Mercedes missing its motor on one side and a red Citroën with the bonnet up on the other: check. They were back in Hackney, in the garage. Pretty much back to where they’d started the night, then. What a relief that was. God, she could only guess at what time it was now. Had to be extremely late, since it had been closing in on midnight when they’d entered the warehouse. Still, an hour, tops, before anyone showed up with questions they wanted answering. Plenty of time to start asking her own and getting a few promises that this wouldn’t happen again. Dad was going to be furious and worried and when Mum found out...

It was the Doctor’s hand slipping away from hers that brought her back to remembering what had been in progress before the bubble had appeared around them. For a moment, she couldn’t make sense of what she was seeing, everything coming across as harsh and disjointed. Jasper seeming to settle back against the Doctor, more than being forcefully held. Him seeming to struggle a bit with the load, feet struggling to maintain their grip on the floor of the garage. The soles of his trainers scrabbling and slipping before the pair went down in a heap together. And Jasper not reacting to any of it.
Using a Vortex Manipulator was like speeding down the Autobahn on a motorbike at 120 kilometres per hour. That is, if one was riding a motorbike while completely starkers, during the winter in the middle of an ice storm, and with the mother of all hangovers. If the Doctor had thought it was bad the last time he'd used one, that was nothing on this time. Nothing at all. Nausea and the feeling that someone had been trying to suck his brain out through his ear was just something he'd have to ignore, because Jasper was currently a solid weight against his chest. Solidly unmoving, that is. A moment of panic flashed through him, where he was thinking that he'd completely failed on everything that evening.

"God, Doctor. Are you--"

He cut Rose off with a hasty, "I'm fine," as he tried to ignore the ringing in his ears. It was like someone had installed a miniature version of the Cloister Bell inside his head and was now merrily thumping away on it for all they were worth. As he sat up enough to scrabble around, looking for a pulse in the man's neck, he could hear the others rushing over. Not that even locating a neck, much less the carotid artery, was such a simple task, what with all the facial hair on the bloke, but once he found it, he could let himself breathe again. Jasper was still alive. Pushing aside the residual nausea left from going through the vortex unshielded, he turned his attention to assessing the damage. If he'd thought the contents of his stomach had been threatening to evacuate the premises before, that was nothing compared to what he felt when he saw Jasper's shoulder. Bloody hell, he'd certainly timed that one wrong, hadn't he?

"Is he--?" someone was asking, but he ignored them. He didn't have time for questions, much less answering them. Already he was pulling off his jacket and shirt, trying to staunch the bleeding. Rose was there, helping him, while Percy unsuccessfully was trying to wake his brother up. "Edgar's fetching the emergency kit from the office," she said, eyes wide but voice calm. "Got anything upstairs for this?"

"No," he admitted on a growl, frustrated beyond belief. Of course there wasn't. All he had was mostly the stuff he'd confiscated from Torchwood, trying to prevent anyone from accidentally causing the end of the world. Nothing that would actually do any good. Blood was running everywhere, no matter how hard he tried to stem the flow. Jasper was still breathing, but his pulse was getting thready and it was all just too much for a couple plasters and a paracetamol to fix it.

Edgar came back shortly after, but that box of things meant for cut fingers and splinters wasn't any use. Throwing it aside, the Doctor barely kept himself from yelling in anger. Rose put a hand on his arm, steadying him for a moment. "What about the sonic?" she asked.

"What good would that do? Want me to resonate the concrete floors in here?" he retorted, immediately feeling like an arse. He flashed her an apologetic look before getting back to trying to rig a tourniquet with Jasper's own belt.

"There's nothing else we can do. None of us are trained medics, we've got to call 999--" she told him and there was nothing he could do but agree with her, even as Percy was protesting. "We can't, they'll report it! Then the fuzz will have us for certain," he protested, glaring at them even as he cradled his brother against his chest. "I don't wanna go to gaol, and I know he doesn't either!"
Putting up a hand to run it through his hair in frustration, the Doctor caught himself in time, looking at the blood with a grimace. Too many bad memories he’d like to forget there, he thought grimly before giving himself a mental shake. "Look, this is your brother's life we're talking about here, your very own brother. You can't--"

"Why can't you fix him, then. Everyone calls you Doctor, don't they?" Percy challenged, eyes flashing dangerously.

"I'm not--" He looked to Rose for some help, but she was biting her lip and giving him that look that said Percy had a point, even if they were wasting valuable time arguing here. The walls of the garage seemed to be closing in on him; the pounding in his head running counterpoint to his heartbeat.

"Wrong kind of doctor," Rose jumped in helpfully, giving Percy a sympathetic look. "I know you don't like it, but--" She bent down and was talking to him softly, even as Edgar was pulling the Doctor aside.

"They're both right. Maybe we can just drop him off at the closest A&E, be safer that way. If the police get involved, you're the first one they're going to go after," he said softly. "That copper's been on your arse for over a month now and--"

"D'you think I bloody well care about that now?" he snapped, walking over to the office and grabbing the phone off the desk. "We're not just dropping him off like a flipping package. We're his friends, not a screwed up delivery service. And if you didn't happen to notice, we've not got any vehicles here that actually run and we left the sodding van back there!" Anger and the feeling of helplessness didn't mix well, he realized as he stiffly punched in the numbers. "Emergency? I've got a man who's been shot--" he grated, glaring defiantly at Edgar. If he ended up in a cell, so be it. It was better than letting Jasper just die on the floor here. Maybe he deserved a stint in a place where he'd be almost guaranteed to be kept from getting into any further trouble. After all, if he'd been a bit quicker on his feet, none of this would've happened. Head spinning and heart in his throat, he started pacing when the dispatcher asked him to stay on the line. That damned ringing in his ears was getting worse, too. Almost sounded like sirens, it did.

Back at the warehouse, things were still very much in progress. Pete was directing the processing of the evidence and prisoners when Jake was back on the radio. "Um, boss, we were just coming through Whitechapel and Lane was monitoring the emergency bands when something popped up," he said, voice tight with tension.

Rubbing a hand across his forehead, Pete sighed. "God, what now?" It seemed like this night would never end. Jackie was going to do her nut when he got home, after being out all hours. More so, if things continued to get worse than they already were.

Jake hadn't sounded so grim since the stars had been going out. "Well, we've got proof they're in Hackney, even if there was just a call for an ambulance for a gunshot victim that came through."

For a moment, it seemed like his heart forgot how to beat and his lungs couldn't manage to draw a breath. "Male or female victim?" Pete asked, knowing they'd not have given a name out over the radio. He was still trying to piece together his scrambled memories of what had happened just before everything went to chaos and was still coming up with a tangled mess interspersed with parts where it was all a blank. He was already heading for the van and motioning for agents to follow.

"Male," Jake answered tersely. "Said 'mid thirties' and that they were unconscious."
For the life of him, he couldn't remember who'd been in the likely line of fire. "I'm on my way," he grated. "Keep me posted and if it's... just be there for Rose, yeah? And if it's not him, keep him there. Even if you have to handcuff him to something or sit on him, don't let him leave." They both knew which 'him' Pete was referring to.

"Got it."

When he signed off, the DI was watching him with barely concealed curiously. Pete gave her a nod, deciding to keep her in the loop. "Those units you dispatched earlier are about to come in handy. Now let's go, my people can handle this from here. There's another scene where we're going to be needed more."

Deciding to drive, he kept his eyes on the road, mouth set in a grim line as he pushed the engine of the SUV to its limits. Flipping on the flashers while Gail broadcast the advisory to the Met, they sped through the night in silence until she cleared her throat. "So, how long have you known Smith's had all this tech on him?"

Pete threw her a glance before sighing heavily. He sounded reluctant, but answered, "Long enough to regret it."

But she wasn't going to leave it there. Adjusting her lap belt before glancing in the wing mirror for any vehicles following them, Gail continued smoothly, "And you never thought to stop him from acquiring it in the first place?"

"Who said I hadn't?" he said defensively. "If you knew him, you'd quickly find he's not only quite persuasive, but has a tendency to do as he damn well pleases."

"Even openly defying authority and ignoring any and all dangers?"

"That's a matter of course. By now, if he didn't, I'd really start worrying." Pete then raised an eyebrow, giving her a sunny smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "You should see him when he gets really bored. Starts taking apart household appliances and puts them back together in ways you couldn't begin to imagine or worse, decides to educate my son about the variety of lifeforms in the Universe."

Gail arched her own brow in reply. "What, and the protocols for off-world refugees magically don't apply to him?"

Smiling in bitter amusement, Pete held in a mirthless chuckle, ignoring her question entirely. "He's never going to answer to that, you know. Smith, it's not his name." Silently he added, you try keeping a hurricane in a bottle and see how far you get, madam. You'll quickly find it's impossible. Very much so.

Rolling her eyes and seemingly unperturbed by the sudden switch, Gail said, "Right, he goes around calling himself 'the Doctor'. It's on his file, if I recall. Or was, before he trashed all the databases that had any record of him." At Pete's sudden look of apprehension, she smiled sweetly. "Basic detection, putting things together in ways that make sense and seeing what kind of reaction you get. Looks like I'm not far off the mark." Pete ignored that, in favor of watching the road, cringing inside when she added, "After all, no one names their kid 'Doctor'. You'd have to be completely insane. That, or he really is from another planet, one where they're all barking mad."

Once again, the lady proves herself to be astute, he thought, smirking humorlessly to himself again before scowling at the idea that she was getting dangerously close to the truth. Clenching his teeth, Pete muttered, "No." He turned on the comms, listening in for any more word on what was going
Gail seemed to be busy contemplating her own thoughts as they were passing through Wapping, leaving him to his own. Anything could be happening, right now, anything. Not knowing was the problem, even if he wasn't sure he really did want to know. Any one of them could be injured, perhaps fatally so, and then he'd be picking up the pieces after. If it was the Doctor who'd been shot... that wouldn't be a shock, would it? Walking disaster magnet, him. Jacks would be livid and God, Rose. He wasn't sure how much more his step daughter could handle, if it was him. If it was one of their friends, well, that might just be the straw that broke the camel's back. The Doctor was already seemingly a mess as it was, if one of his friends was hurt or... he really didn't want to contemplate it. Not yet, at least. Might as well make the most of these last few minutes of partial calm before the storm. It'd only last so long before it was back to pure chaos again.

Before they'd even gotten out of Wapping, Jake had radioed in again, saying that he'd gotten to the garage too late and they'd already left. "Ambulance is already on the way to Hope Hospital. No one's here, at all. One of the neighbors said they'd borrowed a car and sped off, after an argument with a PC."

"Did they mention who was driving?" Pete asked, feeling both hope and no small amount of frustration- hope that there wasn't a police chase and frustration at the thought there probably was, knowing them.

"I've got good news and bad news," Jake said jovially, sounding annoyingly chipper.

Wincing, Pete weighed his options for a moment, finally giving over. "Give me the good news, it'll make the bad news so much easier to take-- not that I can handle any more bad news."

"Rose and the Doctor are alright, from all accounts."

With that question answered, Pete let himself relax somewhat as he changed directions, heading for the hospital. Cautiously, he asked, "And the bad?"

Jake paused, sounding more amused than Pete would've liked. "He's the one driving."

The hospital was chaotic, to say the least. Especially at this hour, with people in various states of wellness wandering about, along with doctors, nurses and orderlies trying to keep the situation manageable. When they stopped at the front desk, her badge coming in handy, the harried looking nurse told them Jasper Petersen was in surgery and distractedly directed them towards the waiting area on the second floor by the surgical unit.

The ride up on the lift was quiet, other than Pete on his comms unit, in a heated conversation with someone. When she looked askance at him, he merely said, "Just letting the wife know what's happening."

"That bad?"

He shrugged. "Worse if I didn't and she found out after. Figured I'd wait until I knew if we were going to be planning a funeral or not."
"Good thinking," Gail offered, trying to get a better read on the situation. She couldn't understand these people, none of them. There was Pete Tyler, a man who was, by all accounts, a capable and deft commander who'd led Torchwood in the battle to eradicate the remaining Cybermen threat. The very same man who had, since then, steered them through countless other threats since and now seemed half in awe, half in fear, of what anyone else with any sense would perceive to be a possible greater threat than even Lumic's creations. And then there was his daughter who, from what she'd heard, had been chasing some sort of will-o'-the-whisp for ages before this. Still was, in a way, going by the facts evident to anyone who was observing things. An even easier assessment to make, now that certain facts had come to light and after numerous conversations with the subjects involved. Conversations that always left her very much aware after, that she'd been easily steered away from any real answers that were direct from the source. Manipulation came easy to that one, along with the fey moods and enigmatic smiles, like he was one of the same fairies from the stories her Gran had told her as a child. No, Gail thought as she caught sight of him as she stepped into the hospital. Far too mortal to be that.

Bloodied and looking like he'd been dragged through hell and probably needing to be seen by a medical professional himself, Smith-- or the Doctor, as everyone who knew him seemed wont to call him-- was leaning against the far wall of the waiting room with Rose pulled against his side, dark eyes shadowed under heavy brows pulled down in a glare. The same group of bearded guys were standing nearby, along with several harried looking Torchwood agents. Jake was talking to Rose in low, earnest tones, like he was trying to explain something. His eyes were flicking occasionally to the man beside her, while a uniformed officer she didn't recognize stood watch, looking apologetic. With a polite nod, the man whose name tag said 'Clarke' stepped forward, saying, "I tried, ma'am. You didn't tell me there was a DS already there."

"What?" Confused, Gail looked around, not seeing any one else from the police. "What do you mean? Who?"

Clarke nodded respectfully at the Doctor, looking back at her with surprise. "You don't know him? Badge said he's from the Met."

Feeling extremely confused, she stepped back, trying to find some kind of answer, when she heard Pete snort in amusement. "Psychic paper." At her questioning look, he smiled. "Don't worry about it, it's happened to the best of us."

Trying not to feel like an idiot, she decided to try for an explanation. "Psychic... paper?"

"Someone's been very naughty," was all he said, before walking over to talk urgently Rose.

Amidst all the greetings, Gail felt even more lost. What the hell was psychic paper? She dismissed the constable, knowing Clarke's time would be better spent elsewhere, where things actually made sense. There was still the Doctor."Mr Smith," she began, stepping into his line of sight. "I--"

He turned the full force of that glare on her, forcing her to step back slightly. An impatient look settled on his features then, and he made a dismissive gesture with the arm that wasn't wrapped around Rose. "Suppose you've got something to do with this, then," he accused, eyes shifting upward for a moment. "Don't you lot have something better to do with your time than this?"

"Doctor," Rose cautioned him, breaking away from her conversation with Jake.

"What?" He turned to her, eyes flashing. "If they hadn't come... barging in, none of this would've happened. Jasper wouldn't be on a gurney, getting carted off to surgery, and--"

"You'd be in possession of nearly half a tonne of illegal goods and I'd have enough reason to lock
"I could arrest you," Gail warned him.

Pulling back, he raised an eyebrow, looking her over before smirking. "Um, no, you won't. Now, back off, lady." His voice was loud enough to carry. Everyone froze before taking a hasty step back, watching the goings on with avid interest, waiting for all hell to break loose. Everyone except for Rose, that is. She just smacked his shoulder lightly. "You're gonna provoke the nice police lady," she singsonged at him through gritted teeth, a strained smile on her face.

He scowled, settling back against the wall, not looking any more tractable. "Sodding coppers." When he leaned back, the front of his coat fell open slightly, revealing something Gail just knew had to be a weapon, tucked into the waistband of his trousers.

Automatically reaching for her own weapon, not certain if everything would suddenly go horribly wrong, Gail cleared her throat against the sudden thickness there. She distantly heard Pete swearing softly behind her. "Mr Smith, I'm going to have to ask you to put the weapon down and come with me to the station for questioning," Gail said with deliberate calmness, feeling anything but calm. Inside, she was a mix of terror and elation, watching his expression go from haughty to slightly confused.

"What?" He glanced down, a look of sheepish horror coming over his face. "Oh. That."

"Doctor, what the hell?" Rose demanded, glaring at him. "You were supposed to leave the TD gun at the flat."

"When was I supposed to have done that, hmm? I was a bit busy, trying to keep Jasper from bleeding out and then borrowing the car off Crispin," he retorted testily. He waved an arm impatiently. "There's only one of me."

"Shouldn't have brought it with you in the first place," Rose grumbled, crossing her arms and glaring at him.

"Then Jasper would most certainly be dead," he returned, glaring back.

"And if you'd had any sense, we'd not have been there in the first place," Rose said hotly, voicing an undeniable truth.

"Right, and lose the best chance at finding whatever else it was Chambers told me about. There's still
something else out there that looks a lot like this and whatever it is, it's not good. If the wrong person gets ahold of it, it could be a bloody flipping disaster. But no, I'm supposed to just sit around, look at curtains, and not do anything."

"It might be better than having to stop you from trying to get yourself killed every other week!" Rose snapped, turning away and walking out of the room. While he was busy gaping like a fish and trying to come up with an answer, Gail stepped in. "Mr Smith, I'm placing you under arrest."

"Are you mad?" he questioned her with dispassionate curiosity, head cocked to the side, eyes half lidded and heavy looking. "Seriously, have you completely lost it? I could do the same thing I did not even a half hour ago and you'd never find me. What makes you think I'll just quietly come along with you now? Shouldn't you be busy cataloging your haul?"

"Hence why I'm bringing you in for questioning," Gail said firmly, not taking her eyes off of him. "You know what's there."

"Go ask Bryn Holburn. He knows more about the junk than I do and don't bother asking me to do it, cos he's not gonna talk to the likes of me," he said forcefully. "As for me, what's the point? No one actually listens to me, so I might as well bugger off back into the shadows, where, hopefully, everyone will forget I exist. You can bugger off too, while you're at it," he added rudely.

Pete hastily cleared his throat, glancing at the others in the room. "Perhaps we should move this... elsewhere, where there aren't as many civilians?"

"Ah yes, civilians. God forbid anyone should know the truth, much less actually have an idea of what's actually going on," the Doctor snorted.

The uniformed constable's hand was edging for his baton, with likely ideas in his head of taking down a dangerous subject. With a look, she silently ordered him to stand down, willing to wait a bit longer. All eyes were already on Smith, waiting to see what he'd do next. But Gail scarcely had time to blink, much less react before Pete was pushing past her and grabbing Smith by the collar. She didn't quite make out what Pete said, but she heard the other man retort, "Can't actually arrest someone for intents that aren't followed through. If I go into a shop intending to get a new shirt and I don't, doesn't mean I'm still going to have to pay for the bloody thing."

He disentangled himself from Pete's grasp easily, still holding on to the weapon. "You want it, here," he muttered, shoving it at Pete. "Try not to end the world with it, yeah?" Letting out a dismissive snort, he pushed past all of them and after Rose.

When Gail turned to make her pursuit, Pete held out a hand to stop her. "I'll--" He sighed, shaking his head. "Just wait here. I'll go after them. You're not likely to get one without the other."

Against her better judgement, she nodded, deciding to see how this development would unfold. "He's still under arrest," she called after Pete's retreating back. "Impersonating an-- oh sod it. I'm never going to get within a mile of him, am I?"

It seemed like endless corridors and too many people standing in the way. All of it seemed to dissolve into one big blur as he looked for Rose. Vaguely familiar with his surroundings, he barely noted the absence of any little shops as he stepped around yet another nurse. He thought he heard someone asking if he was alright but he pushed on, ignoring them. Had to find Rose, tell her she was
right and that he was sorry.

Perhaps he should've actually taken the time to think things through, instead of making things up on the fly. Not that he'd ever actually gone into anything with an actual plan, but still. That, or not just open his mouth and let the gob run off on him. Criminy, all this linear living was getting to him and the headache... all he wanted to do was apologize to Rose, have a nice long kip, and get away from it all after he'd heard whether Jasper was going to make it. Get away from all this madness and everyone expecting one thing or another. All expectations that he was bound to never meet. Sodding metacrisis. Lost a good number of vital organs, half his wits, and all of his handle on life there, him.

Spotting a flash of blonde hair that looked like her, he started running, only to see the person go through a door up ahead. The emergency stairs, he saw as he ducked through the door. "Rose!"

There was no answer. Shakily making his way down the stairwell with knees that threatened to buckle with every step, he didn't hear anyone behind him yet. He was thinking that was a minor miracle, grateful no one was going to panic when he stopped to lean against the rail and knelt to rest his head against his arms, trying to slow his breathing. That silly lone heart in his chest didn't seem to be pumping enough blood to his head, skipping and skittering along like some tiny, frail little vermin had lodged itself there. Didn't seem too far from the truth, actually. Light headed, he dropped to a crouch on the second landing he made it to, ignoring the chill of the metal railing against his cheek. His long legs wobbled so he sat awkwardly, his chin tipping forward against his chest as he did. Completely knackered, he couldn't care less if he was sprawled out on a some stairwell in a hospital with no shop in it. Right now, it seemed like too much effort to try going any further at the moment. A bit of a rest, just to catch his breath, before he got back up and continued on. Didn't want Rose to see him like this, it'd scare her. Last thing she needed was to be spending any more time worrying about his daft arse.

"Christ, do I need to call the medics for you as well?"

Stifling a groan, he thought about lifting his head before deciding it was too much effort. "What now, Pete? Come to finish lambasting and lecturing me, telling me again how much I've mucked up, like I don't already know?" he groaned.

Pete sighed. "God, you're difficult. C'mon, let's get you up." He reached down and started pulling the Doctor to his feet.

"I'm fine," he protested, trying to push Pete away. Feeling a bit woozy still, he managed to keep his balance for only the span of a breath before having to sit again.

Pete crouched down, looking concerned. "Not from where I'm standing, you're not."

The Doctor snorted, wanting not so much as to disappear but to have not gotten out of bed in the first place. "Just vortex sickness, I'll be fine. I've got to go after Rose," he returned, still clinging to the railing. It was helping to keep the feelings of vertigo at bay for the mo'. "Just go back to whatever you were doing. Don't bother about me."

"So, how long does this last?" Pete asked smoothly, seemingly apropos of nothing as he ignored him and calmly put out a hand and felt the Doctor's forehead.

Confused, he pulled away, head swimming at the movement. He could feel the turn of the earth... and not in a good way, either. "How long does what last?" he asked in return, slightly impatient and wanting to be anywhere but here. Surely they didn't expect him to answer questions now, did they? "An' what'd you do that for?"
"Just checking." Pete said dismissively, voice falsely light and carefree. "Anyhow, the moping, the semi-suicidal tendencies, the overwhelming urge to make everyone's life as difficult as possible...?"

That brought a whole new level of frustration to the forefront of his thoughts and more of the urge to run. Run and run, like he never had before. Sighing, he forced himself to accept his limits for the time being. "I honestly don't know how you lot do it," he admitted reluctantly. At Pete's look of confusion, he continued slowly, "I mean, the living day to day and not knowing."

Pete leaned close, peering into his eyes carefully. "Not knowing what?" he hazarded, voice low.

"Not knowing when it'll all end, is what. When the universe at large finally twigs on, snatches it all away, and then laughs in your face for having the temerity to dare be happy for once, that's what. And the waiting, it's killing me. Just bloody killing me, day after day, waiting for it all to come crashing down around my ears, like it always does." He closed his eyes and debated about trying to get up again. At some point he'd have to, couldn't stay here forever. He felt so bloody tired, too.

Pete peered at him carefully, settling back on his heels for a moment. "Any dizziness, disorientation, trouble focusing?"

Blinking away the little black spots that were dancing across his vision, he waved an impatient hand. "I'm fine, really I am." Pete looked skeptical-- both of him. Looked like two of them for a moment, there. A quick squint reassured him that there was only one. Small mercies, that. Two Petes running around, giving him orders, trying to get him to conform to their narrow minded ideas of proper behavior... that'd be a bit much. Yeah, one Pete was a bit much.

That railing certainly did look comfortable, didn't it? Wouldn't think it, but a bit of a rest here wouldn't be so bad, would it? Close the eyes for a minute or two, catch the breath, and then go find Rose. Yeah, perfect plan, that. And look, he'd actually made a plan for once. See, he could do it, adapt to this life. Just watch....
Rose decided that now was the right time to go take a breath of fresh air. Anything to just get away from things for a moment. Just one minute where she wasn't waiting for the impending disaster to strike. The Doctor seemed bound and determined to end the night in a cell, courtesy of the People's Republic of Britain, what with the way he had been acting. As if Jasper getting shot and everything else wasn't enough, she thought to herself.

Making her way back to the lift, she found herself on the ground floor. Avoiding the chaos around the casualty ward, she headed for the front doors, remembering having briefly glimpsed a coffee shop just around the corner on the way in. A nice hot cup of a caffeine-loaded beverage was just the ticket to helping her pick her spirits back up again. Plus, the way the night was already headed, she'd probably need it to keep herself awake, despite all the worrying left to do.

A chill breeze was blowing outside, making her pull her coat around herself a bit tighter. The weather hadn't been the same on this version of earth since Torchwood had gone chasing after the Cybermen, though the excessive heat had started to abate since she'd first ended trapped here. And trapped again, she was, though this time it was with him. Sometimes it made things easier, being stuck on a world that was not her own with someone to commiserate with. The way food didn't taste quite the same, the differences between the music and popular culture and all that. And other times, she half wished he wasn't here, since he even made getting the shopping in difficult. Entertaining and never boring, yes, but difficult enough when you were politely asked to get your milk and tea elsewhere.

Right now, as she ordered and handed over a couple quid for the latte, all she wanted to do was drink it and have a moment's peace. Peace before she had to go talk him out of doing something more daft than he'd already had or scaring the starch out of unsuspecting coppers again. She still couldn't believe he'd actually kept the TD gun on him like that. Him, with a weapon -- t just seemed wrong. Then again, back when he'd had big ears and less hair, she'd jumped between him and a Dalek to save its life. Hadn't had a problem wielding a gun then, had he?

_Sound familiar? That's me, when we first met._

_No shit, Sherlock_, she sarcastically thought to herself. Always stating the obvious, Doctor, always. Now, if I can get this version of you to keep from falling apart on me entirely, it'll be a miracle. Though I don't know if there's enough glue on the planet to fix something or someone that's already so broken.

The coffee was so warm, so soothing. It was something tangible to hold on to, a comfort in the midst of chaos. Instantly she could feel the heat and caffeine working its way through her body. Adding that double shot of espresso had definitely been one of her better ideas in the last twenty four hours, that much was certain. Just a few minutes with just her and a hot beverage, and not thinking about anything else. Well, she'd try. Between the Doctor, Jasper getting shot and what that man had said back at that warehouse, just before everything went all.... Nope. Just her, her coffee, and a moment's peace, that's what she was aiming for. Sighing in relief, she sipped at her latte, ignoring the looks from the other customers. There were only three or four of them, but they obviously recognized her. Probably from the bloody tabloids, she thought to herself, pasting a fake smile on when one of the teenagers came up to ask for her autograph. So much for peace, yeah?
That was something else she'd never get used to, being famous in this universe. It wasn't all bad, but the look of near awe on the girl's face was a bit embarrassing, to say the least. Sometimes, when she was faced with this sort of situation she just wanted to shout out, so the whole world would hear and understand, that she put her knickers on one leg at a time, same as anybody else. Of course, she couldn't and didn't, because even the thought of the PR headache that would cause made her cringe. Cringe because that would be too many headlines in too many dodgy papers, when all she wanted was her former anonymity. She missed that, she did. Missed that with a passion, because former shopgirls just didn't go around signing autographs back in the proper version of London and in this world, they apparently did.

Finishing her latte, she stood. A glance at the clock on the wall above the shop's entrance told her it was an ungodly hour. Like she hadn't already gathered that. It was lucky, finding a coffee shop open this late, but not surprising with the hospital nearby. Crumpling the paper cup and tossing it in the bin as she left, she braced herself to step back out into the cold. A light mist was falling as she stepped onto the pavement. No surprise there, it had been threatening rain since that afternoon. God, that seemed like such a long time ago now. More like days or weeks instead of twelve hours or so since she'd walked back to the flat with Jasper. Jasper...

Hurrying her steps, she distractedly noticed that instead of merely two Torchwood vans parked in the carpark, several other had shown up. With the vague hope that it didn't signify a calamity about to happen, she walked through the entrance. Everything seemed to be business as usual, though. The same slightly harried looking woman in reception; the same bunch of worn mothers with crying children; and the same guy with the basin, looking like he was about to sick up his toenails. In other words, exactly like it was when she'd stepped out less than a half hour ago. Well, other than Jake meeting her at the lift with an odd look on his face. And odd, as in, "I was looking for you, but I really hadn't thought to find you this soon,"-- that sort of expression.

When he said, "Pete wants you upstairs, pronto," she somehow wasn't all that surprised. All she could think was that she hoped the Doctor hadn't gotten himself into too much more trouble than he already was and that Jasper was gonna make it.

Just as he'd expected he'd have to, Pete leaned forward just in time to catch the half Time Lord as he suddenly slumped, barely in time to prevent him from tumbling headfirst down the next flight of stairs. As soon as the Doctor had handed over the TD gun, he'd known something wasn't right with him. If that wasn't proof enough, the way he'd suddenly opened up just minutes before would've clinched the deal. Using his own body weight as leverage, he tried to pull the Doctor back to lie flat, surprised how heavy the man actually was. For such a scrawny bloke, he felt like he was half a tonne as he lay limply against Pete, head lolling to the side. Right, Pete thought, time to call for backup.

Jake was the first to arrive, saying he'd already relayed the message on to Owen, with the exhortation to hurry. "Let's get him somewhere better than this," Pete suggested as they managed to get the Doctor upright.

"God, what the hell happened to him?" Jake asked, pulling the Doctor's arm around his shoulders to help steady him. Still unconscious, the Doctor just sagged there, unresponsive to Pete slapping his cheek gently.

"Said something about vortex sickness before he went all... you know, this," Pete said with a bit of exasperation. They had two short flights of stairs and another landing to negotiate. Then, on to find the closest available bed, or something of the like to rest their burden. Until then, Pete wanted to keep
the convo at a minimum while he sorted out the logistics of getting an alien hybrid somewhere safe and away from the hands of the police. Whatever was wrong with him, a stay in the local gaol wasn't likely to help matters any. Helping him half drag, half carry the Doctor, Jake arched a brow. "So, like what some people got from trying to use the Dimension Hoppers, or the Cannon after that?"

"I don't know," Pete admitted. "But that head injury he had from just a week ago probably has a part in it."

Jake snorted. "Thought they were a bit hardier than this, Time Lords. Rose always talked about him like he could walk on water, or near enough to so it didn't matter."

"If we could only be so lucky," he muttered ironically to himself.

Using his authority as head of Torchwood and his reputation as the billionaire founder of Vitex, Pete managed to commandeer an unused room with a bed, instead of on one of the nearby wards. Jake was swiftly dispatched to find Rose, in hopes that she'd be able to shed some light on what was going on. Finding a chair in the corner of the room, he pulled it over to the bedside and sat down to wait. He'd wait the few remaining hours until dawn if he had to, or even longer if need be. Either way, when the Doctor woke up, they were going to have a nice, long chat. Or else.

But seeing as there was naught else to do in the meantime besides wait and just staring at the lino or the ceiling tiles was likely to make him fall asleep himself, Pete took a few moments to take a precaution or two. Things that didn't take long and would hopefully prevent things such as scarpering, obfuscation and avoidance in general. Of course, if he'd had his druthers, this all would've happened at a more reasonable hour, but life rarely seemed to work that way. Chaos didn't only descend when it wouldn't interrupt one's teatime and alien invaders didn't call ahead to schedule in an appointment for the next Apocalypse, after all. Though he imagined the universe would be a much tidier place if they did do so.

Surprisingly, it wasn't a long wait. Minutes had barely passed when Pete noticed the slight change in his breathing pattern. A drawing together of brows, hinting at a wince, then a slight gasp as the Doctor regained consciousness. There was a hint of a wobble as he sat up, right hand going up to rub at his head as if it was tender. "Anyone catch the number of that lorry?" he said with a groan. "Blimey, my head is killing me."

"Thank you, Pete." Catching sight of Pete leaning forward, he momentarily froze before turning his head to acknowledge him with a raised brow and the usual daftly giddy smile. "Hello, Pete."

He could have sworn after that it was like watching someone raise the barricades, all signs of discomfort and exhaustion wiped away with a mask of bland, slightly aloof geniality. With a hint of condescending annoyance for added measure, of course. "Doctor," he replied blandly, waiting for the full realization of the particulars of the situation to finally dawn on him.

"I've gotta go," the Doctor muttered, throwing his legs over the side of the bed and making as if to depart hurriedly. It was then that he finally noticed the pertinent detail that had formerly escaped him. "Pete --" he grated warningly, eyes flashing hotly, all hints of humor vanishing.

"Funny thing," Pete began jovially, smiling like butter wouldn't melt, "fate would have it that the closest floor to where you decided to keel over just happened to be this one: the mental ward. Fitting isn't it? Wouldn't take much to convince anyone you're a nutter. Not much at all, I reckon. Just think if the nurses happened to get the paperwork mixed up and accidentally sectioned the wrong man. What a bleeding shame, right?"

Glaring at the restraint that held his left wrist to the side of the bed, the Doctor pulled at it ineffectively before turning the same burning gaze to Pete. "Except there's no paperwork," he
declared with a disgusted curl of his lip. "As far as all the formalities and legalities are concerned, I
don't exist."

"Oh, but I could arrange it," Pete said cheerfully, noting the brief flash of fear in those dark eyes before it disappeared. Interesting, he thought. The mask does slip far more often then I'd thought it would. He then wondered what actually lay beneath. "Wouldn't take much."

"You wouldn't dare," the Doctor said flatly in a low voice. The narrowing of his eyes and the tilt of his head were the only giveaways that he wasn't entirely confident in his assertion.

"You'd be absolutely amazed what one can pull off, being one of the richest people in Britain to have survived the Cyber Wars with their fortune intact," Pete returned in a plummy tone, keeping his voice even and flashing a charming smile. "Buys a lot of cooperation, all that lolly. Especially with the current economy."

And there it was. From the superior disdain to the sudden blanching and tightening around the mouth, he was finally getting the point across. Using Machiavellian tactics like this wasn't something Pete was actually fond of doing, but sometimes it was necessary to take the gloves off. A change in tactics was sometimes necessary. Last time he'd attempted it, it had been a bluff; this time, not so much. If he had to confine him somewhere, he would, for reasons of safety and possibly the sanity of everyone around this volatile man. Explaining it all to Rose, well, that would be another matter entirely. He'd originally thought to be a bit gentler with the man, considering his possible medical issues, but with eyes that focused, no further signs of having problems and at least enough gumption to attempt fleeing a difficult situation, he decided to chance it. Why not? If this could help cut down through the nonsense and get him something so he could get a handle on this, so be it. Forewarned was prepared and that beat dealing with the fallout after, like had been happening all along since Rose had brought this difficult being back with her from the other world. It seemed, for a moment, like barely minutes had passed since that first time he'd told an arrogant alien that his word wasn't law on this planet. Almost no time at all, even.

He watched as those shoulders sagged, the Doctor's head drooped and all the fight in him just seemed to wither away. "What do you want, Pete?" the Doctor said on a sigh, using his free hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. He sounded exhausted, with no sign of hostility or snark in his voice. When he looked up his eyes were wary, but not as shuttered and distant as they usually were. There was still a bit of caginess, thought. Something that Pete couldn't quite lay a finger on, much less define if he'd been asked to name what he saw there. A certain something that said he wasn't quite done breaking down all those many walls.

"Just some answers to questions I have, firstly," Pete said softly. He had wanted to push back, show he meant business, not break the man entirely. He just wanted the bloody truth for once, instead of dancing around the issues.

The Doctor swallowed nervously, but nodded. "Go on, then."

Pete drew a breath before starting, running through a list he'd had in his head for awhile. "How did you get involved with Bryn Holburn?"

"Hired me to wire in a security system for him," the Doctor replied matter-of-factly.

Pete nodded, accepting that answer. "Where did you find out about that... temporal distortion gun in the first place?"

"From him."
Pete gave him a skeptical look. "He just told you? Doesn't seem the sort."

"Not as such," the Doctor admitted. "Between the anomalies in that sewer, the blob currently residing in your cellar, and the CCTV footage that copper showed me, I made the connections."

"And Bryn comes into it... how? Other than the blob coming out of his warehouse..."

The Doctor closed his eyes, as if shielding himself. "Him and his brother... he'd get the stuff in. Miles would hock it for him. With Miles dead and all, we thought we'd get in on it, take over the gap in the distribution chain."

Pete could see that. Made a certain sense, if you weren't in the least concerned about the safety of getting involved in criminal enterprises. "Looking for the other one, I suppose." At the Doctor's look of surprise, he said archly, "I, for one, do actually listen."

"Good on you, mate," the Doctor said in a deadpan tone that just barely skirted the borders of sarcasm. He sagged back against the bed, stretching out, but holding himself stiffly without relaxing fully. The walls were rising once more. Anyone with eyes in their head could've seen that.

Ignoring that, Pete continued. "And my guess is that Dougal Chambers is the one that told you about the second one's existence, right?" All he got was a wordless nod for a reply. "And what makes you think he wasn't just telling you porkies?" This time, a shrug. "So you just rushed in there, deciding to poke around to see what you could stir up, with nary a thought that it might come back to bite you in the arse?"

The Doctor chuckled drily, not looking away from his current intent study of the ceiling over his head. "Did it for nine hundred years, why break from tradition?" he said glibly, the momentary lapse in his usual attitude disappearing as quickly as it had come on.

Leaning back in his seat again, Pete huffed at this, nearly growling when he reminded him pointedly, "With no thought to the risks involved, either."

"Meh, you could get killed crossing the street." The Doctor gave a dismissive half shrug, as if they were just discussing something as unimportant as the last footie match on telly.

"Doesn't mean you stand in the middle of the M1 waiting for the first bus to come along," Pete snapped. "And for something you don't even know exists," he muttered in disgust.

The Doctor turned his head to regard Pete icily, jaw clinched, fairly spitting out the words when he said, "What'm I supposed to do, just wait for it to happen? Wait for the end of the world while eating my beans on toast?"

"No. You tell someone, someone whose job it actually is to be mucking about in all this, and let them handle it!" All those times he'd been tempted to throttle the obstinate alien came back with a vengeance. For someone so clever, he really could be astoundingly thick sometimes. "You don't just go in playing the Lone Ranger, or whatever it was you thought you were up to."

The Doctor's brows drew down in contemplation as he said musingly, "Wonder if that makes Rose Tonto, then." He shrugged before becoming serious again, ignoring Pete's furious demeanour at his refusal to take anything seriously. He gave a tight and very unfriendly grin as he said, "You forget who and what I am, Pete Tyler."

"Yeah? Could've fooled me, 'cos all I see is someone who's on the verge of falling apart and taking everything around down with him," Pete retorted, struggling to keep his voice even. "And I'm not going to let that happen, so bloody well shape up." Seeing the sulky look and the determined set of
those lips, he sighed. "For God's sake, man, look at yourself. I know this isn't the life you're used to, but still. All this... thrashing about and daring fate, it's only hurting yourself and the people who love you. Did you ever stop to think what it'd do to Rose if something happened to you?" That apparently got through more than anything, as the last vestiges of anger faded away. "All of us humans, we go through life knowing it all could end tomorrow. Most of us, we take that knowledge and try to make the most of what time we've got," he continued softly. "I can't claim to know what it's like, going from having a life span like you had to just this, but please, just try." Pete chanced a halfhearted smirk. "And who knows, some of us might actually like having you around. When you're not being a complete arse, that is."

There was a knock at the door then. "Ah, just in time." Pete rose, stretching nonchalantly and pretending to ignore the way the other person in the room looked ready to bolt all over again. Noticing the Doctor's look of distrust, he said, "It's just Owen. Come to give you a look over, make sure you're not going to drop from an apoplexy or something of the like."

The thought of getting out of this place and heading home to bed were very appealing at the moment. Some rest, a hot shower to wash away the aches of a long day and a decent meal would be brilliant. Thing was, he still had to check the preliminary reports on the haul at the warehouse and deal with the paperwork regarding the arrests of Bryn Holburn and his associates. That wasn't even getting into getting one extremely enthusiastic and thorough DI to give them some space, though he'd be sharing the information he'd just gained. As he exited the room, he heard the Doctor call out from behind him, "Wait, what happens next?"

Turning, Pete gave him a considering look, declaring tiredly, "That depends entirely on you."

Hesitating, the Doctor seemed to be doing some sort of mental calculations. "And that is...?" he hazarded.

Pete smiled. "I'm sure you can suss it out. You're clever like that, you are." He decided to leave it there for now. Let the man stew over it a bit. A little self examination wouldn't hurt anyone. Might even do him wonders, in fact.

Corridor after corridor, this place was like a bloody maze. Worse than the hospital on New Earth, even. She'd already had a time of it since Jake had met her by the lift. It seemed like he'd taken her down every back route in the place, before she'd asked him if he'd forgotten where he'd left them. They were in an area with no people around around. Rose didn't have any idea where they were, just that she'd seen a sign for the radiology department a few turns back and one floor down and another for housekeeping on the last one. If she breathed in deep, she could smell the barest hints of laundry soap in the air.

"I'm not lost," Jake retorted defensively, stopping to lean against the wall by a fire extinguisher. "Just thought you'd like to take a bit of a walkabout first."

Rose rolled her eyes at that, coming up next to him to stand with her arms crossed over her chest. She wasn't sure what was going on, because no one had said, but she wasn't sure she liked where this seemed to be going. "Because three AM is just the perfect time for gawking, yeah?"

Jake smirked briefly before looking a bit discomfited. "Just... if he's not awake yet, Owen will probably be looking him over and if he is..." He shrugged. "You know. Think the boss was planning to have some words with him, is all. Probably be better if..."
"I wasn't there?" Rose filled in, knowing what he meant. Sighing, she tipped her head back, puffing out a breath to blow a lock of hair that had fallen in her eyes. When that didn't work, she impatiently tucked it back behind her ear with a tense hand. "So how bad is it?"

Jake eyed her steadily, sounding uncertain. "Nothing broken, far as I could tell. No blood, neither."

Rose nodded. "'S good. At least he's not... and Pete? He's not gonna... is he?"

Jake groaned, looking like he'd rather be elsewhere, but he answered her finally. "Dunno."

"Really, I don't. Pete wanted a chance to talk to him and I thought I'd take the chance to catch up with you while I can."

Rose narrowed her eyes at him but nodded, willing to see where this was going before she said something that might be too hasty. "Yeah?"

Jake smiled, looking relieved that she hasn't stormed off in a huff yet. "It's just... we never see you around anymore. Ever since you came back from over there, you've been off with him."

"Jake," Rose sighed, shaking her head. This was exactly what she'd wanted to avoid, all the questions and people fussing.

He fidgeted a bit before saying, "I know you went looking for him and I know some of the stuff you went through, going from world to world like you did, but now you don't even go down to the pub or anything or hang out with your mates. I know all you did, trying to find him, but is that really what you wanted, back when you were out looking?"

"There was a bit more to it than that," Rose said archly, looking away. "Stars going out and all that tosh."

Jake huffed, sounding a bit put out as he said sarcastically, "I'd forgotten, ta. Three whole years of my life, half a dozen mates from work killed in action-- all must've slipped my mind." Sobering, he added, "We worry, you know. Don't know if you two are just gonna up and disappear and we'll never see you again."

Softening, Rose turned back, giving him a tentative grin. "I'm not goin' anywhere yet, you daftie. The TARDIS isn't near ready yet and you've seen how well he takes to travelling with one of these."

She tapped at the vortex manipulator that was still on her wrist.

Jake studied it with curiosity. "Can't believe he actually nicked that from the archives."

"Well, at the time, he had good reason to. It's come in handy since." Rose shuddered, remembering the first time, with Ferguson's cold dead eyes boring into her. "Probably would've been dead now, if not for this thing."

Jake shook his head in amusement. "Trouble magnet, that one."

Rose couldn't help but chuckle at that. "You have no idea."

"So, is it as bad a go as people have said?" He nodded toward the wristband, lightening up from his earlier remarks.

"Worse, actually. Makes the first runs with the Dimension Cannon that we did look like a Sunday picnic with ice cream and biscuits for all."

Jake let out a low whistle, suitably impressed. "Cor, wouldn't want to try that one, myself. Can't see
how that Time Agent we confiscated that from did it then."

"Must get used to it, I suppose." Rose remembered that case well. The Time Agent had turned up not long after she'd gotten to Pete's world. Just out of the blue, the bloke had turned up in Regents Park with some nasty injuries and a pack full of even nastier contraband. Radiation canisters, Janus thorns and bottles full of the concentrated poison from the Judas tree. He'd also been a piece of work, at that. Last she knew, he was still being held at the Torchwood 4 holding facilities on the Isle of Man.

"So," she began hesitantly, trusting Jake to tell her the truth, no matter how bad it might end up being, "has Dad said anything about making arrangements for any trips to the land of the Manx lately?"

Pushing away from the wall, Jake began walking again. A few more turns and they were at another set of lifts. Despite the obvious delay in answering, he knew exactly what she meant, too, and didn't try to change the subject, finally saying once they were in the lift going up, "Pete's not said anything about transporting anyone to the Gulags, but he was pretty cross. Not that I think he would do it, just because, and well that's part of why I decided to take the long way around."

Reassured and even more suspicious, Rose squinted at him, wondering what he was on about. "You keep talking, but you're not making any sense," she said warningly. As the lift doors slid open and they stepped out, the sign for the particular ward they'd reached was revealed, her mind began spinning with a hundred different scenarios, none of them good. She whirled on her friend, glaring at him. "Jake-"

"It was the nearest bed we could find!" he said by way of excuse, hands held out defensively. "Have you ever tried carrying that git up a couple sets of stairs? Tell you what, he's not half heavy, that one."

Remembering when her and Mickey had done just that-- oh such a long time ago it seemed-- Rose decided to let it go for now. She had to suppose they'd done their best at the time, even if they'd left the Doctor on the nut ward. And hopefully, she thought as an orderly unlocked the door to the ward, they'd be so kind as to let the Doctor back out again after. Though, judging by the grumbling from the orderly and the looks they got from the nurses as they passed, they'd probably just rather be shut of them all instead.

Of all the things to happen, here he was, tied to a bed in a hospital in some backwards little planet. Well, it was only the one arm and it wouldn't take much to undo the buckle. Still, could be worse. At least it wasn't a mind probe, Villoxian medical scanner, or a Dalek containment field. He'd seen far worse than this, far worse. But that wasn't the point. It was the principle of it all. Really, who goes around ambushing helpless Time Lords and then shackles them to the nearest cot? Well, Pete Tyler for one, but seriously, who did that? Though, he had to admit he could see the man's side of things, as uncomfortable as it was to even acknowledge it inside his own thoughts. Course, it'd take the combined efforts of the Sisterhood of Karn and a hundred million Ogrons to get him to admit it, even if the man was aggravatingly right. Bloody well hated that, he did. To make things worse, that horrid Torchwood medic was poking and prodding at him again.

"Any discomfort?" Owen asked brusquely, shining a light in his eyes. He'd already put one of those blood pressure cuffs on him and pumped it up until his fingers were halfway to numb. Then the man had pulled out what had to have been the coldest stethoscope on in the galaxy and tormented him with that, sticking it against his chest without so much as a by-your-leave. The utter cheek of it!
Trying to pull away, eyes half closed against the blinding illumination, the Doctor snarked, "Only from the light that some donut keeps shining in my eyes."

Owen was completely unruffled. "Any headache?"

"Only you," the Doctor replied, trying again to pull away from the hands that were now rudely prodding at his skull. "Oi, watch the hair, you plonker. Took me ages to get it like that, it did."

Owen swatted at his hands, scowling at him. "Do you have to be so bloody difficult?"

With a sniff, he retorted. "I like alliteration. Doctor, difficult, dashing... you get the point."

"Right," Owen drawled, rolling his eyes. He turned away, busily scribbling something on the folder he had brought in with him. Curious, the Doctor forgot he was supposed to be intractable. "What's that?"

Owen didn't even look up. "Just a file," he replied shortly, without even pausing with his note taking.

Putting on his most coy and innocent expression, he tried again to blag some info. "On what?"

Owen grumbled a bit, but answered, "Just some twat who doesn't have the sense to rest when, by all rights, they should've been brain dead just a week ago."

Dismissing that, the Doctor merely replied with satisfaction, "Superior biology wins the day again."

"Superior biology, my arse," Owen retorted, wheeling around to stare down at his recalcitrant patient. "Sure, you should be dead right now, and don't ask me why you're not, because I don't bloody well know, but you're not effing invincible."

Why did people have to point out the obvious? And Owen obviously wasn't done, either. He shook his head in seeming wonderment as he said, "Seriously, if not dead, then you should be in a persistent vegetative state. And somehow, you thought it would be such a lovely idea to go pushing your luck again."

Wanting to avoid yet another lecture, the Doctor nodded. It wasn't anything he hadn't already sorted out for himself, he thought, wincing at the worsening of the dull ache in behind his eyes. However, Owen was sharp enough to notice. He smirked. "You can lie all you like, but I know it's still bothering you." He turned away, made a couple more notes and started to walk away. Thinking better of it, he stopped and looked back. "Oh, and that friend of yours? Heard tell he's still in surgery, but they're expecting him make it, they said."

With that question answered, the Doctor could relax a bit. A definite relief, that. "Thanks," he mumbled, grateful someone was going to keep him apprised of Jasper's wellbeing.

"Probably won't be doing much with that arm for awhile, but at least he's keeping it," Owen added before he left.

Sitting up again and reaching for the buckle on the strap that had kept him there this long, the Doctor set about getting himself free again. Once he'd released it, he stood up cautiously, swallowing past the sudden dizziness and nausea. Yeah, sleeping this off seemed like a good idea suddenly. Funny, who'd have thought it, him wanting sleep. Ha, one measly little meta-crisis and he was stuck wasting a third of his life sleeping, just like all the silly little humans did. A quick pat to check the contents of his pockets revealed-- much to his surprise-- that Pete hadn't taken the opportunity to divest him of his sonic this time. Awfully trusting, he thought with a smirk. He was carefully walking to the doorway when Owen ducked back in briefly. "And I completely forgot. You're supposed to go
home and rest. Pete's orders. And he said that if your name pops up in so much as a letter to someone's maiden aunt, he's gonna have your arse in a sling. So cheers, mate!"

Surprisingly, other than a nurse who hurried by, giving him a baleful look as she did, there wasn't anyone around. No big, beefy guards to haul him away to an undisclosed location, no coppers with handcuffs at ready, no one. Kind of disappointing, really. Just one nurse who'd looked at him as if he'd shit in her flowerbed or something. And as for Pete and his little minions, what, was that all there was? Just 'go home, you're not needed'? That was just... belittling, really. And sad. Like kicking puppies, pears in your jam, and an entire planet without jelly babies or cricket levels of sad. Rather depressing, really. Just go home, have a good life, and bugger off, then. Right.

The Doctor continued to walk onward. Seeing there was no one to see him do it, he reached out a hand to touch the wall, steadying himself. Letting it trail along the plaster, he told himself it didn't matter when he wasn't trying to fool anyone. No one to impress? What's the do, he'd make it. Always had done before, wouldn't make today any different. Blimey, he couldn't even remember what day it was. That was the time sense gone, and wasn't that wizard. Next he'd be having to buy a calendar and a watch. Bugger it, what did all those meaningless assigning names to particular days mean, anyway? Just another human convention. I laugh in the face of Thursdays, ha! You don't own me, Sunday afternoons, so sod off. And if you think you're special Monday morning, you are so wrong.

It was just him in that long corridor lined with closed doors, harsh lighting overhead and shiny lino beneath his feet. Typical hospital, this. Centuries from now, on a hundred thousand different worlds scattered across a myriad of different galaxies, that much wouldn't changed. That, the reek of disinfectant cleaners, and the overwhelming air you got in a place full of sick people. Places like this were only second to bus stops for the number of lost souls they contained. And then Rose appeared at the end of the hall and it was like the sun had come out from behind a cloud. Well, metaphorically speaking, that is. She might've been pink and yellow, but she didn't actually cast light upon the planetary bodies orbiting her, nor actually have such. Well, other than him. She did light up his world, at least.
Chapter 53

Despite the locked ward and curious, questioning looks from the nurses, they got back to the lift easily. Surprisingly, it was done with little fuss from anyone, staff or — oddly — the Doctor. Biggest surprise, that. It ended up being simpler than she'd thought it would be, getting the Doctor back to Hackney safely without argument or arrest. For all he'd looked ready to drop when she'd first seen him standing in that hall, he'd rallied a bit on the way down in the lift. Rallied enough for there to be a few tense moments when he'd stopped the lift and headed back to the waiting room, only to be wordlessly ushered back to the lift by Pete.

"Get him out of here," Pete had told her, ignoring the Doctor's murmured protests. "Before he does anything to change my mind. Take him home and keep him there."

"But—" she'd started, looking beyond him to where she could see Percy and Edgar standing hunched by the wall, their eyes searching for someone with any news. Maisie had shown up and was standing next to Edgar, talking to him in a low voice that didn't carry to where she was standing. Pete had forestalled her protests with, "Someone will be in touch if there's anything to report on your friend's condition." He gave her a meaningful look before turning away stiffly. Obviously, whatever had gone on had led to this. Whatever this was, exactly. She didn't know and she wasn't about to question things too closely. Might as well go with it, yeah?

Rose had nodded, faking cheer as she cajoled the Doctor back to leaving. He'd argued a bit, but that was to be expected. They'd passed the DI down in the lobby on the way out, pretending to ignore the thinly veiled looks of hostility as they did. She'd driven them back to Hackney, keeping an eye on him as she drove. Oddly enough, he was quiet the whole way, mostly staring out the window with an exhausted look leaning back against the seat with his eyes closed.

The sky was just beginning to lighten towards the coming dawn when they left the auto parked in front of Crispin's building and walked back to their own. He'd walked slowly, stumbling once over a kerb, but brushed off her offer of assistance, saying he was alright. She wasn't sure if he was or not, but he seemed to be handling the aftereffects of vortex travel better than the last time. No bloody nose or prolonged state of unconsciousness, at least.

The Doctor had paused in front of the garage, eyes shadowed and expression noticeably blank. He'd stood there for a long moment, shoulders slumped and hands loose by his sides, before he let her lead him upstairs. Once upstairs, he'd set the locks, checked the TARDIS coral over and double checked the perception filter on the door again, before starting to tinker on some gizmo he had left scattered in pieces on the sofa. With reassurances that she would have her mobile on in case anybody rang about Jasper, Rose had finally convinced him to go get some rest.

He'd looked awful by then, with his hair mostly flattened against his head, his stubble rapidly progressing towards being a full beard and there was still blood on his clothes from earlier. Wordlessly, he'd stripped to just his pants, leaving his clothes in a pile on the floor as he climbed under the duvet. Even if it was tempting to do the same, Rose forced herself to take a shower and change into sleepwear first. She was yawning as she fought with the temperamental plumbing in the shower, wincing at the loud groaning in the pipes. That was one thing she missed about her old flat in Wapping: the superior plumbing. Though she couldn't fault the Doctor not being overly fond of that posh place, with the disapproving doorman and stuck up neighbors. All the years in Pete's World hadn't made her any more used to that lifestyle and sometimes she missed life on the estate. Not the petty crime and the struggle for enough money to pay the bills, she didn't miss that at all, just the familiarity of her old neighborhood. She'd gone there once, shortly after getting here, went for a look
at this universe’s version of the Powell Estates.

Sadly, Peckham hadn’t fared so well in the aftermath of the Cyber war and the entire block of flats had stood silent and empty. Been there and never went back, other than in the nightmares that plagued her for months after. Those had been common, dreams of stepping out of the TARDIS into the empty courtyard, an errant breeze blowing a few scattered bits of paper about and no one to be seen anywhere. When she’d turn back, the TARDIS would be gone, and when she’d run for the stairwell and up to her floor, calling out for him, her mum, anyone, everything remained hauntingly empty, except for a whisper on the breeze. Him— calling her name, with increasing desperation. All she’d hear were her own trainers slapping against the concrete, his voice, and the incessant wind outside, even inside her old flat. That was the worst part, that place that had masqueraded as her former home, where once she’d step through the doors everything looked like that white wall. Then she’d run and everything would turn into that wall again, one big, white nothingness, everywhere she looked and the sound of him, calling her name. But that was then and this was now; those dreams hadn’t returned since the second time in Norway.

By the time she’d emerged from the loo, hair still damp and clad in flannel jimjams, he was already asleep. Hadn’t even stirred when she crawled in bed beside him and wrestled away a share of the blanket for herself. That was something she’d learned in the last few months, that he had a tendency to wrap himself in the duvet like a mummy. Not consciously and not if she was already in bed with him, but if she got out of bed to use the loo or got into bed after he was asleep, then the tug of war ensued after. That is, if he wasn’t having a nightmare and had kicked all the covers onto the floor. It was almost amusing, how much of a sound sleeper he was, for someone who used to take the piss for humans sleeping so much.

Now she was still awake almost two hours later, still too wound up to sleep. Exhaustion only counted for so much when her thoughts wouldn’t settle. For the last hour she’d watched him sleep, idly running through the differences between then and now, him and Him. It was easy to forget at times that there was another one of him out there, wandering the universe alone. All she could hope was that he’d found someone, found a hand to hold, anything, even if it wasn’t her. That was the hardest part about all this, that he hadn’t let him keep her promise to stay with him forever. Also the most confusing part, because in a way, he had. As for the one who was softly snoring next to her and curled on his side facing her, she often wondered. Was it the being stranded here that left him so wrong footed and miserable or was it just too much to adjust to? This sort of life, chaining someone like him to schedules and routines, it just didn’t work, didn’t fit. He didn’t fit.

Then again, it hadn’t even been six months and even she hadn’t gotten used to him being here. It still caught her unawares sometimes, waking up in a moment of confusion when she thought she had accidentally slept in and missed her jump. The Dimension Cannon had taken up so much of her life and waking up with him burrowed into her side or sprawled out on her bed was just... surreal. Surreal, but in a good way, other than the constant clutter he left everywhere and the fact that neither one of them had any idea what they were doing.

Biding their time, she supposed; waiting for the TARDIS coral to finish, so they could go back to the life of constant running and defending the defenceless. Running was all he really knew, everything he was was made for that. From his frenetic energy to his lean build and restless nature, nothing about him was built for this sort of life. And once the TARDIS was ready, what then? Travelling constantly until they both got too old for it? Going from planet to planet, sorting out problems until one day they couldn’t run fast enough? She didn’t know and didn’t want to think about all that yet. It seemed too practical, too mundane, too... everything, and all she wanted was to have a life with him, one that they’d be happy with. Even if it meant...

Settling down, it wouldn’t be so bad, just it obviously wasn’t enough for him. This world, a life like
this, how could it be enough, when he was used to so much more? All those centuries spent wandering freely as a traveller in the fourth dimension would always outweigh the time spent earthbound, it had to. Something in between would be good, but he didn't seem one for half measures. When she tried to picture the future, she couldn't, not beyond a shapeless blur with a lot of running and strange new sights to marvel at. Having kids.... well, he hadn't said exactly, had mostly seemed to avoid that topic like so many others, but still. Not that she was even sure if she wanted any, this life wasn't really made for them either and she didn't even want to think about how he'd handle that. It'd probably send him into a worse panic and she didn't even want to contemplate the emotional fallout from having to deal with that and morning sickness.

Hence why she regularly sent thanks to the person who'd invented the pill. One part Time Lord was enough to deal with, more would be a bit much, even if she sometimes did wonder. What would having his children be like? Would they look like him or her or a mix of both of them? His hair and her mouth, possibly, or God knows, maybe a combination of any of his previous incarnations, even. Just hope none of them got his dress sense, or they'd be picked on unmercifully at school, poor mites. Then again, it probably was impossible, having kids. He'd once mentioned that the Time Lords had been sterile, but it had only been said in passing and of course he hadn't elaborated, only said he wasn't completely sure what the metacrisis had done to his genetics. That had changed enough things, as it was.

He rolled over in his sleep, snuffling into the pillow softly as he settled himself onto his stomach, right hand resting on the pillow by his head. With a yawn, Rose reached out a hand, gently twining her fingers with his, smiling to herself as she noticed which hand it was. That hand still felt different, was always slightly cooler than the rest of him and still had that line around his wrist, like a scar. And that wasn't the least of it. His body temperature still ran lower than a normal human, that much she knew; even if he frequently complained about being so bloody hot now. Like living in a sauna, he'd said once, when he was in a sort of sharing mood. One more thing for him to stack up against the many differences and things that were just plain wrong. So much and yet, not enough — for him, at least. Even if he had promised to stay, not to leave her, sometimes she wondered if it would be kinder to let him go.

It felt like noon was close on when he woke. For a moment, he contemplated staying in bed, but told himself he couldn't. Sleeping a quarter of his remaining life away was one thing, having lie-ins was something else entirely. Next thing, he'd be wearing track suits, betting on the ponies and giving up on life entirely and he wasn't ready to do that yet. Groaning, he sat up, noting that his headache was gone. Though the ghost of it seemed to be hovering at the edges of his awareness, reminding him not to push his luck. Right, pushing his luck — like everyone seemed all too happy to tell him he was. Rose was still sleeping peacefully when he slipped out of bed, shuffling off to the loo after he'd checked her mobile to see if anyone had called. No one had, and he wasn't sure if that was worrying or a relief. Still, could be worse. At least Jasper was probably still in the land of the living and Pete hadn't called to give him a proper bollocking. Yet.

Catching his reflection in the mirror, he winced. Rose was right — he could do with a shave, before he got picked up for vagrancy. Bad enough he stood a chance of getting picked up for just doing what he always had done. Apparently, finding trouble and diving in head first was frowned upon here. Obsessed with safety, the lot of them. Mulling over the events of the previous night, he showered before shaving, squinting at a suspicious looking hair. For a moment he'd thought it was the first grey hair of his impending decrepitude, but it was just a trick of the light. What a relief that was. Nine hundred and change or no, getting grey hair already... that would just be rubbish. He'd
done that before but the implications then were something else entirely compared to the now. Once that started, next would be the zimmer frames, low sodium diets, blood pressure medicine and getting packed off to a pensioner's home. Bloody hell, would he have to worry about that someday? Sod it, no. If he had to, he'd pack his zimmer frame and hobble to the nearest cash point and sonic it. With luck, Pete would’ve retired by then and wouldn't make such a fuss over it. And Rose... well, hopefully she'd be up for a life of (sedate) adventures through geriatrics. He wondered if she liked oatmeal enough to eat it with him when that was all he was allowed.

And why was he even contemplating all this depressing shite? Bah! Mentally chiding himself, he toweled himself dry and threw on a clean pair of pants and a clean t-shirt, not bothering with trousers yet. The clothes from yesterday he binned on the way to the kitchen. Those stains weren't coming out and he didn't want that particular reminder hanging about, staring him in the face accusingly. He could wallow in guilt without the added assistance from that, ta.

He filled the kettle, plugged it in, and went back to the bedroom. Rose was still sleeping, buried under the bedding, with just a few strands of blonde hair escaping from the mess of duvet and pillows. On the bedside table, however, was her mobile. He quickly grabbed it, careful not to disturb her. Waking Rose, after everything else, wouldn't be the best of ideas. It wasn't the best of ways to start the day, even under normal circumstances when he hadn't nearly managed to get them all killed less than twelve hours before. After he fixed his cuppa with plenty of sugar, he smeared jam on a couple slices of bread and wandered off to the lounge to settle himself on the sofa.

Tea in one hand, he held the mobile in the other, wracking his brain as he tried to recall if he'd ever seen the number for the hospital posted anywhere. And that would be a no, though, he supposed he could get ahold of them if he called 999. Somehow, he didn't think that would be much help, since he vaguely remembered something about it being illegal to ring up emergency services without an actual emergency. Rose had Pete's number in her contacts, but calling Pete was probably on the list of bad ideas as well. He could call Jackie... no, just no. Not even going to think about it. Best case scenario, she'd start nattering and asking him a lot of really uncomfortable questions. Best to avoid that risk, too. There was one other possibility for someone that might know the number he could reach Hope Hospital at, though.

"Gramps!" he greeted, once the line on the other end picked up. Wincing, he corrected himself, "I mean, Wilf. Er, how are you?"

It was slightly disturbing, how easily it was to just start blogging away on the phone, tucking it between chin and shoulder as he picked up some wires and started splicing them together as he chatted away idly. Apparently Sylvia still wasn't letting Wilf have his morning fry-up and the oatmeal was getting tiresome and then there were the usual inquiries about when he was coming round for a visit before he remembered why he'd actually called. He pointedly didn't mention the goings on from last night, not wanting the fuss. Even if he was waiting for the reprisals and lectures, he didn't want to initiate it any earlier than would be. "Listen, you wouldn't happen to have a telephone directory handy, would you?" Wilf gave him the number after a moment. "Thanks!" he said before ringing off.

Then he called the hospital and they wouldn't bloody tell him anything. "Are you family?" asked the lady on the switchboard, sounding bored.

"No, he's my friend," he explained patiently.

She didn't sound even slightly interested. "Sorry, Sir, patient confidentiality."

"Look," he said soothingly, trying to sound convincing, "he got shot last night and was in surgery last I knew—"
"Sir, I can't divulge anything. It's a matter of patient confidentiality," she interrupted flatly.

"I just want to know if he's still alive!" he sputtered, frustrated.

"Sorry, patient confidentiality," she intoned, sounding not in the least bit sympathetic, much less sorry, as she rang off abruptly.

With a groan, he let his head fall back against the sofa, cursing into dead air. He almost tossed the mobile across the room before he remembered that it wasn't his and Rose wouldn't be exactly chuffed with him if he broke it. Closing it carefully, he set it aside with a glare, muttering to himself. Not that it was the phone's fault, but everything seemed to be set against him. So far, it was turning out to be a lovely day, wasn't it?

That was it, then. Only one thing to do, really. Perhaps someone in the neighborhood had a telephone directory lying around and could pretend to be a relative, that or maybe the good ol' grapevine was still working properly. Gossip was a wonderful thing to listen to to find out what was going on, right? Someone might have heard something by now. Quietly he returned to the bedroom, pulling on a pair of jeans and impatiently shoving his feet into his chucks. Rose was still asleep, a muffled snort his only answer when he cautiously called her name. No help for it then, he told himself, no other way about it at all. With a fond smile he quickly scribbled a note, hoping that would be enough to stay her wrath. Even if she was likely to be a bit cross with him, surely she'd understand, wouldn't she?

Surprisingly — or not so surprisingly, since it usually took something like a spaceship crashing into Big Ben to catch people's attention and even then, they'd shrug it off and call it a mass hallucination or a stonking great hoax — the rest of the world was doing it's own thing. The sun was out, though there was a hint of something in the air that said it wouldn't be for long, and Mrs Singh merely eyed him curiously before nodding a greeting as they passed each other in the hall. Unfortunately, she hadn't heard anything and it was too much to explain when they were both in a rush. No news bulletin then, or headlines in the papers. But then, the Singhs weren't much for keeping up with the news beyond what effected them directly. Such insular lives some people led, not bothering unless it was their family or friends involved. Considering it could end up effecting them all, or at least end up with consequences for the entire neighborhood if the coppers decided to come down hard on them for the whole smuggling thing. After all, he had sorta told Pete they'd done it before and had sorta hinted at involvement in other things of dubious nature. That gob was gonna be the end of them if Pete passed that information along to that bloody DI. Foot, meet mouth, you're gonna be the best of friends, aren't you?

There wasn't even a Torchwood team keeping watch for signs of any shenanigans or a policeman waiting for him by the door. Not an unmarked van or panda car in sight, though a stray moggie hissed at him before disappearing under the rubbish skip by the garage entrance. The door was partially open, the lights were off and he could hear someone inside. Stuff was being shifted about and moved without sounding like it was being done with purpose. Could be a burglar or it could just be one of the guys working on the Citroën. No way to tell unless he looked and that was the problem.

Suppose it was a burglar — or worse? There could end up being trouble, Trouble with a capital 't' and that would just be bad with a capital 'b'. Too much more of either and Rose would probably be past her limit. He hung back wavering, chewing his lip with uncertainty. For a moment he considered turning back, going upstairs and not getting involved. But no, he couldn't. That was Edgar's hard earned livelihood in there, all the tools he needed to make ends meet and pay the bills. Even if the job last night had been scuppered, there was no need for things to end up worse. Talk about daylight robbery, he thought to himself as he crept forward, hand reaching for the door to ease
it open as quietly as possible.

Pete sighed. There were already reams of paperwork on his desk when he got in. Mostly reports to read through, department requests to approve or deny as need be, and memos about upcoming or ongoing operations. There was possible rift activity on Oxford Street, a complaint from three shops getting unexplained power surges had been forwarded by the utility company and one of the labs in the basement was complaining about the viscous blob creature that was still being contained down there. Interplanetary Relations still had no clue where it had come from or how to return it and Pete was debating whether to tell them the Doctor would handle it eventually.

The daft fool had said something about it originating in the primordial ooze, so there was the concern that if they interfered with it too much they could end up messing up something major. Lose the blob and forget accidentally killing your own granddad, he'd said. You might wipe out humanity he'd said. Of course, that had been just before he'd waxed poetic on the merits of cleaning fluid from the 51st century and mythology so who could tell what was what. The bloody lunatic was going to going to deal with it directly after he got that ship of his going, no dillydallying about it. As for the concerns the fool man might end up mucking things up in the past or getting himself lost, that was something Pete could worry over later. Much later. It'd be a good test flight and the only thing he'd have to do was convince his stepdaughter not to go.

Right, as if that was gonna happen. Still one could hope, couldn't they?

Pete was still amazed he'd convinced Gail Evans to back off. Of course, he'd buttered her up by telling her everything the Doctor had told him about Bryn Holburn and the smuggling, reminding her that such activities were Torchwood's jurisdiction and that since the sale hadn't actually happened and no money had actually changed hands, there'd be no arresting the blokes from the Garage or the half alien. He'd also pointedly told her that while the Doctor was off limits on this one, he was fair game for anything else in future.

As for his friends, it had been a surprise when Edgar and Percy had told him it wasn't actually his idea. Said they'd had to persuade him, and he'd been reluctant from the get go. The Doctor, trying to avoid trouble? It didn't seem possible. Of course, he'd failed spectacularly and there was a man in hospital to prove it. It was amazing no one had ended up dead. Still, they had Bryn Holburn in custody and that was one less thug off the streets. A thug that, from what Pete had already inferred, had been involved in the kidnapping, even if there was little evidence yet and he wasn't talking.

Damn, he'd forgotten to ask about that when he'd the opportunity. He'd have to get on that next chance he got. Still, if the Doctor didn't seem to care, or pretending not to care, fine. He had enough contraband hanging around to deal with any threats. That... thing he'd turned over last night (or technically, this morning) was already in a secure vault, same as the disassembled odds and sods from the Dimension Cannon, down where no one would be getting their hands on it. No one was touching it and R&D wasn't even going to be allowed to inspect it.

Nope, after this, the git was on his own, as he wished. If the man raised any more trouble with the police, he could get himself out of it. If he got Rose mixed up in it, well then there were going to be words. Strong words. Tempting thought it would be to wash his hands of it entirely, Jacks would kill him. She probably would if she knew he'd ended the protection. If the bloke wanted everyone to forget he existed, fine then. Let him deal with the problems that would cause, not that he'd listen if anyone tried to persuade him.

Pete sighed again. As much as he'd done to keep the warehouse raid quiet, there was a note from his secrecy about Issacson leaving several messages. Seems like the MP had caught wind of the goings
There was a cut off curse and the clatter of something being dropped as he reached a hand around the doorframe and flicked on the lights in attempt to startle the intruder. It worked beautifully, though it wasn't a criminal bent on relieving the shop of its contents.

Edgar jumped and whirled around at his "Oi," hand on his chest as he realized who was there. "You prat, you didn't half scare me to death. Want me in my grave already?" he gasped, glaring.

"Touchy, touchy." The Doctor gave him a crooked grin, asking hopefully, "How's Jasper?"

"He's doin'. Be laid up for a bit, but he's alive. Not that I can say the same for gits who try to scare folks to death," Edgar replied with a glower, sounding morose. He went back to sorting through a tray of hand tools, pulling various sockets back in their slots.

"Oh, good," the Doctor said with relief, finally letting himself relax. No burglars and Jasper was gonna make it. Things weren't botched up too badly, then. He let his eyes range around the room, noting the tools that had been pulled out and stacked in various degrees of tidiness. The sandblaster, various air compressors and other oddments were all piled up around Edgar. "What's all this, then?" He ducked down to fiddle with a loose hose, tightening the fitting before it came off the tank.

Edgar grunted in annoyance. "Looking to see what I can sell off."

The Doctor glanced up, eyebrows raised. "Oh? Considering a boot sale, are we? We'll have to get the van back for that," he said mildly. "Unless we use Argo's. Probably be better to get ours back, though, before some pikeys lug it off in pieces."

Giving him a sad smile, Edgar picked up a spanner, turning it over in his big hands with a strange look on his face. "It's a bit more than that, I'm afraid."

A sinking feeling in his gut, the Doctor stood. Knowing it wasn't going to be good, he asked anyway, "What is it, then?"

Edgar sighed and set aside the spanner, pausing with his hand outstretched for a moment before letting it drop. He closed his eyes several times then forced a smile half hidden under his beard. "Missed too many payments," he said simply. "The hazards of having a mortgage, I reckon. Shit luck, yeah?"

It felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. "The money from the sale...." He winced at Edgar's nod. "Anything we can do?"

Edgar shrugged helplessly, looking around. "Nothing to do. I've been behind for the last year and the deadline for payment is four days from now. With everything going squiffy, figured I'd go through this mess before the bank ends up with it all." He nodded at the Citroën in the far bay. "Get that done, dusted, and out of here before then, too."

"How much?"

Edgar snorted, shaking his head. "Don't bother, you don't have it."
"How much," he repeated, more forcefully this time, standing up again. He stepped closer, reminding Edgar that he wasn't a wee boggin to be intimidated. Nope, he was an entire four inches taller than the man.

Edgar crossed his arms over his chest and fixed him with a steely look, completely unimpressed. "Fifty thousand quid," he spat. "Another hundred thousand on the building. You barely have a fiver to your name, so don't even bother. An' if you even think of nicking that much dosh off the nearest cash point I'll kick your arse from here to Margate. I've been told. Yon dad of hers —" he jerked his head toward the direction of their flat — "said next time, you were on your own and we weren't to encourage you none. Even if all of you had better start looking for another place to hole up, doesn't mean you— he uncrossed his arms to poke the Doctor in the chest — "should set out to get yourself a new one in the nearest prison."

The Doctor swallowed, the bitter taste in his mouth tasting of defeat and disappointment. So much had been riding on last night, and it had all come to nought. So much for thinking everything wasn't gone pear-shaped. No matter how hard he tried, the ruddy things always found him. First Jasper, then this — everything always went wrong wherever he went, it seemed.

Edgar gave him a sympathetic look. "It's not your fault, mind?" he said softly. But that didn't make it any easier.

Looking around, he tried to think of something he could do. "Just... give me a chance to think up something," he said softly, thinking of the times they'd had here. These people had given him and Rose a place to stay when they were hiding from Ferguson, risked so much to help them. There had to be a way he could help, there had to be. After all, there couldn't be that much of a difference between saving the world from impending doom and saving his friend from foreclosure, could there?
"Why didn't you say anything?" he asked, looking at Edgar consideringly, his head cocked to the side. He flinched at the bitter laugh the man gave in response. "What would've been the point of that, lad? It started long before you showed up and turned everything upside down. Started when I got the brilliant idea to go honest, keep the other stuff to a minimum, so the filth would lay off us for a bit. Thought there was enough of us in trouble with the law and enough crime in the area. And since then," Edgar shrugged helplessly, looking defeated, "since then everything's been one constant fuss, one right after the other. Can't expect you to deal with it, when it's not your problem and you've barely got your head on straight."

You know, that actually stung a little. The Doctor shuffled his feet, regretful and feeling at a loss for a plan. He needed to do something. There had to be something he could do to right this. All these people, with their lives that weren't exactly earth-shatteringly important, they still mattered. All of it, the day to day living, the insignificance and mundaneness of it all, it mattered to them, at least. Hadn't that been what he'd done all those centuries across the stars, sorting out the troubles so they could live their little lives in peace? "I could've helped if you'd just said. Mrs Murphy..."

Edgar shook his head, waving a dismissive hand. "Mrs Murphy will find some charity or programme of sorts to get her her treatments, don't bother your little head over it none. The rest of us, we'll start again and get on with our lives as best we can."

No, that wasn't right. Even if Edgar seemed to be resigned to the way things were, he wasn't going to just give up. Someone had to at least try. In fact, he had the start of an idea already, as clever as he was. As he turned and strode toward the door, making a hasty exit, he heard Edgar hollering after him. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"To make this right," he threw over his shoulder, not slowing his steps any. Indeed, that idea was growing legs and arms, taking shape like it was meant to. He ignored the sound of muffled curses behind him, not letting himself get distracted with such things. Not now, when he had a new purpose, another problem to solve. He was the Doctor, right? Making things better was what he did and he had put the sonic screwdriver and the psychic paper in his wallet. Time to go be impressive and save the day. Well, to go save the garage at least.

It was nothing, trotting several blocks to the bus stop and letting the psychic paper masquerade as an Oyster card to gain his admittance onto the bus. A few people gave him odd looks as he made his way to an unoccupied seat, reminding him he was in jeans and a t-shirt while everyone else wore light jackets and jumpers against the cool air. But that was as complicated as it got, thankfully.

"High metabolism, me," he explained to a pensioner sitting across the aisle from him. She gave him a distrustful squint, fingering the grip of her cane with obvious suspicion before turning away and patently ignoring him. With a sigh, he turned to the window, watching the streets and buildings passing by in a blur. So much hustle and bustle, people going about their business without stopping to consider anything beyond this tiny planet spinning through space. Even the people on the bus hadn't paid him any mind really, choosing to ignore his presence. Seemingly, no one had recognized his face from the telly or didn't particularly care, if they had. Rather refreshing, that. The human tendency to forget and move on was a wonderful thing at times. And absolutely horrid at others.

"Autumn was almost there and the excessive heat that had plagued Pete's World in previous years had since morphed into more variable weather patterns. Namely excessive cold and shorter summers, as he'd surmised from the meteorological data from the last two years that he'd perused in a fit of curiosity and boredom. Throw in the effects of the stars going out and the retrograde dimensional rift
closure and he'd lay money on the effects getting worse over time. Until the earth's atmosphere got itself sorted into some kind of equilibrium, that is. It was wonderful how nature tended to right itself without any undue interference.

As the bus pulled up to his stop, he stood. Leaning over, he said to the old woman, "Take it from me, though, you just might want to stock up on anoraks and jumpers. You're gonna need them," speaking in a sotto voice before straightening and strolling to the front and hopping off onto the pavement. He threw a jolly wave as the bus pulled away, catching the dark, bewildered eyes of the woman as she stared after him.

Right. Now here he was, standing in front of the Hackney branch of the Federal Bank of England. The brick edifice was still somewhat impressive, despite the signs of wear and tear around the edges. Obviously, it hadn't entirely escaped the Cyber Wars unscathed. Still, he had to admit the fancy cornices remained a bit impressive to look at, what with their cherubs and vines and all that fluff, carved in stone. People were going in and out with regularity, people of all types. Businessmen in suits, pensioners, women with kids or on their own — so much traffic. Too much risk of being seen for him to simply go over and blithely sonic the cash point, especially with the queue of people waiting their turn in front of it. He'd start a riot and he didn't want that. Not yet, at least.

Inside it was, then. Perhaps he should've changed clothes before coming, put on the suit — if he could find it, that is. He wasn't sure where that had ended up now. Oh well, he'd have to rely on the ol' charisma. Wow them where they stood and charm them off their feet, then. Allons-y!

From the moment she first poked her head from under the duvet, she noticed the quiet. It was too quiet. Oh, the normal sounds of the neighborhood were all there — a lorry passing on the street, a woman shouting a greeting at someone, an argument somewhere in the distance, noises that carried — but for the one thing she had expected wasn't. Throwing back the covers, she hastily scrambled out of bed.

"Doctor?" she called, her voice still sleepy but echoing slightly. A chill came over her, making her rub her arms as she peered around. No answer came, no messy hair appearing from around the door to the loo or from behind the sofa. A quick look about the kitchen revealed a sideboard littered with bread crumbs with the rest of the loaf still sitting there next to an open jar of jam. In short, no Doctor.

He'd definitely been there at some point, that was for certain. Question was, how long had he been gone and where'd he go? His battered red chucks were also missing, even if his jacket was still lying on the chair where he'd left it when they'd got in last night. That meant he couldn't have gone too far, she thought at first before discarding that notion. As if not being prepared to go somewhere, practicality as in planning for any possibilities or even having a rational thought would be like him. More like spontaneity, flying by the seat of his pants and just going with any and all random ideas were his standard operating procedures. Problem was, he had a really nasty habit of not having any discretion or even concern for such mere trivialities as safety, legality, or logic.

The TARDIS coral seemed to be humming to itself in the corner, sparking with a golden glow when she laid a hand on it cautiously. It seemed warmer than usual and a bit larger than it had done. Rose noticed the liquid growth formula had been refilled and there was some sort of box on the floor next to the coral. It appeared to be an amalgamation of what used to be a stereo and someone's computer, with wires running from it into the kids wading pool that it had been moved to once the coral had outgrown the oil pan it'd been in before. She just hoped that the previous owner of those electronics wasn't going to be showing up, all in a tiff over their ruined stuff. It was bad enough she could see
the empty toothpaste tube and what definitely looked like toothpaste being used in place of glue.

"That explains where that ended up," she sighed to herself, shaking her head as she turned. The room looked as though a natural disaster had happened in it, like a whirlwind or something of the sort. Almost enough to make her picture a police raid had already happened. No, just one half alien bloke tinkering with things. She was grateful that nothing had exploded or anything. Then again, with the state of the place, who would be able to tell?

Going into the bedroom for her mobile, Rose found that missing as well. Another search of the flat revealed that in the lounge. She didn't notice the scrawled note left on the back of the sofa next to the phone she'd retrieved. Of course, a few phone calls made informed her that Donna and Wilf hadn't seen him, but that he'd called to ask for the number to the hospital Jasper was in. She made another one to Jake, who checked the radios and current alerts and at least let her know he'd not run afoul of the law — yet. That meant wherever he'd gone off to, he was still on his way there. It wasn't any surprise that he didn't have his mobile on him, either.

Rose muttered a curse as she threw on clean clothes and hurriedly pulled her hair back into a sloppy ponytail, visions of him pestering the medical staff at Hope Hospital or worse dancing through her mind. Pete had run out of patience now and if he got himself into trouble this soon after last night.... Right, now to find him before he did something really stupid, something worse than the last time. God, it never ended, did it? It hadn't even been twenty four hours yet and he'd already scarpered. If she was lucky, he was in the garage, not out looking for trouble. Never was any rest for the wicked, was there?

Edgar was down below in the garage, busy under the bonnet of the Citroën — busy working and seemingly doing so by himself, without even Nigel or Terry around, much less the Doctor. "Have you seen the Doctor," she asked, after a second, more hopeful look around.

Edgar straightened, wiped his hands on a rag and gave her a look of pure guilt, clearing his throat as he said, "Yup. Been and gone."

She rolled her eyes at that. As if she hadn't sussed that herself, ta. "Gone to see Jasper, right?"

Edgar started moving spanners and things around, trying to appear busy and distracted and saying offhandedly, "Nope. Think he went to the bank."

That was unexpected. And suspicious sounding. The Doctor at the bank? What sort of rubbish story was that? Even the idea of chequeing accounts and personal finances put him in a cold sweat. Either someone was telling porkies, that trip through the vortex had put paid to the last vestiges of the Doctor's sanity, or something wasn't right here. She was going to go with that option, it seemed the most likely. Then again, with his mentality, who knew if he'd finally gone off his onion. Then again, who'd be able to tell with that, either?

Rose squinted at Edgar, her suspicions rising even more. "The bank?"

"Gone to see someone," came the muttered reply as Edgar fairly dove back under the raised bonnet to avoid talking to her any further.

Right, as if that didn't make her all the more suspicious. And worried — very worried, at that. If he was harassing the coppers, setting Pete into throwing a wobbly, or merrily tripping into danger without her, she was gonna kill him. Totally and completely kill him — and then she was gonna lock him in the flat, maybe even chain him to the bed and gag him with a sock or something, just to keep him from whinging too much and driving her barmy. Or barmier, that is. She was already getting pretty close to it as it was.
Jake groaned. He had had barely four hours of sleep, his head felt like it was stuffed with cotton wool from too much running about and not enough kip and he hadn't even gone through security when the secretary passed him a memo from upstairs. "Mr Tyler said don't bother even starting in on any other projects, this is priority number one on your agenda today," Mr Dickinson supplied.

Jake glanced at the note and groaned at his assignment. It was not what he'd been planning but not unexpected, either. "Came down to tell you himself, did he?" he asked wryly, shaking his head.

"Yes, Mr Simmonds, he did."

"Ta, then." Jake turned around with a sigh, ignoring the bemused look from Sally as he passed her in the entrance. She was heading in, coffee cup in hand. He was almost jealous. The opportunity for a cuppa hadn't come up and there wasn't much hope of one for awhile yet.

"Where're you going?" Sally called after him curiously, leaning back out of the entrance.

"Off to go babysit," he replied, turning and walking backwards as he continued, "Hopefully to prevent any catastrophes and keep the Director's blood pressure below two hundred today. Saving the world, one surveillance op at a time!" As he spun back around and continued to the car park, he missed her look of absolute confusion.

Now he was cruising through Hackney in his old van, looking for a cafe and his much needed dose of caffeine. It wasn't even noon yet, surely Rose and her walking disaster wouldn't be out and about yet. Probably lying low, waiting for the heat to be off before they got embroiled in another uproar. The boss had been pretty narked last night — pissed off, even. He was certain he'd heard Pete's orders for them to go home and stay there. With that much emphasis, Rose would most likely be doing her best to keep him distracted.

Probably shagging like bunnies, if they're even awake yet.

Or not, he mentally added, catching sight of an all too familiar figure standing in front of the local bank with a purposeful look on his face. Scrap that, then. So much for my coffee, he thought, ruefully eyeing the little coffee shop across the street from the bank.

By the time he'd found an open spot to park the van, the Doctor had already disappeared, strolling into the bank like he owned the place, despite his rough appearance. At least the man had shaved for once, which was an improvement over the last few times he'd seen him. Hustling to catch up, but leery of being too obvious, he almost knocked over a woman exiting the bank. With hasty apologies, he slipped inside, ignoring her indignant squawks of disapproval. Staying a good distance away, he watched in amazement as the Doctor made a beeline for the manager and blithely slipped a wallet out his back pocket and flashed a badge of some sorts at the pudgy little man.

That was worrying. Jake couldn't recall if Pete had given the psychic paper back or not, he just hoped the Doctor hadn't nicked a badge off one of the coppers last night. That or was using his old Torchwood badge one. And just what the hell was he up to? There wasn't any unusual goings on here that he could see. Nothing unusual at all, unless one counted the chav with the purple hair and his even odder looking mates over in the queue.

Jake crept a bit closer, overhearing the bank manager speaking in a low voice. "I'm sorry, sir, this is highly irregular," he protested. "The annual inspection from the Ministry of Finance isn't for another three months."

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"And that's why it's called a 'surprise inspection'," the Doctor said smoothly, giving the man a condescending smile. "Just to properly assess the integrity and fairness of your mortgage and loan department's business practices. What with the complaints that have come in to the office recently, I'm sure you understand the necessity of such oversight on such matters."

The manager narrowed his eyes at that. "Complaints?"

"Oh, foreclosure processes," the Doctor said glibly, waving a hand airily. "Wouldn't want to have to make a formal inquiry on this, would we?"

But the manager wasn't buying it. "I'd have to see your credentials again, Mr..."

"Smith. Here." The Doctor once again waved what Jake duly noted was a completely blank piece of paper in a five quid wallet. "See?"

The manager squinted even harder at it this time before looking in askance at the Doctor's jeans with the holes in the knees and the burgundy t-shirt. The trainers with the laces flopping about and unidentifiable stains on them didn't help his credibility any. "And your manner of dress... is this the standard appearance at Whitehall now?"

The Doctor smiled and waved that off with another smooth answer. "Meh, the boss has gotten this silly notion that casual Fridays will improve interoffice relations and the staff's efficiency at better serving the public's needs."

The manager was coldly disapproving as he said icily in a very clipped tone, "It's Tuesday."

Jake just had to admire the stones on the man, just walking in and brazenly feeding a load of absolute bollocks to someone like that. Good god, what the hell was he planning? From blowing up warehouses in Shoreditch and smuggling to... this? Bloody hell. He'd be having to step in soon, before he was having to explain why he'd just watched the Doctor talk his way into twenty to life.

"Is it? Silly me, forgot to look at my calendar," the Doctor chirped, looking only slightly chagrined. It didn't dent his forced humor. "Explains why the receptionist kept giving me that look. Tell you what, eyes like an eagle that woman and the breath on her! Could make you lose your lunch from the pong. I always want to offer her an Altoid, but Gladys from HR keeps telling me it's against office harassment policy and..." he babbled, starting to look slightly panicky.

The time for stepping in was apparently now. "Excuse me a minute," Jake interrupted.

He smiled at the glaring manager, noting that one of the tellers behind the counter was watching them with open suspicion. It looked like her hand was already on the button for the silent alarm, ready to punch it at the first sign of mayhem. "Sorry about this, he does this all the time when he's forgotten to take his medications. Keeps thinking he's got his old job back, despite they'd had to let him go after the mental breakdown he suffered," he said in a confidentially loud stage whisper, ignoring the Doctor, who was gaping like a fish at him. Stepping forward, he grabbed the Doctor by the arm and quickly steered him back outside, ignoring the baleful look he was getting or the crowd of gawking people in the bank. He didn't let go until they got to the van either, knowing the Doctor would do a runner if he did.

As it was, the Doctor angrily pulled his arm away as soon as they were on the pavement, uncaring about the people passing by possibly overhearing the conversation, stepping close to loom over Jake as he growled, "What the hell did you do that for? You interrupted in the middle of some very important business."
"You mean preventing you from going up before the magistrate on fraud, impersonating a government official and countless robbery charges?" Jake snapped, also stepping forward without any sign of being intimidated.

The Doctor rolled his eyes dismissively, unconcerned by the danger of imprisonment he'd just been in. "Pfft, it wasn't that serious, really. If the man had just listened to me, instead of judging me by my appearance."

"Not serious?" Jake squawked in disbelief. "Like major felonies are something to sneer at. This is flipping unbelievable! God, do you have any concept of right or wrong? I know you're not from this planet, but there's this old book and with all the slumming on earth you've done, I'm sure you've heard about it. Has this bit, a whole list of the stuff and rules about what you're not supposed to do, like stealing. Call it the Ten Commandments, they do, and 'Thou shalt not steal' is one of 'em."

Sarcasm fairly dripped, even oozed from his words, but the Doctor seemed utterly oblivious to it. With a disdainful sniff, he said archly, "Of course I've heard of it. Had a signed copy from Paul of Tarsus himself. Popped back with the first one Johannes had cranked out off that press of his, I did. Though Paul kept asking why I wanted it signed and how I'd managed to get all his personal correspondence like that. As for morals, I'm a Time Lord — they practically come preinstalled in us. Or did, until I blew them all up. But I assure you, I most certainly know 'right from wrong', as you so quaintly put it."

Not even bothering to credit that one about St Paul and trying not to flinch at the mention of blowing up planets, Jake sighed. He really needed that coffee now, or something stronger. About now, he envied Pete Tyler with his bottle of whiskey hidden in his desk back at Canary Wharf — envied and totally understood it, too. "Bugger that, what the bloody hell did you think you were doing in there? Robbin' banks isn't your style."

The Doctor glared and looked away, mouth set in a grim line. "My friends are all about to end up homeless and Edgar's losing the garage. Thought I'd have a gander at the computer files and fix it," he admitted gruffly. "And for your information, all those people ending up on the streets is wrong. A lot more wrong than some greedy, fat banker ending up with even more dosh than they've already got banging about and cluttering the halls."

Jake could only gape at him. "So you thought you would..." He shook his head in bewilderment, realizing that arguing and explaining things like laws and the proper ways of solving problems was completely pointless with this one. "You're completely and utterly apeshit insane, you know that, mate? Now let's get you back before I lose my job and Rose does her nut. If you're lucky, you'll be back before she notices you've gone anywhere."

He opened the door to the van and gave the Doctor a rough shove, momentarily considering the necessity of actually strapping him in. Surprisingly, there weren't any escape attempts. Just wait until Pete heard about this one, he'd be livid. Sod that, he'd be beyond livid. Pete would be practically fluorescent with rage when he found out and all Jake could do was groan, thinking of that conversation. At least he'd gotten there in the nick of time to avert disaster.

Rose had barely gotten back to the flat, having run up to grab her Torchwood ID and wallet after checking with Argos. Then suddenly, Jake was pounding on the door. He pretty much shoved a scowling Doctor through the door, saying exasperatedly, "For God's sake, tie him to something, will ya?" before promptly leaving and slamming the door as he went. From the sullen look on his face to
the fiery look he threw at the now closed door, Rose was able to surmise a lot about what the Doctor might've been up to.

"Sorry," Rose called after her friend and former teammate before turning her attention back to the Doctor. "What on earth did you do now?" she asked tiredly, wondering if she actually wanted to know. Judging from Jake's apparent temper, it couldn't be anything good.

The Doctor fidgeted uncomfortably, a hand reaching up to tug at his ear as his eyes darted around to look anywhere but at her. "Erm... nothing?"

Pull the other one, it's got bells on, she wanted to retort, but didn't. She watched mutely as he gave her a sunny, unconvincing smile and bounded off to the lounge, busying himself with fussing with wires. Stifling the urge to scream at him in frustration, she followed, watching and waiting in silence as he did a thorough check on the coral. The whole time, he was cooing over the progress made since the last time while pretending to ignore her. She could tell by the way he had his head tilted he wasn't, though. Not really. No, he was obviously waiting for something. The imminent explosion, maybe, as her last nerve finally snapped and all her patience went thoroughly and completely out the window.

It was very nearly a close thing until he finally straightened and reached to rest his hand against the coral. He let his head tip back slightly, shoulders slumping as he softly murmured, "Couldn't come at a worse time, this. It's too soon, far too soon and I daren't move her at this stage of development."

"What couldn't happen at a worse time?" Rose asked, suddenly more on edge than she had been. Why was he talking about moving the TARDIS already? Like he said, it was too soon and... there were just too many possibilities to even consider at a moment's notice like this. He'd have to start talking and stop expecting her to guess. He turned to face her then, his eyes dark and serious and finally meeting her own. His throat bobbed as he swallowed, voice hoarse as he admitted, "Edgar's losing the garage."

The news was so sudden, so completely unexpected that she felt broadsided. "What?"

"The bank's taking the whole lot. The garage, the building, all of it, just..." His voice faded to nothing and he gave a helpless shrug, seeming to shrink into himself a bit as he did. Rose stepped close to him, lying her hand on his arm, wanting to comfort him. "That's where you went, isn't it, the bank?"

His arm was tense under her hand as he sighed, "Yeah."

Of course he would try to help. As it was, he'd mentioned a lot riding on last night's deal before they'd even left. She hadn't realized that need went so far, that things would be so complicated and difficult after it had fallen through. "Let me guess, you were sonicking the cash point when Jake found you, right?"

He looked distinctly uncomfortable again. Embarrassment was writ plain across his features. "Not as such, no."

"Holding up the tellers with the sonic?"

He scoffed at that, lip curling disdainfully. "As if."

Rose raised a brow at him, tapping her chin contemplatively with a finger as she studied him carefully. "Let me guess, you were hacking the computers?"

He sighed again, raising a hand to scrub at his face. "Not quite that, either. Jake showed up just as I
was charming my way in and interrupted things," he said with a huff. "Then he berated me on the street and presumed to educate me on the contents of the Bible, of all things. Didn't figure him for a religious sort, did you?"

Rose ignored that last part in favor of the more salient point hidden in there. "Interrupted? Wait, were you just gonna erase their database or something, wipe all traces of everyone's debts along with everything else?"

He nodded enthusiastically, looking not at all concerned or impressed with the trouble he could've caused. Throwing up her hands, she backed away, trying not to groan at the sheer magnitude of his attempted actions. "For someone so bloody clever, you are such an idiot sometimes, Doctor."

"Whaddya mean," he said, looking utterly offended.

"All financial transitions are tracked electronically here. Most people go years without even touching an actual, physical note. Something like that, you could've dumped the entire economy in the loo with one very impressive push of a button."

He gave her a quizzical look, brows drawn in confusion and uncertainty. "Um, that's a bad thing, right?"

"That's a bad —" she sputtered, amazed at how thick he could be. "Did your brain fall out your ear somewhere between here and the Medusa Cascade or did Donna really end up with all the cleverness?" she snapped before turning away from him. Just thinking about it, just looking at it made her angry. She had to get out of here, even if it was just for a bit. She stomped back to the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Excepting she couldn't, 'cos if she did, she might never stop.

"God, He just had to go and leave me with the stupid one," she muttered to herself as she rummaged for something to wear.

It was mere moments before there was a soft knock at the door. "Rose?" came a hesitant voice.

"Not now," she called with exasperation after biting back a less kind reply, like, 'Bugger off.'

That seemed to quell his desire to drive her even barmier for the moment, though he was still standing there when she opened the door. Pushing past him, she held up a hand to halt the Oncoming Babble before it could even start.

"Where are you going," he asked cautiously, as she scooped up her handbag and stuffed her mobile and keys in it. He looked somewhat chastised now and properly scared.

"To visit Jasper in hospital," she answered shortly, not looking up at him.

"Oh."

She had her hand on the doorknob, ready to head out when she turned back. "On second thought — sonic and psychic paper, hand 'em over." He did so reluctantly, with a down-turned pout on his lips. Those items also went into her bag. "If you're not here when I get back," she warned, "I swear I'll put a tracking collar on you next." He scowled at that, crossing his arms over his chest and raising his chin slightly, as if it was a challenge. Really, she knew better than giving him a direct order like that. He'd defy it just on principle, he would. Deciding to soften the blow, Rose touched a hand to his cheek. "Don't worry, I'll see what I can do to sort things out. Just..." She paused, smiling hesitantly at him. "No swanning off for the once. Get some rest, play solitaire, fiddle with some pieces you've got in the corner there — anything. Just stay out of trouble for a bit, before my dad goes ballistic, yeah?"
He nodded stiffly and she leaned up to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "When I get back we'll talk," she reassured him before opening the door. He was still watching her with large, unblinking eyes when she closed it behind her, looking for all the world like someone's puppy that had been kicked.
"At least I caught him before he'd gone too far," Jake said into the comms unit, trying to take a prosaic, more positive view of things. It might actually help. Sitting in his van, his eyes watchfully roved over the neighborhood. It was just a typical down market neighborhood in London, a bit rough around the edges but no worse than anywhere else he'd seen. Better than some, actually. South of the river was nearly a no-man's-land, even now. A pub stood down the way, with rough men loitering about; delivery vans and dustman and normal, everyday people could be seen on the street from his vantage point. All those people, busy going about their everyday lives, would never know how close it had been, how easily everything could have gone horribly wrong like it had before. How easily they forgot, didn't think about the people who kept them safe. "One disaster averted. Until the next time, that is."

"Do you think he'll try it again?" came the unhurried reply from Pete on the other end of the line. He was in between meetings and had had Jake switch over to a private channel so they could talk.

Jake thought about it for a moment before shrugging. "It's pretty much a guaranteed thing, innit? I reckon it won't be today, though. Rose probably laid into him, gave him a few choice words and then some."

"If she's not going to join in on the whatever cockamamie excuse for a plan he comes up with next, like she has done before," Pete sighed.

Wincing, Jake shook his head, wishing that idea hadn't occurred to either of them. "Quite." He looked down the street toward the terrace house with the garage below. A flash of color and some movement caught his eye. "And there she goes," he murmured.

"What, Rose?" There was a sound of rumpling papers. Pete was probably crumpling a hapless report in his frustration at not being there to keep an eye on things himself.

"Oh yes. But she's all on her tod, at least. No skinny lunatic in tow. Don't know if I should be relieved, or worry more," he mused. Another glance up at the window of the flat with its mismatched and faded drapery showed some movement within. "Doesn't look like he's going with, either. Should I stay or follow?"

Jake heard Pete sigh. A moment passed before he got a reply of, "Stay. I trust her to possibly have a modicum of sense — more so, when he's not with her. Make sure he's not going to take off on his own again."

"Sure thing, boss," Jake said, signing off. He decided to throw caution to the wind. It wasn't like they wouldn't be expecting him to be there, anyhow. "Oi, Rose!" He waved her over. "Wotcha?" he said teasingly, jokingly mocking her Cockney accent.

"You really have been in London too long, mate," Rose said in amusement, stepping forward to lean against the door of the van, one hand resting lightly on the wing mirror. "Dad set you to keep an eye on us, then?"

Blowing out a shaky breath, Rose nodded. One hand went to brush her fringe out of her face as she said softly, "Yeah. I tried talking to Edgar, but he's not exactly in a talkative mood, so I'm gonna go over to the hospital to check on Jasper. See if he and Percy can tell me what else is goin' on with it."
Jake raised his brows in surprise. "You think there's more to it than that?"

Rose let out an unladylike snort. "Bound to be, like always."

Jake figured it was probably a stupid question, but he had to give it a go, anyway. "Ever think of just asking him?" He nodded towards their building.

Rose sighed again. "Right about now, if I had to listen to him try to rationalize the illogical or him snowballing me with senseless arguments, I might do something I'll regret," she admitted. "I know people change, but I think I forgot how infuriating he could be at times."

Jake could certainly agree with that assessment. He was starting to miss the regular sort of alien invasions. "Rose tinted spectacles?" he joked, trying to lighten the mood.

"Shut up," she said, but he could see the glint of laughter in her eyes at his quip. "Still, suppose it's better than him mooning after some French tart and riding a horse through a mirror to go after her," she muttered, looking away. Jake had just opened his mouth to ask when she cut him off. "Don't bother. Look, gotta run. Catch you around, yeah?"

"Yeah. See you, Rose," Jake said softly, even as she was hurrying along the pavements, running to catch the bus he could see in the distance. With nothing else to do, he turned his eyes back to the building ahead, waiting to see what would happen next.

With a heart that seemed like it was going to pound its way out of his chest, he watched her approach the van parked below. Watched her talking to the man inside and the singular glance in his direction before dashing off down the street. Dashed off and left him stewing in a pit of anger, alone. Twitching the curtain closed again, he turned away, seething inside.

She hadn't even let him explain, had just shut him out before storming off. Just ran off, leaving him with vague promises of talking later. What if he didn't want to talk later, what if he wanted to just ignore everything everyone was telling him about the "rules" and do it anyway? He could, you know, and it'd be easy, so easy. She'd left her laptop, the local had free WiFi and it wouldn't take much to hack through the firewalls. And it wasn't like he'd been planning on wiping all the data — just the mortgage and loan department's files. Worse yet, she was treating him like a bloody child — everyone was, at that. He had the sneaking suspicion that even if he'd just wandered out to the shops he'd have gotten a similar reaction. Like he couldn't take care of himself, like he'd not spent his whole life wandering amidst the dust of eternity. Of course, what made it sting even more was the fact he knew she was right, not that he'd actually admit it. Rushing into something without thinking it through wasn't the cleverest thing to do, no matter his motives, but it had been his modus operandi for so long, what else did he know? He'd just wanted to fix this, make his friends' problems go away, protect them from the harsh realities of this world like they'd done for him. But still....

A soft hum caught his attention, bringing him out of his mental wrangling. "It'd be so much easier if we could just pop off and go fix all this, old girl," he murmured, crouching down beside the coral. Checking the level of growth formula and the temperature of the fluid, he sat back on his heels with a sigh. The slight humming took on a tone that hinted at disapproval, but that might've been his imagination. "Yeah, you're right. If that was a valid option at the mo', I'd be gone but for dust by now," he admitted with another sigh, getting another hum in reply.

It was faint, so very faint, but he could feel her on the edge of his awareness. Nothing like it used to
be, of course, back when she was much, much larger than a filing cabinet and he had two hearts and an iota of an idea what the hell he was doing. With an audience that wouldn't judge (well, not in any sense like anyone else on this backwater planet would and not with words of condemnation, at least, just vague impressions of such that weren't quite so hard to stomach) it was easier to give voice to his thoughts.

Sitting down, he rested his back against the coral's surface, using the faint connection to let his mind settle into a semblance of calm. "Crikey, it wasn't this bad when I did this before, girl. Getting stuck on earth, exiled... I was a different man back then, in more ways than one. I'd more patience and far more to keep myself occupied then. Now when I try to find something to do, someone throws a wibbly and says I mustn't. Can't win for losing, can I? And all these... emotions — what frivolous, useless, confusing things they are — can't just bury them and go on, can I? No matter how hard I push them aside, stow them in the back of my mind, they keep percolating there beneath the surface, ready to pop out unbidden and skew my thought processes all a-kilter. Terrible business, that. Amazing they get anywhere, humans, with all those needs, desires and feelings that are so immediate, so demanding. I'm cold, I'm hot, where's the food, where's my bed... and don't get me started on the sex drive. It's like a double edged sword, Damocles' blade aimed directly at my heart and keeping my brain from functioning properly, while distracting me with lithesome frivolities. Worse yet, that a millennium's worth of experience and wisdom should go out the window at the slightest hint, the slightest hope, and all's bound up in trying to make a human girl think I'm actually worth the bother."

The coral seemed to be laughing at him, actually laughing, the connection tickling slightly. "Heavens help us if she ever sees us for what we really are, 'cos she's all we've got, old girl. All we've got, and I never know whether to be ecstatic about that or apologize profusely for the terrible inconvenience we happen to be." There was another buzz of admonishment, making him glare over his shoulder at his companion. "If you've got a better idea on how to go about this... linear existence, old thing, go on, I'm all ears. Least you could do is be a bit more supportive, instead of merely telling me I'm an idiot. As if I didn't know that already," he grumped, turning back around and drawing his knees up against his chest, curling himself into the smallest shape he could, filled with the overwhelming urge to just disappear. Not run off, not go wandering into trouble since he'd promised he wouldn't, but just hide from the world for a bit. Maybe a fortnight or two, or a decade. Yeah, a decade away sounded just lovely about now.

With nothing to do with them, his fingers twitched in protest against the boredom. Idly picking at the fraying threads around the rip at the knee of his denims, he nodded to himself, a pensive look on his face. "She's right, you know," he confessed in a low voice, refusing to look at the growing TARDIS. "Thrashing about, running forth with no heed to the consequences, it's folly. So hard to find a course and stick to it, when life's far too reminiscent of bus stations and burnt toast and me with the niggling suspicion that I'm the lost luggage what's been left behind. I've got to try harder somehow, do better before she throws her hands up in defeat and gives up on us. Even if I have to pretend, I have to. Have to. No ifs, ands or buts about it, time to shape up. No machinations or Machiavellian games will change it, no smooth persuasion will fools her, 'cos she'll see right through it. Damn me, but she knows me too well. Have to love her for it, seeing through me and crying 'horseshit' when necessary, as frustrating as that is when she does it."

With a sigh, he dragged himself to his feet. Cursing the seemingly constant need for sustenance, he rummaged through the cupboards for something to eat, finding a tin of soup. A spoon was not so easily located, causing him to have to do the washing up just to find one. The microwave gave up the ghost with a spluttering fizz and the smell of burnt circuitry while the soup was partway heated, tempting him to try repairing it. The memory of being scolded for tinkering with the appliances held him back and same for the idea of attempting the use of the cooker. That Aga seemed to hold a grudge against him for some reason, perhaps because of his previous attempt to improve its function.
The scorch marks on the wall above were a testament to that incident, stubborn thing that it was.

So be it.

Cold soup and freshly washed spoon in hand, he retired to the lounge, but that wasn't any better. The jumble on the sofa prompted him to clear things up a bit, just for a place to sit. He almost gave up and sat on the floor next to the coral, but worried what dangers spilled soup would pose to the growth of the baby TARDIS. She certainly wouldn't appreciate it, judging from the waves of annoyance she was sending, touchy creature that she was. Seriously, he'd do well to work on developing self-tidying domiciles, since this one certainly lacked that oh so important feature. Might as well fix the shower rod while he was at it, before the damp set into the floors in the bog any more than they already had and the tub went through to the flat below. Then there was the laundry to be sorted, since he was at a loss to find a clean button-down for his arms that felt slightly chilled...

Pete gave the man on the other side of his desk a distinctly unfriendly smile, showing enough teeth to probably remind the man of a shark. That was completely on purpose, too. "If I might remind you, Mr Isaacson, all extraterrestrial life forms residing on or entering into the proximal vicinity of this planet are under Torchwood's preview, not Parliamentary committees or unjustified inquiries from middling members of government," he said pointedly, glaring a bit to make his point.

Isaacson didn't even bat an eye at that. "However," he countered, "when Torchwood shows itself to be out of their depths when it comes to controlling such... things, leaving the population at risk to the threats posed by those..." he made a moue of distaste, raising one of his fastidiously manicured hands and waving it for emphasis, "then it does raise the question of Torchwood's capability of handling its said tasks," he said smoothly, giving Pete a smile that fair made his skin crawl. "Namely, the entity that is known colloquially as 'the Doctor.'"

"Someone whose very existence is still classified under the State Secrets Act," Pete pointed out, leaning back in his chair. He'd known where this was going before it had even started. Kudos to Isaacson for not playing coy and dragging things out and wasting his time more than he already was.

"Funny, doesn't stop him from causing a ruckus in shopping centers and openly cavorting with your daughter in public."

Pete smiled again. "She's a trained agent, one of my best. He's under constant surveillance, don't you worry yourself over the matter."

Isaacson was not to be deterred, however. "Yet he still poses a threat to the people, as evidenced by recent events."

As charismatic and charming as the man was said to be, Pete was completely unimpressed, reminded more of a wily stoat out to raid the chicken pen. "Name one instance of threat to the people of Britain," he said archly from behind steepled fingers, eyes glittering.

Isaacson looked pleased with his own cleverness as he said succinctly, "Shoreditch, with one hundred and fourteen people dead, including a government agent."

Pete could've laughed about then, but he didn't, feeling that it would be highly inappropriate. Leave the inappropriate blunders for others. He was of half a mind to just introduce Isaacson to the Doctor and lock them in a room together, see who begged to be let out first. "Right, when he stopped a
malignant entity from wiping out humanity. And Ferguson was already dead, only he'd failed to acknowledge it or let anyone else know, either. Also, it could've been far worse. Like six billion more dead, for starters," Pete replied, not missing a beat.

Isaacson began ticking off points on his fingers, brushing aside Pete's response. "Associating with known criminals—"

"Who were key in both the Shoreditch Incident and only last night were instrumental in exposing a smuggling ring," Pete interrupted smoothly, wondering just what the man was hoping to accomplish. It wasn't like he actually thought he'd just hand the Doctor over, as tempting as that might be at times.

Isaacson was beginning to look put out, but nevertheless, he soldiered on. "Possession of unregistered and forbidden weapons of alien origin—"

"That are currently in the vaults below, safe from prying eyes and prodding fingers, never to be a threat to mankind again," Pete finished, beginning to feel bored. He sighed, leaning forward rest his elbows on the desk. "Tell me, are you familiar with William Jones?" At Isaacson's curt nod, he continued, "Good, go see him and perhaps you'll learn how far you'll get with your pointless inquiries."

Issacson narrowed his eyes, ignoring the blatant dismissal in Pete's tone. "Are you trying to say that you've even got the slightest bit of control over this creature, your pet alien, as it were? Despite the evidence to the contrary, that you've even a clue where he is and what his intentions are?"

"Believe me, one of my agents has him well in hand," Pete said calmly, sitting back again and letting his hands drop to rest on the arms of his chair. He really hoped that statement wasn't an inadvertent double entendre and that news of this morning's bank incident hadn't gotten around yet. Or ever, at that. Honestly, he was already expecting either him or Rose to turn up before long. It'd probably be Rose, he thought. He's got too much pride and that'd be a hefty one for him to swallow, coming to ask for help.

Issacson rose from his seat stiffly, disdain almost dripping from his words as he said, "This isn't the end of this, Tyler. There's still the fact that you and your family are openly associating with that sort of creature. God only knows what the public would think if they knew, all those people that regularly purchase those drinks you sell. Can't imagine how that would effect one's reputation."

Pete eyed him evenly, smirking slightly as he replied, "Can't imagine how your constituents would react if they knew of your own associates' doings, like your former bodyguard who was involved in an altercation in Wapping a few weeks back." Pete paused for effect, cocking his head to the side and saying pointedly, "But then again, you're rather close to the Earthers, aren't you? Come to think of it, those are exactly the type of people that might have an idea where Dougal Chambers has disappeared to. He was there that night when your former assistant tried murdering him, you know. We had him in protective custody then some blackguards raided the safehouse he was in. Odd thing, that. Perhaps if you're looking for the cause of all the murder and mayhem lately, you'd be better off looking elsewhere, like with your own friends and associates. Elsewhere, where it's not actually in violation of the State Secrets Act, yeah?" He gave the man a smug smile, watching in satisfaction as Isaacson stormed out, ignoring the bewildered looks from the retinue of lackeys he'd brought with him.

There was that mess set aside for the now. Best to continue the constant surveillance on Isaacson and his cronies, since they'd be more likely to try something now that their feathers were ruffled. Now to get back to other pressing issues, like what to do about a certain pair living in Hackney...
Rose trudged back from the bus stop, still feeling a bit knackered from the super-long day and night yesterday and still stressed out from earlier, her thoughts going a mile a minute in her head. She'd had a long talk with Percy and Jasper at the hospital. Well, with Percy anyways. Jasper had been pretty much out of it still, drifting, for the most of it, in lala land with all the pain medications he was on. It had been an informative conversation, very informative. Informative enough that she understood why the Doctor had panicked a bit. Things were serious and time was short. She'd have to go talk to her Dad tomorrow, see if he'd loan her the money if she didn't have enough in her bank account. Torchwood paid well and all the years she'd been here she hasn't spent much of it. Not that she had had time to, since she'd had little social life and less so once the stars began going out. Now she was more worried what she'd find once she got back to the flat.

Two of the Singh's older children passed her on the stairs, calling a rushed greeting as they went by. She returned it, wondering what she was going to find on her own floor. Upstairs, the flat was way too quiet. Quiet and disturbingly clean. Clean enough that it made her pause for a moment, wondering if she'd opened the wrong door. She almost ducked back out to check the number to see if she was in the right flat, but she knew she was. It was a minor miracle, especially how manky the place had been and the fact she'd only been gone for several hours. She didn't even want to consider what level of boredom it had taken to get him in the mood for doing all this, or think about what else he'd gotten up to. The sound of her shoes against the worn lino was far too loud in her ears but was nearly drowned out by the rhythmic beating of her heart.

What was really worrying, besides the uncharacteristic spate of frantic cleaning done during her absence, was the fact that he was nowhere in sight. Nowhere. Bloody hell, she thought, throat too tight and breath coming too short to speak or call his name. The lounge was empty, as was the small kitchen, and with no thump of disagreeable plumbing, so was the loo. On a last bit of hope she glanced in the bedroom, startled then into stillness by what she saw there.

"Oh."

A relieved sigh escaped her lips as she took in the sight of him sprawled out on his back. Not gone, not vanished into the ether, just asleep. Sleeping with his head turned to the side, face toward her, there were still faint, lingering signs of his earlier scowl. It looked like he'd just fallen into bed, staying where he'd dropped after only taking off his trainers and socks first. His bare toes were oddly adorable, completing the deceitful image of total innocence. Him innocent? Ha!

The Doctor stirred at her surprised gasp, brow creasing slightly before relaxing into a careful blankness, devoid of expression. His eyes opened partway as she lightly sat on the edge of the mattress beside him. "You stayed." When she reached a hand to brush his cheek gently, he nodded and burrowed into her touch. "Promised, didn't I," he murmured gruffly, voice still thick with sleep, eyes pools of darkness that searched hers.

It was impossible to miss the watchful, wary look on his face or the way he held himself, shoulders tense. Not exactly unexpected though, was it? More like a miracle that he'd not scarpered, but she couldn't say that. "Hungry?" she said instead, going with the diplomatic route.

He sat up partway, propping himself on an elbow. "Meh," he drawled, considering the idea, "I suppose I'm a bit peckish. Had cold soup earlier."

Rose could guess what had probably happened. "So which one did you try improving, the microwave or the tin opener?"

"Microwave. It wasn't my fault it just decided to go phut on its own," he protested with an offended
sniff. "The quality of manufactured goods these days, they should be ashamed of themselves."

"Did you take it out of the tin before you stuck it in and turned it on?"

He had sat up by then and was reaching for his trainers. Pausing, he gave her a wide eyed look, one eyebrow raised questioningly. "Was I supposed to?"

Rolling her eyes, she stifled a groan. "Never mind, we'll have takeaway. I suppose. Reckon it'll be easier and cost less than having the fire brigade in after mucking about with that cooker again." She shook her head as she got up, leaving the room to grab her jacket again.

"How you ever survived when you were stuck on earth before," she muttered under her breath as she shrugged it on, not intending him to hear her. But curse that superior biology of his, of course he did. "There was always a mess hall, the pub or servants the times I've done this. Or a shindig or two with nibbles aplenty," he said matter-of-factly, surprising her by speaking right by her ear.

He was standing just inches away when she turned around, almost losing her balance from moving too fast and not expecting someone to be that close. Putting a hand on his chest to steady herself, she was going to tell him not to jump her like that, but her attention was caught by something else. She blinked in surprise. "You shaved."

"Yup." He gave her the barest ghost of an uncertain smile.

"You're letting them grow back in again," she breathed, cautiously tracing a finger over one of his sideburns.

He ducked his head, the tips of his ears turning pink. "Yeah. Thought you might like it," he murmured, eyes darting from the floor to meet hers briefly.

Biting her lip, she nodded, unsure of what to say. Between the cleaning and him suddenly trying to impress her, she wasn't sure whether to worry the head injury was messing with him or if this was him trying to say he was sorry. And sorry like he actually, properly meant it, not his automatic response of 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,' like he was prone to doing. Sad thing was, she wasn't sure if she should be grateful or start fretting more. He could be trying to butter her up, just so he pull something even more outrageous later.

That would be so like him, wouldn't it?
They wandered down the block to the pub, planning on ordering a plate of greasy chips and a burger for each of them. Neither of them wanted to get pulled into the crush of people socialising around the bar or the ones busy watching the footie match on telly. There were too many pressing issues for that. "Forgot how busy this place was," she muttered, dodging yet another person who wasn't paying attention to where they were going as she waded through the crowd.

It wasn't a surprise that Crispin was there, or that there were others that immediately surrounded them, all asking the latest on Jasper. "He's fine, should be home in a couple days," she'd said, pushing past and hoping the Doctor would follow instead of being drawn into some debate about what had gone wrong the night before or whatever other gossip there was. Surprisingly, or not so surprisingly once she thought about it, he wasn't any more interested in talking about it than she was. Gruffly pushing past people and waving away the ones prying for more gossip, he joined her in the corner booth she'd slid into to hide in. Of course he'd not had to deal with people blundering into him. At his height, he just strolled through and they'd move aside, easy peasy, like Moses parting the Red Sea. That was so enviable.

With the crowd, service was slow. The burgers were cold by they got to their table and the chips weren't much better. Not exactly a surprise, what with the swarm of people in there. "Could've walked a bit further, there's a pizza shop down the way," he said by way of apology. "Fewer people," he added. "Though, it'll be raining right off. We'd get even wetter then, and us with no umbrella."

Rose shrugged, pushing aside her plate. "Figured we could talk easier this way."

"Right, talking." Looking around, he swallowed nervously, rubbing the back of his neck.

Grinning, she teased, "Less chance for any explosions here, with the whole neighborhood looking on, even if they can't hear anything we say over this racket."

He rolled his eyes, snorting in amusement. "How thoughtful of you," he muttered, but didn't try to leave. She couldn't be sure if he was already scoping out an escape route or not.

"Jasper said to say hello."

He seemed to relax at that, settling back to slouch in his seat, one leg propped on the other and she could feel his foot twitching. He couldn't be as relaxed as he acted, despite him looking like he hadn't a care in the world. "How is he?"

"He was a bit out of it when I saw him. They've kept him pretty comfortable."

"That's good," he said, looking reassured that at least his friend was out of danger and wasn't suffering too much. Throwing a glance at his own plate, he studied it for a moment before throwing caution to the wind. All the better to avoid answering questions with, she wryly added to herself. Or not, knowing him. "The doctors said you saved his life, keeping pressure on the wound."

"Basic medical training. Any boy scout would know it, or anyone with any sense," he said around a mouthful of food.

Right, no surprise on that, she noted, deciding to ignore it. "His mum was there, along with Percy, who's not left his bedside by the look of it. She was really grateful for what you did."
He shrugged, looking embarrassed. "Anyone would've done the same," he replied after swallowing. Looking away, the Doctor pretended to be suddenly engrossed in watching the telly.

Deciding it was now or never, Rose went for it. "So, the bank—" Anyone else would've gotten whiplash, turning their head like that. Eyes narrowing, he tilted his chin up slightly. "What about it?"

Taking a breath, she continued, "Talked to Percy and his mum. I can see why you panicked a bit."

He set the burger aside, no longer looking so casual as he took a deep breath. "This lot," he waved a hand to indicate the people around them, "and Edgar especially, they risked so much taking us in like they did. Hid us when everyone was looking for us, despite all the rot that was on the news reports. Can't just leave them all hanging." He pointed to Mrs Murphy, who was wearing a scarf to hide the hair lost to the chemotherapy already. She was drinking a pint with Mr Donnelly from the newsagent's. "Today's a good day for her, but without any more treatments after this, how long will that last?" He sighed, sitting back in his seat and crossing his arms over his chest, eyes turned up to the ceiling. "All that on top of the building being up for foreclosure. The Singhs wouldn't be able to afford rent anywhere else, it's why they've the deal with Edgar to supply unlimited curry from the shop for a discount. And Jasper... he'll be lucky to even have a place of his own, once he's out of hospital."

Rose had heard all that from Percy. She'd also asked about how much they'd need to catch up on his mum's place. "So you were gonna fix all that at the bank, yeah?"

He groaned, looking away as he nodded stiffly.

"We're gonna have to talk to my dad, you know."

The look he gave her was a mix of terror and outrage. "What? No! He'd be locking me up somewhere if he knew what I tried to do. Also, the indignity! Rose, I'm not —"

Rose shushed him with, "He already knows, 'cos Jake would've told him by now. If he'd was going to do anything, he would've done it by now."

That didn't stop the Doctor's protests. "I'm not going about begging for money, Rose. I will not," he said flatly.

"I'm not talking about borrowing it from him. I'm talking about him helping us make an arrangement with the bank. Percy said Edgar had been talking about selling out a few years back, but we'd have to talk to him first." And now she was waiting for the fireworks to start. Didn't take him long to suss things out for himself, either.

He gave her a look like she'd just proposed that they should try waving down a Dalek fleet and asking kindly for a planetary invasion. That, or wanting to go live with her mum and Pete again. He suddenly sounded very suspicious of her. "Are you talking about getting a mortgage, Rose?"

"Well," she slowly, "if I sold my flat in Wapping and used my savings, I don't think we'd need to." She continued even when he opened his mouth to start protesting against that. "Look, you've been banned from the premises —"

"What?" he squawked, looking indignant.

"Letter came in the post some time while I was in hospital and you were kidnapped," she said dismissively. "Now, since you never actually had your own account, all your pay cheques were paid into mine..."
He raised an eyebrow at that, looking skeptical. "I only worked there two weeks, Rose. Plus with having to replace all the windows on your old building... that can't exactly add up to much." He snorted, looking even more unimpressed than before. "Still owe them a few thousand quid, actually," he mused, shrugging before looking away.

Rose watched him, seeing clearly that more than anything else, he wanted to run. But he wasn't. Not yet, at least. God, was it too soon? Was she rushing him into this too fast? Sure it was a lot to take on, but it was the only legal option she could think of. Unless she could convince her dad to do something more drastic... but the Doctor had already nixed that idea.

It's just too much, too much. He won't profess to understand the senseless practice that this time period has of vying to obtain little pieces of paper only to exchange those little scraps for the things one actually wants, much less pretend to know what the set value to those scraps of paper actually means. All he knows is that whatever the asking price on the building and the garage is, it's too much. Way too much, even if Rose is shrugging it off like it's nothing.

Looked at in another way, a far more tangible and understandable way, it was absolutely terrifying. Terrifying, thrilling, cringe-worthy and alluring, all at the same time. He could say yes and consign himself to a staid permanency that makes his heart pound and his skin itch like he'd sand fleas from Callisto swarming under his clothes and making a meal out of him. He could say yes to something that he had always been denied, silently and demonstratively daring the Universe to snatch it all away. On the other hand, he could say no and seem like the coward he really was or worse yet, seem like an ingrate. She'd think he was throwing her offer back in her face. It would probably hurt her feelings and he didn't want that. He'd hurt her enough as it was.

For a moment, the brief images of the timeline that could've been if he'd stayed as John Smith back in 1918 came to mind, making him flinch. That was too close, too much of a reminder of what almost was and was not; of what was and wasn't possible and what had changed since then. Oh, he could stay now, grow old with her like he'd not been able to do before, but how long before she saw through to the truth of it all and decided it wasn't for her, like Joan had done? Part human or no, he couldn't pretend to be what she thought she'd seen in him before, not now when all the barriers and masks were stripped bare. It was so much easier when one could live forever, barring accidents, and didn't have to live in the muck of the consequences of your own actions. Easier when you still had the charisma to hide most of the flaws, the man behind the mask, and could keep them distracted with the allure of that life. Once all that was stripped away, what was left? Not the legend, not the perceived omnipotence, not much of what he had been able to make them think they saw. And that was precisely the problem, what he didn't want her to see. 'Cos once she saw, she'd have to turn away, unable to look anymore. Hell, he couldn't even bear looking at himself half the time and he was the one expected to shave regularly. He knew what she was thinking, what she planned to do and just... no. It was why he couldn't let her do this, give so much to someone who didn't deserve it. She'd already looked into the heart of the TARDIS, risked her life for him so many times, gotten stuck here with him...

Either way, no matter how you looked at it, it was just too much. The only thing left was to figure out how to tell her so without everything falling into a giant mess of domestics and rowing, people screaming and abject misery to follow. Funny how the words just disappeared when they were needed the most. All that loquaciousness, that unstoppable gob — rather useless once you got down to it, wasn't it? "Rose—"
She must've seen his panic writ large on his oh so expressive features. "Or we could think of something else, then. Come up with another idea or... dunno," she said on a sigh, puffing out a breath. "Rushing things a bit, I guess. Sorry."

He waved her apology away. "Don't be. I'm flattered, really I am, it's just..." Floundering a bit, he scrunched up his face, trying to think of what to say next. Nothing was coming to mind, either. Well, other than a hundred different things he knew wouldn't be prudent. Not if he didn't want the screaming and recriminations to start now, in a pub of all places.

As always, she rescued him. "Makes your skin crawl, yeah?"

"Sorta," he admitted reluctantly, giving her a cautious grin. "Seriously, could you imagine it? Me, a landlord. Ha! The universe would implode at that. I'd be crap at it and doubtful owt would survive the experience. Certainty not functional enough to tell the tale after." He shook his head, running a hand through his hair. "It's just... it's too big. You've done far and beyond..." Pausing again, he swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. "You've given up enough for me, put up with so much, I can't let you —"

"Is this you trying to make my decisions for me again, Doctor, deciding what's best for me when I'm perfectly capable of doing it myself?" she said slowly, with more than a hint of warning in her voice. Her eyes got that squinty look, so much like her mother's, making him duck a little. Only as a precaution of course, just in case the slapping was hereditary.

Bollocks. And this is where it all starts... He visibly cringed at her tone, throwing his dignity to the wind. "Um, no?"

"Fine then. We'll talk to Dad tomorrow," she said primly, sliding out of the booth to stand, grinning down at him.

All he could do was gape in the face of his very apparent defeat. Just like that, she'd... managed him. He had to admire that. Anyone had to admire how she'd so capably shifted everything on its head. "You," he pointed an accusatory finger at her, "are entirely too good at that," he grumped halfheartedly. Heavens knew where she'd picked that up from. Certainly wasn't him.

By the time they got outside and away from the pub's throngs of people, it had started raining, just as the Doctor had predicted earlier. Coming down in buckets, it was, the streets shining under the street lamps and the gutters running with torrents of water. From where she stood under the awning, looking out with a frown, Rose was decidedly unimpressed. "Why did this have to be one of those times you were right?" she complained with a huff.

"Could be worse," the Doctor said cheerfully, his earlier mood seemingly forgotten, "it could be raining sulphur, like it does on Io."

"We're not on Io," she pointed out, thinking about how cold and wet they were likely be by the time they got back to the flat.

Of course he'd be undaunted by that. "Party pooper," he chided lightly. "C'mon, little water never hurt anyone, unless you're currently stranded in the middle of the Atlantic and already treading water. Which we're not." He stepped out from under the awning to illustrate his point. "See?" Throwing her a grin, he held out his hand, wiggling his fingers in invitation. "Race ya?"
They weren't so much wet as they were utterly soaked, both of them getting splashed by a passing cab right in front of the garage. Laughing, they stumbled up the stairs, Rose teasing him because she'd won the race by a good margin.

"Only because I was the chivalrous type and took the brunt of the water," he said with a sniff, wrapping his arms around himself and trying not to noticeably shiver. His fringe was plastered to his forehead and there was a drip running off the end of his nose, making him feel even more chilled to the bone than he already was. Bloody inferior human biology...

Rose noticed and steered him toward the bathroom. "Get the rest of those wet things off and take a hot shower, it'll warm you up."

"When I said it was going to rain, I didn't think it was gonna be a deluge," he complained. Struggling to peel off his wet oxford and the t-shirt after, he looked like a drowned rat, standing there in the hallway dripping everywhere. "Someone should ask around, see if anyone's spotted Noah yet. Think I saw the ark go by just before we passed Argo's shop."

Rolling her eyes at that, she gave him a gentle shove toward the loo before heading to the cupboard for some towels. Looking around, she decided she'd probably need the mop just to clean up the puddles on the floor they'd left when they came in. With the customary thumping and groaning, she heard the shower start up just as she found several large towels. He was sitting on the toilet lid, shoulders hunched, waiting for the water to warm up when she stepped in to hand him the towels. He looked even more bedraggled sitting there and trying not to vibrate his way off his perch with all the shivering he was doing, a sentiment she could totally agree with. It wasn't half Baltic in there and she was getting cold herself, even if she'd not gotten anywhere near as wet as he had.

Promptly wrapping himself in one to stave off the chill, he looked her up and down. "You're wet too," he said pointedly as he bent over to put a hand under the shower spray.

"Has it warmed up yet?" she asked, brushing that aside.

"Almost," he replied. "What about you?"

Rose shrugged, glancing in the mirror to see her own bedraggled state. "I'll be fine."

"You're soaking too, you know," he said, plucking a wet strand of hair away from her face with a pointed look. "You should go first."

"With the water tank as it is?" She shook her head. "You go."

"Hardier constitution, Time Lords," he said with a dismissive wave, trying to keep his teeth from chattering by clenching his jaw. She almost laughed at him then, watching him try to be so brave about it, trying to pretend he wasn't freezing when there couldn't be anything more obvious to her eyes. "Or... we could share."

His eyes flashed at that, a flush rising on his cheeks to match the reddened tip of his nose. Ducking his head, his eyes darted around and she couldn't tell if he was excited or embarrassed. It was sometimes hard to tell with him. That was him, firmly on the retreat again and this time she wouldn't let him. "Doctor."

He looked up again, throat bobbing as he swallowed nervously, a shy half smile on his face, as he apparently decided to take the risk. "It would conserve energy and water," he admitted softly with a look that said the gears in his head were turning away a million miles an hour.

Deciding to save him from further awkwardness and to just get it over with, she stripped off her own
clothes without fuss, jumping in the shower. Almost jumping back out with a yelp, she stepped out of the reach of the spray. Shooting him a glare, she steeled herself and reached to turn up the hot water. "Hot shower, yeah? Not tepid," she groused. God, she'd forgotten what a narrow range of temperatures he actually found comfortable. Hot to him was anyone else's lukewarm but any cooler than that and he'd be frigid.

"It is hot. To me at least," he returned, slipping into the shower, wincing as he did.

While she was soaping up, he was just standing at the back of the stall, still shivering away. "You're hopeless," she told him, turning the temperature back down before grabbing him and pushing him directly under the spray. Reaching around him, she turned the hot water back up gradually. "Here, do it slow and it won't be so bad."

"Yeah?" The Doctor didn't sound in the least bit convinced. He still had his arms wrapped around himself, the shivering starting to pass, but he was still trying to angle himself away from the spray.

"Yeah." It was worse than trying to give her baby brother a bath, him trying to squirm away from the water the whole time. He kept trying to swap places with her, his cold hands making her yelp every time he touched her. That certainly wouldn't do. An idea struck her then, a mischievous look in her eye. There was one guaranteed way to distract him, that much she knew. It had always worked on any other bloke she'd been with and at the end of the day, that's what he was: just a bloke. Running a soap slicked hand across his chest, over his folded arms and further down, she palmed him gently, finding that part of him certainly wasn't focused on the temperature of the water — too hot, too cold, or otherwise.

"Rose," he gasped, surprised, finally unwrapping his arms from around himself to brace himself against the wall as she knelt and sucked him into her mouth. "What're you... is that actually safe, much less sanitary, Rose? Blimey, and you say I have an oral fixation. Oh Rassilon, don't stop."

Of course he'd be able to keep up a near constant stream of babble, even during this, she thought, enjoying the fact she could reduce him to incoherency. Feeling him trembling under her hands and against her lips as she pleasured him, she felt so powerful, so in control as she heard him gasping for breath and the torrent of words stutter to a halt over her head. It was just for a moment though, only as long as it took for him to suck in a lungful of air, but it was enough to tell her he was enjoying it. One hand on his hip stopped him from thrusting forward like he had done at first, nearly choking her when his length hit back of her throat.

"That's got to be illegal... oh ye little fishes, don't stop! Oh yes, don't stop..." His constant mantra of "don't stop" in twelve different languages soon became, "Wait, stop, stop," as he felt his control starting to slip.

She pulled back, releasing him with a wet pop as she looked up at him. He certainly wasn't noticing that the water was steaming nor was he shivering anymore. "What?"

"Er... could we... finish this in bed?" he said in a rush, blushing slightly. "Not that I have anything against us 'christening' the shower, as the colloquial expression says, but really..." He raised a questioning brow as he pulled her to her feet.

They didn't bother with the towels; drying off could wait. Her back had barely hit the mattress when he was between her thighs and already sliding into her. Arms straight as he held himself over her, his eyes bored into hers. Water dripped from his wet hair onto her chest, their skin slipping and sliding together wetly as he started moving slowly. Oddly, he was silent now as he thrust into her, his eyes never leaving hers.
Biting his lip, he wore such an expression of intense concentration that it worried her slightly, wondering what was going on inside that head of his. Guilt over the war, Jasper getting shot, or just guilt in general? While Rose could usually suss what was going on with him, the specifics sometimes escaped her. Reaching up, she put her hands against his shoulders, pulling him down to kiss her. He let her, but still kept his hands planted at her shoulders, elbows at awkward angles as he kissed back. At first she didn't know why he was so careful to keep from touching her with his hands, then she realized. "You're afraid of going into my head again," she said, turning her face enough to rest her cheek against his.

With a nod, he latched onto her collar bone, shifting the angle of his hips enough that his thrusts were hitting her in a whole new way. "Oh god," she gasped, closing her eyes. From far away she heard a soft chuckle and she would've called him an insufferably smug git but it got lost on a moan as he did something involving his tongue and her earlobe. That, and the fact he suddenly moved a hand to grab the back of her knee and pull it up under his arm left her breathless as he changed his rhythm to something faster. Thank God his hands had warmed up now.

Straightening his arm again, he was looking down at her again, wet fringe hanging in his eyes. If anyone had asked and she'd been coherent enough to answer, she'd have said she could see galaxies being born and stars going super nova in the depths of his eyes then. But then, she could've just been imagining it. She couldn't tell.

As good as it all was, she could still sense he was holding back or that something was missing. Vague memories of the one time he'd totally lost control and what it'd felt like came tumbling back. It had been such a chaotic, terrifying mixture of joy, being whole in a way she'd never imagined was possible, and overwhelming pleasure. Suddenly wanting to feel that again and not caring about the possible risks, she put her hands on the sides of his face, touching her fingers to his temples and catching him completely unawares.

It was like electricity sparked between them, an unexpected jolt and the sensation of an immediate presence inside her head, a startled 'What?! But that's impossible,' and something like a silent thunderclap. It was like the universe suddenly blinked. That was even as he suddenly let go of her leg, his hand slamming down on the mattress beside her to catch himself as he threw his head back, letting out a shout. She could feel what she instinctively knew he was feeling, the wet warmth clenching around him, quickly pulling him apart, and it was dragging her with him.

Over the rushing noise in her ears, she dimly heard the sound of her crying out his name, even as he was calling hers. It felt like falling head first into a dark well, not caring if she ever came back up again. When she came back to herself, he was lying on top of her, gasping for breath. A gentle nudge in the ribs and he shifted over to lie beside her, wheezing out, "That's... impossible," as he flopped bonelessly on his side.

"I heard that," she murmured back, stretching luxuriously, curling her toes against the damp duvet. Damn. They really should've dried off first, the bedding was all wet now. Somehow, she couldn't bring herself to really care. "Before, I heard it in my head."

He blinked at her, expression blank. "Rose, you shouldn't have been able to..."

She put a finger against his lips, forestalling him and his babbling. "Hush. Doesn't matter."

He levered himself up on an elbow. "But—"

"Later," she said firmly. "No one's dead, no one got hurt, you're not doing this."

Mouth opening and closing, he let himself drop back onto the mattress, giving over easier than she'd
expected he would. His eyes never left hers, however. Rose could see so much uncertainty in him, reminding her that less than twenty four hours before they were in a situation where they could've ended up dead. On top of that, he'd been suffering from Vortex sickness. That also explained why he'd been sleeping when she'd gotten back from visiting Jasper. Getting wet like he had certainly didn't help if he was still feeling the effects. Feeling an overwhelming urge to hold on and never let him go, she scooted closer, snuggling up against his chest. Reaching out, she let her fingertips trace over the scars on his side, making him startle and flinch. After a moment he relaxed, drawing in a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "Still seems weird, that," he murmured, almost to himself.

She couldn't help but ask. "What's weird?"

"All of it." He pulled her closer against him, resting one hand on her hip, tangling their legs together. "Wearing the damage on the outside where people can actually see it, us... everything."

"You're crap at pillow talk," she told him truthfully, starting to feel sleepy. She should probably get up to fetch a flannel, clean them off before they ended up with an annoying, sticky mess, but she couldn't bring herself to care about that either. That was something she could worry about later. Right now she couldn't be bothered, not when there were much bigger things to fret about. Things she was currently trying to avoid thinking about, ta very much.

The desire to sleep was pressing down upon her heavily, weighing her eyelids down until it was easier just to shut them. His even breathing and the beating of his heart was lulling her off and he was being quiet for the moment. That was something she was very grateful for. However, a short time later: "Rose, I'm cold again."

It startled her to wakefulness, a sudden thought occurring to her as she glared at him, getting up to find another blanket. "God, how the hell are you going to survive the winter?"
Bryn Holburn's solicitor showed up before she could even begin to question him. Showed up in all
due haste, much to her surprise and, as she suspected, Holburn's as well. Of course he advised his
new client to keep schtum, and of course the git complied, as if she hadn't seen him, with her very
own eyes, hold several people at gunpoint and then shoot one. The utter cheek of it all, and now the
bastard was refusing to budge. Wouldn't budge when they still didn't know who his supplier was,
where the goods were coming from, and how many more were involved. The two they'd picked up
at the same time, his accomplices, they weren't speaking either. Pretended they didn't have a clue,
when no one was daft enough to fall for that one.

To say Gail Evans was cross was possibly the understatement of the year, as she slammed back into
the squad room. "Pick up the wife, get her in here. She might end up being the leverage we need,"
she said to the sergeant before turning away, stomping back to her overflowing desk. The
superintendent was watching from the hallway to his office, with a look on his face that said he
wanted a word. Stifling a sigh, she abandoned all hope of sitting down and approached him with
apprehension.

"Mr Tyler has been ringing. Anything?" the super asked with a questioning look.

Shaking her head, she finally let out the sigh she'd been holding in. "No, Sir. We've got him on the
attempted murder and the possession and intent to sell contraband. Nothing on the possible
involvement with the kidnapping a few weeks ago. Torchwood's sending a team over this evening to
have a crack at it. Maybe they'll have some sort of magic pill that'll make him spill," she offered.

Hartley nodded thoughtfully. "I'll let him know, then." Turning back and then pausing, he glanced
back at her. "Any chance on getting ahold of Torchwood's golden boy again on this one?"

Gail smiled ruefully. "Possible, but doubtful. Tyler's running out of patience with him, but it's
anyone's guess what sort of stunt he'd pull just to get out of answering any questions. He's a master at
avoidance and even better at obfuscation. If he wants to keep schtum, he will, and there's not much
for leverage to shift him when the Director of Torchwood himself will only let us go so far."

Hartley looked away, puffing out his cheeks as he let out a breath. "I'll see what I can be done to
change that. The man's got entirely too much information that's vital to too many cases to keep quiet
forever and I don't like it. I want some sort of report on my desk, with some sort of solid conclusions,
proper names, dates, and someone up for changes on it — and I don't particularly care who it is!"

"Yes, sir." Gail had to agree on the first part and cringe at the second. That information that Pete
Tyler passed on was too vague to do anything with, merely summed up most of what she'd already
gathered on her own. Great, now she had to go finagle a confession out of someone who'd already
refused counsel and then go bother Pete Tyler again. Lovely start to the day, wasn't it?

When the call from the sergeant who'd gone over to the residence came in, she couldn't be bothered
to even try to be surprised. No vehicle in the drive, house hurriedly abandoned, and Edna Holburn
had seemingly disappeared. Time to get the scene of crime techs over there, talk to the neighbors and
see if that'd get them any information. That is, if the neighbors were even willing to talk or there was
actually anything to find. They'd already searched three warehouses that were under Bryn Holburn's
name and hadn't gotten so much as a name of a possible supplier from it. All they had were further
mountains of odds and sods that Torchwood were still sorting through.
"Oooh, they've got a picture of Rose in the Mirror today," Jackie said with a sniff. She took a sip of her morning tea, eyeing Pete who was hiding behind his own newspaper. It was one of those rare mornings where it was just them at the table in their dressing gowns. Tony was off with the nanny, and Pete hadn't left at an ungodly hour for a meeting or crisis of some sort.

"How lovely," he murmured offhandedly, turning the page to the next and continuing to read.

"Seems odd she'd be out at that time of the night," she remarked. Pete didn't reply so much as make noncommittal noises as he continued to peruse the broadsheets. Clucking to herself, she shook her head in disappointment at her daughter's ways. "Can spend all hours out wandering the shops but can't call her own mother. It's just like it was before, off wandering around all of time and space and only pops in when she needs her washing done. Typical."

Pete muttered something that she couldn't hear, one hand darting from behind the paper to grab his mug. That too disappeared. Jackie arched a brow at that, particularly unimpressed. Knowing something was up, Jackie went on. "And without Himself. Wasn't that the night before last, when you were busy with extra paperwork over those Gorbi-whatsits? Funny that, if I recall, that shop's not far from Hope Hospital, where I had Tony. Remember that?" she said pointedly. "Used to pop in after my appointments with the midwife. They've a lovely decaf latte macchiato."

"Really? How nice," came Pete's distracted answer. He was fidgeting with the paper rather suspiciously in her opinion. And not like anyone could be that interested in the day's news. If they were, they'd watch it on the telly and save the bother of reading it all. Right. Something was definitely up and right now she was tired of feeling out of the loop.

"So what's he done now?" she demanded as she grabbed the top edge of the paper to glare at her husband. It didn't take a genius to suss what was likely the cause of all the bother. Of all of them, Pete was having the hardest time adjusting to having the Doctor around.

"Jackie—" Pete blinked at her, obviously thinking he was going to act all innocent without any idea what she was talking about.

"Don't play stupid, you know what I'm on about. What's he gotten her into this time?"

Pete set aside the paper, knowing when to call it good. "It's not actually his fault for once."

Jackie's eyes got big as she envisioned a hundred possibilities. "Oh, god. They're not in gaol, are they? Food poisoning from one of those dodgy takeaways?" Another thought struck her then, her hands going up to cover her mouth. "She's not pregnant already, is she? I'm too young to be someone's gran!"

Pete sighed, burying his head in his hands and shaking his head. "No, Jackie, no. Rose isn't pregnant, as far as I know. You're panicking over nothing..."

"They're not getting ready to announce they're moving to the back of beyond or swanning off to somewhere like Mozambique or Slovenia, are they?"

"What?" Pete looked at her in confusion. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Well, you said it wasn't his fault and if she's not pregnant..." Jackie shrugged.

"No one 'accidentally' moves to Slovenia, Jackie," he said on a sigh. "Though if anyone could manage it, it'd be him," he muttered to himself. Pete shook his head. There were many reasons why
he'd not said anything about the incident in the warehouse the night before last or anything about what else he'd found out lately. This was one of them. But, with her already starting to panic, if he didn't tell her, she was likely to go storming over there. If she did, she was likely to get someone all upset (most likely the Doctor) and when the time came for talking, things were more likely to be more difficult (most likely the Doctor).

All of a sudden the doorbell chimed, just as Jackie had opened her mouth to resume her tirade of questions. Pete had to sigh in relief at the apparent reprieve he was getting. Then again, perhaps not. It was unlikely he'd be able to keep this part from his wife. Some things were just inevitable.

Glancing at his watch, he groaned. That was either his solicitor or them and either way you looked at it, that was the cat at least partially out of the bag. And if he didn't want said cat to be climbing the drapery and messing on the carpet, he'd better keep his wife away from the phone or she'd be letting the word out even sooner than he was prepared for. As it was, there was only a limited amount of time he could expect to keep things quiet. A few hours at most, actually.

A hundred thousand bowships were spread out as far as the eye could see, the last line of defence between the Dalek fleet and the Gates of Elysseum. Stark dread came from the foreknowledge of the battle to come, as they blocked out the view of the rest of the Kasterborous system. He watched them pass from an impossible vantage, like he was the bodied awareness of a vast, formless entity spread out in the cold and dark. He wondered if I.M. Foreman's final incarnation had ever felt so vast and filled with such a nebulous sense of drifting before it had merged with the planet Dust. Drifting, seeing, and unable to control yaw, pitch, or even fate itself. The cold surrounded him in his intangible form. Cold that wasn't dispelled by a sudden flash that momentarily lit the dark. A planet buster, most like, taking with it the vanguard of whatever striders, killcruisers and hoverbouts that it could. Unfortunately, several of the bowships went with them, more sacrifices laid on the altars of war. Along with an entire planet sacrificed to buy off time, to hold back the teeming hordes that were still approaching, that's what it was. Was it Karn? Polarfrey? An unnecessary and inconsequential moon? He could only hope, since he didn't properly know and all he could do was watch it happen. Watch it all go down in the flames of destruction and be entirely unable to touch, only to look on, the cold leaching into his very essence as the ether roiled with the ripples and echoes from a battle not yet happened. It hadn't even started, even as it already had, already was, and in future would be remembered by few and survived by even fewer. The time loops had begun and the cold was seeping in even more...

He awoke with a start, Rose in his grasping arms, their limbs still hopelessly entwined as he clung to her as if for dear life. She murmured against the pillow, shifting closer as he buried his nose in her hair. Scent, touch — it served to earth him in the here and now, wherever now was. He couldn't remember — not yet — and the sensation of wafting aimlessly through the cosmos was trying to remain, even as the weight of her against his chest was bringing him back to reality. Right, Pete's World — Hackney, to be more precise — and it was morning. Early in the morning, he gathered from his scrambled time sense. Early enough that he wasn't overly bothered to think about getting up yet. Better to lie here and gather himself, possibly to slip back into slumber again even if, as ever, the threat of more dreams loomed.

The fading impressions from the earlier dreams brought his breath in quick and short pants, sweat making skin clammy and his heart pounding steadily away in his chest, racing like mad. It still felt like there should be two of them in there and the fact there weren't was disorientating, like the whole planet had suddenly tilted on its axis and all had come unfettered, unhinged. Or maybe it was just him. Maybe it was always him. Not immediately knowing where he was, he pulled Rose closer,
trying to find a sense of stability again. What was real and what wasn’t were hard to define as he cast about for a sense of the proper state of ‘being’. He was still him, Rose was still Rose, and they were together... time seemed to wobble then, fading slowly from his awareness, as his now blurry senses settled back to their newfound ‘normal’ state. Given the stated value of ‘normal’, well...

Slightly chilled, he fumbled around for the duvet without looking, unwilling to trust his own eyes yet when visions of burning bowships depressurizing were still so bright in his memory. At least he knew where the sense of pervasive cold had been drawing its inspiration from. If only he could find the blanket. No help for it, he’d have to trust another one of his senses. Perhaps it’d firm his shaky grasp on reality a bit. There: on the floor. He must’ve thrown it off in his sleep. Fortunately, he hadn’t been thrashing and turning too much, or he’d have woken Rose. No, no thrashing, he’d just wrapped himself around her like she was his own personal life raft. Carefully detangling himself, the Doctor rolled and reached enough to snag the fallen duvet with one hand. His pulling away only made her turn over in her sleep, blindly seeking him even while she wasn’t awake. With a feeling of joy mixed with blind panic, he let her snuggle up against his chest, trying not to get too content with his lot when he felt her deep, even breaths puffing warmly against his collarbone.

It still seemed inconceivable, all of this. The chance to stay, not having to go on after watching her wither and die while he remained unchanging himself... it all seemed too fragile, too impossible to be true. The dreams that still plagued him, those seemed more solid by comparison. Those, at least, he understood, knew how to accept and endure. This life, the possibility of it... how long before the universe twigged on and set to righting what it would most likely assume was an error? And last night, what she’d done — initiating telepathic contact like that, full entrelacement — that was beyond impossible. Then again, this was Rose he was talking about. When had she ever let something so insignificant as impossible stop her? But still... she wasn’t the first one that thought they could hold on, that thought it would be forever. She was just the first that actually stood a chance at getting it, provided things didn’t go pear-shaped on them.

Sometimes, when he was feeling optimistic and the sun was shining bright, he told himself that this was Fate and the Universe's way of apologizing for centuries of living through what was frequently best described as utter hell. Then the odd metaphorical hair in the soup of life would turn up, serving to remind his more realistic (cynical) side that no, the Universe just wasn't that kind. One small part of him was half expecting the Trickster's Brigade, the Paradox Faction, or Pythia herself to show up and go, "Ha! Fooled you, you daft old Time Lord. Tremble in awe at my latest clever scheme to wrench away all that you hold dear!" Cue maniacal laughter and the dastardly plot's complete unfolding to follow directly on, as per the usual programme of events. And they all wondered why he couldn't just settle. Rather hard to, when one was accustomed to living on the run and having multitudes of enemies that were all out to get you. After a millennia of that, having a sit down to ponder the grocery list and the complexities of qualifying for the latest shop discounts just wasn't on. It was like going from piloting a star cruiser to a bicycle and expecting the trip to Metebilis to go just as smoothly and speedily as before, without the decompression sickness to clobber you a good one along the way.

Yes, this was something he’d only dreamed of, back when he was busy carrying out the duties of being Time's Champion, but still... it wasn’t like he'd ever stopped to consider the details. Details were for lesser mortals than he. Details and specifics like methods for dealing with and enduring long periods of linear time; procuring lodgings and provisions; having to vary one's wardrobe, since people had fits if they saw you in the same kit day after day... Though, some things about the details, i.e. the domestics, weren't too bad. Being with Rose, the having an idea of what to expect day by day... scratch that, only the part with Rose in it actually made the rest in the least bit bearable. Sorting laundry was worse than being a junior clerk in the Continuum Continuity Office. Beyond monotonous, that. And bloody hell... was he really contemplating a mortgage? What a way to go. Must've fallen out of his tree, lost his marbles and scrambled his wits all in one go. It was the only
thing that made any real sense.

Owen stared at the results on his screen, wondering why he'd expected anything to make any sense. There was no logical reason to expect it, so why had he? Instead of the usual twenty three base pairs, it was almost half normal and the other half... the sets of triple strands might actually explain a lot. Not that they'd explain anything else, but it was at least something to latch onto. Something he might possibly get his head around someday. Of course, he'd have to be pissed blind, but it was something to work toward. A goal, if you will. Though everything he knew about genetics was already turned on its head. Turned on its head, laughed out of the building, and held up for scorn and ridicule — that was just about the size of it. Just imagining the report he'd have to type up was enough fodder for a month's worth of nightmares.

"Sodding hell." He turned away from the computer's display, annoyed that he'd had to resort to the old school methods to achieve that much. Glancing away from the monitor to glare at the thermo-cycler in the corner, he wondered if he could blame it on sample contamination or if these results really could be that bonkers.

Certainly seemed it, though his methods had been impeccable and every time he'd redone the test with this particular sample, the results had been the same. The same difficulty getting the polymerase to separate the DNA; the same difficulty replicating the two strands, that third one that was interlaced partway through was the part that tried to scupper the whole procedure from the beginning; the same moment of wonderment that the strands, once separated, didn't actually match. And forget trying to even explain the whole illogical number of chromosomes in there, that was where he threw his hands up. Yeah, that report was going to be just lovely. Organizing the results concisely and coherently, then putting it into layman's terms for the boss... just how the hell was he supposed to accomplish that, when he himself couldn't make heads or tails of it? He was about ready to go tell him that if the subject was such a flipping genius, that he could bloody well do it himself and piss on the whole subtle bit, he was tired. But no, he couldn't do that. Something inside just wouldn't let him give up, especially where he'd actually got the process to run through. Perhaps he was just too stubborn, but with one test already completed and the process now successfully tweaked to actually yield results, hopefully the next two would go a bit faster the next go around. He could only be so lucky if it did, but he wasn't counting on it.

"Owen?"

He looked up. Sally Henderson was standing in the door of his lab, looking concerned. She stepped in, looking around like she expected some alien threat to be lurking under one of the tables. "Everything alright?"

"Fine," he muttered, slightly annoyed as he turned the display away. No sense in confusing anyone else right yet, that could wait til he'd shown the boss. Let him sort it from there, suss out if it actually meant anything.

Sally, tilted her head, brow furrowing as she squinted at him. "You sounded a bit bothered there."

Owen sighed. "It's nothing, really. Just a project that the boss wanted done awhile back that's just now getting any results," he complained.

Sally gave him a sympathetic look, clucking. "We've all had days like that," she said.
Owen snorted. "Yeah. Excepting, of course, that this is just the first set of specimens that I've finished testing. Still got two more to go, and I've already been at it for three months."

Wincing, Sally tried to look on the bright side. "Cheer up then. At this rate, you'll have something to keep you occupied until spring, besides putting us lot back together."

Owen glowered at her. "Don't you have something to be doing?" he asked pointedly.

Grateful for the reminder, she nodded. "Yeah, I was supposed to get a physical before I go out on anymore missions. Went round to your office but you weren't there, so..." She shrugged. "There's been reports of weevil sightings around Cardiff again and my name's on the duty roster. Figured I'd get this sorted and head off before I miss all the action."

"Right." Owen stood, waving a hand to indicate she should precede him. As he stopped to turn out the lights and lock the door again, he looked back. Waiting a bit wouldn't hurt. Perhaps it'd help him to have time to think it over a bit more. After all, Pete had said while it was a priority, dealing with the medical needs of the rest of Torchwood was the top one, as per the norm. So be it, the rest could wait then.

By the time Rose woke, the skies were still a disheartening shade of grey and it was still raining. For a moment she lay there, not wanting to leave her warm spot under the duvet. Knowing that the air in the flat was likely to be chilly, she was willing to use the excuse that the gangly arm across her waist had her pinned in place. Then she remembered the day's errands and started disentangling herself with a groan. Doing so was easier said than done, since every effort to pull away only made the Doctor wriggle closer. Judging from the evidence, he seemed to have sprouted several extra limbs in the night. At least six of them, going from the way an arm or a leg would shift to take the place of the ones she'd already gotten loose. As cute as she normally would have thought it, her bladder was starting to send urgent signals, trying spur her into more haste. With an impatient shove, she managed to free herself to run for the loo. All that effort elicited no more than a sleepy grumble from the lump in the bed as he then wrapped himself around her pillow and her share of the duvet, compensating for her absence.

Returning from the loo, she wasn't all that surprised to see the Doctor sitting up, blinking at her blearily. With his hair hopelessly ruffled and pointing in all directions, he was the very picture of bewildered sleepiness as he yawned and stretched. It was almost funny how half the time he slept later than she did and tended to sleep like the dead. There wasn't much that would wake him, other than the rattle of the plumbing. (But then, those bloody pipes could probably wake half of London if one wasn't careful, what with the state they were in.) Then there were the mornings where he'd be up with the dawn, overly energetic, and wouldn't half drive her mad with the disgusting levels of cheer he'd exude.

This wasn't one of them. Obviously.

"Mornin', sleepyhead," she mumbled in greeting as she walked to the dresser to rummage for an acceptable outfit, thinking to herself in fuzzy satisfaction on how the tides had turned. If she was a different person, she'd have paid him back for all the times he'd taken the mick about her oh so human sleeping habits, but she didn't. She had more important things to attend to, like taking a shower and getting dressed.

He flopped back against the pillows, shielding his eyes with an arm as he seemed to flinch at even
the small amount of light coming through the drapes. "Mmmf—" was his only reply as he attempted to burrow back under the blankets.

By the time she finished her shower and had thrown her hair into a messy up-do and was feeling a bit more awake herself, he was partially dressed and sitting on the sofa, curled around a mug of coffee and staring at the TARDIS coral. Wearing a pair of jeans and a vest, he had his knees drawn up before him, bare toes peeking over the edge of the sofa as she sat beside him with her own mug. So far, he'd restrained himself from tinkering with the kettle, but only because of dire threats and multiple warnings he'd been given before he'd gotten the chance. Rose was rather grateful and surprised that he'd actually listened for once. Almost as surprised as she'd been that her mug had been laid out on the sideboard waiting for her, the teabag already in it and just needing the hot water added. There'd been toast and jam laid out too, but she knew better than to trust that. Anyone with eyes in their head could see the sticky fingerprints on the outside of the jar and figure things out for themselves. Also, she wasn't feeling too keen on eating at the moment, since her stomach was in knots wondering how things were gonna turn out.

"So," Rose started, wondering if his apparent pensive mood was a precursor to an all-out panic or if he was just stunned speechless. When he turned his head and blinked at her, she was momentarily flustered. Just turned and blinked, like that was all he was capable of. Just blinked and stared at her with one of those inscrutable looks that no one else she'd ever known was able to manage. One of those ones that with a little more lift to the chin and more peering down the nose involved would be the 'dribbled on her shirt' one. No, this was too open and flat for that, with a sort of thousand metre stare to it. In short, she hadn't the foggiest on how to read it. With the sudden gap in an conversation that was more aborted than faltering, she rolled her eyes and decided to bide her time. If anything else, the time spent between getting stuck here and the development of the Dimension Cannon had taught her one thing: patience. That and how to grit your teeth, smile, and not scream one's frustration.

After a few minutes, the Doctor seemed to give himself a shake, going from a half decent impression of a statue to a barely restrained bundle of nervous energy. "Yeah," he drawled, as if there hadn't been a gap of nearly five minutes. Suddenly he stood up, one hand going to rub at the back of his neck while the other twitched by his side. "Erm, I'll just... go get ready and then we'll go track down Edgar."

The coffee must've kicked in finally, she thought to herself, perhaps a bit uncharitably.

When he returned from the loo, fully dressed in jeans and a clean shirt with his jacket already on over it, she was momentarily stunned. For the first time in months, he'd bothered to do something with his hair, instead of a cursory combing and then just letting it do whatever it wished. There was even what looked like a half-hearted attempt to spike it up, which was surprising. For a moment she didn't know whether to cheer, laugh or start worrying. Other than the clothes, he looked almost like he had done when they were travelling together, instead of how he had when she'd found him again and they'd been facing down Davros. But then, that wasn't right, it'd been the other Him that had been facing down Davros, while he had been busy saving the TARDIS and coming back to try rescuing them. God, it didn't get any easier, all the pronouns. If anything, it only got more confusing.

Rose settled for merely following him out the door, having finished getting ready while he was showering. As usual, the smell of too many cats, overdone curry, and motor oil from the garage below greeted them as they stepped out and the fraying carpet tried to trip them up on the stairs like it always did. "Should get that taken up," she muttered to herself as she avoided the worst of it and stepped down into the cramped foyer. After walking out through the front entrance, she looked back, thinking about how much work this place would be. Work, yes, and a lot of it, but it'd give them both something to focus on, instead of getting themselves tied up in knots thinking about the future
all the time. Or thinking about the past, which could be just as dangerous — if not worse.

"Far too much carpeting," he agreed, stepping aside to avoid being run down on a youth on a bicycle zipping by.

There was no one at the garage when they got there. Going through the contacts list on her mobile, she was getting ready to call Edgar when he pulled up in the van. Nigel, Terry and Percy were with him. It wasn't the fact that they were all acting relaxed and casual and talking earnestly amongst themselves and weren't making any effort to go open the shop that was the strangest part, it was the fact that they'd all gotten themselves cleaned up for some reason. Beards had been trimmed, hair slicked back, and... good God, where the hell had Edgar found a suit? That was a bit... odd.

Okay, so maybe it was something contagious, this sudden urge to get gussied up for no apparent reason. Just out of the blue, too, she thought. Or maybe there is something going on, and no one told me. Looking at the Doctor, she could tell he was just as bewildered as she was, giving her a questioning look like he expected her to know something about it.

All this happened in mere seconds as Edgar finally hopped out of the van, stepping around a puddle by the kerb, and walked up to them. With a broad grin, he clapped them both on the shoulders, booming, "There you are! Just in time to hear the news."

"Oh," the Doctor said softly, looking confused as he finished lamely with, "News, Rose. Isn't that exciting?"

She was just as bewildered herself, murmuring, "Quite," as she wondered what was going on.

With another nervous glance at Rose, the Doctor squinted at Edgar suspiciously. "News? What news?"

Edgar grinned. "Something that'll solve all our problems and keep you out of trouble." He poked the Doctor in the chest, making him look even more concerned.

She couldn't even begin to think what he could be talking about, but she knew whatever it was it likely meant they were going to have to adjust their plans about talking to Pete or scrap them altogether. Though, whatever it was, Nigel and Terry weren't looking overly impressed, and Percy just looked like... well, Percy. It was hard to read any expressions under all that facial hair, even if it'd been trimmed a bit.

"Oh?" The Doctor was doing his best to look merely curious, instead of overtly acting like he expected word of an impending disaster.

Seemingly not noticing their apprehension, Edgar said cheerfully, "Got your old boss there to take over the mortgage, what with all the alien tech around technically makes this 'beyond the purview of civilians,' as Terry said it was, an—"

The Doctor stared at him, wide-eyed. "Come again, say what?" he sputtered, shaking his head as if to clear it.

Edgar glared a bit, speaking slower and more carefully as he continued, "I transferred the papers to your—"

"Oh, I got that bit," the Doctor interrupted, waving a hand. He chuckled nervously and ran a hand through his hair. "Blimey, for a minute there I was thinking you'd said you'd just sold the whole kit and caboodle off to Torchwood 'cos there's a spaceship upstairs."
"I did," Edgar deadpanned, flashing a relieved smile and nodding, glad that he was being fully understood. He looked over at Rose, adding, "And your dad wants you to stop by the office or the house, if you could."
While he was busy doing his impression of an outraged carp, Rose grabbed the Doctor by the shoulders and gave him a little shake, trying to calm him down before he had a meltdown in front of the whole neighborhood. "Doctor, it's not the end of the world," she reassured him.

"But, Rose—" he protested, only to be cut off with, "I'm sure there's nothing nefarious or underhanded about it and technically, it's to be expected."

He was starting to give her that squinty look now. "What do you mean?" he said slowly and carefully.

Rose shrugged. "Any sites with any artifacts too large or dangerous to move, we — Torchwood — usually take over the administration of. Edgar must've talked to Dad about it before today. Though I'd be surprised if he didn't already know if the bank was getting ready to foreclose long before this."

Any hope she had of him just accepting that without a fight were dashed when he nodded to himself, stating, "Right," in a flat tone with a carefully blank expression on his face as he spun on one heel and strode off, leaving them all to gape after him.

Here we go again, she thought as she hurried after him, just barely catching up to him before he boarded the bus. "Where are we going?" she asked, nearly breathless, cursing his long legs and his ability to be so focused and intent that speed and distance were of no consequence.

He gave her a sidelong look over his shoulder as he made his way down the aisle, barely noticing the other passengers or their bewildered stares as he stormed past them. "To Torchwood," he said flatly once he'd seated himself in an available seat near the back. Then he turned to gaze resolutely out the window, his expression tight and guarded. Trying to pull him out of his shell, to get him to open up again, she touched his hand gently with hers. When he didn't react, she twined her fingers with his anyway and sighed to herself.

She could understand his feelings of apprehension and betrayal, she really could. But what she didn't get was his overweening sense of distrust of all things Torchwood. Yeah, considering the Torchwood in Universe Prime, it was sorta understandable, but how many times did she have to explain this one was different? He'd even worked for them for a couple weeks, for Christ's sake. And Pete — how could he distrust him so much? They'd got on so well in the beginning... and here she was, caught in the middle of things again. She could only hope to diffuse the situation before it turned into an outright feud. God, if only there was a way she could get there first, talk to Pete and sort out a way to calm the Doctor down. But then, that would require leaving him alone and probably having to tie him down somewhere. As tempting and intriguing as that thought was, it just wasn't possible. Not when he was sitting right next to her, stonily staring out the window and watching the signs of their destination getting ever closer.

Finally, just before the bus stopped to let them off by Billingsgate Market, he sucked in a deep breath, letting it out slowly before turning to her and giving her a shaky smile. It didn't quite reach his eyes, but it was a start. When they were at last standing in front of the entrance to Torchwood, he sucked in a breath and closed his eyes as if bracing himself before a battle. A battle that she sincerely hoped this wouldn't turn into.

Rose grabbed his hand again and gave it a reassuring squeeze, feeling the tension in the way he held himself stifly. She wanted to say something, anything, but didn't know what. If this had been before, back when they were travelling and before he'd changed, she'd have known what to say. But with
him, this him, she often didn't, didn't know how to break the silence, how to tell him that everything was going to be okay. After all, she wasn't that same wide eyed nineteen year old anymore and she'd seen enough, experienced enough to know that sometimes things weren't alright. Sometimes you were just lucky to survive to tell the tale after. As far as the now went, he was still standing still and keeping his eyes tightly shut, the constant stream of people going about their day passing them entirely unnoticed. He could've been alone on an uninhabited planet in the furthest reaches of the galaxy for all he was reacting.

Just as she was about to point that out, he suddenly came to life. Raising a questioning eyebrow and cocking his head to the side, he gave her a broad grin, one of those ones that made him look completely daft that she couldn't help but mirror, and said, "Ready?"

She nodded, wondering if she really was as she replied, "If you are."

He grabbed the door and held it open, waving his other arm with a courtly gesture. "After you."

Hesitating as she took in the grin that hadn't budged a bit and the hint of steel in his eyes, she gathered her own resolve and said, "Let's get this over with." As they breezed through security, ignoring the curious looks from the receptionist and the few others present in the front lobby, she thought to add, "Try not to make too much of a scene, yeah? It's not like it's a vast conspiracy against you, you know."

When the morning had dawned and still no sign of her husband, she calmly began gathering up what necessities she'd need. A change of clothes, a passport and papers under a false name, all the weapons she'd already gathered, and of course, ammunition or battery packs as applied. There was no panic or haste to her actions, for this was a situation long since prepared for. One couldn't expect to get involved in something like this without attracting unfavorable attention, especially after they'd taken things to the next level. Perhaps grabbing Torchwood's pet had been a mistake, she thought as she rummaged through the safe for the second set of falsified paperwork. Edna Holburn shook her head fiercely. No, the only mistake was letting that creature go and she was certain it was his fault that the fuzz had caught wind of things. That lot hadn't twigged before now and the only change was him.

No use crying over spilt milk and all that. Not much had changed in the long run, just sped some things up a bit, closed down a few possible options. But no bother, there'd been plans in place for that as well. Plans, certain methods and means of action that would now come into play. There was much to be done, and she'd not be doing it alone.

First on her list of things to do: spring her dearly beloved idiot from the clink. As difficult as that sounded, she wasn't concerned. She already had an idea. Insurmountable odds? Immovable object? Simple. All one needed was a large enough lever and bob's your uncle, you could do anything. Well, in this case, it was leverage not a lever per se, but the principle was the same. Good job she already knew just the lever to get things moving in the direction she wanted, right? She'd always been clever like that.

Now she was sitting in a carpark in a stolen van. Well, not really stolen. More like borrowed, but poor murdered Les wasn't going to be complaining about it — not that he'd have dared to if he was still alive. And she was waiting. Waiting for the right opportunity to make her move, you might say. Things like this were very delicate. Had to be very careful about it, you did. Make the right moves, all at the right time, and you were golden. Had to be prepared, too, or sudden changes in luck could
scupper everything. And you couldn't have that, could you now? No, you had to be ready, alert, patient. She could be very patient if need be.

Still wondering how to tell the Doctor and Rose what he'd been forced to do to keep them as safe as possible without resorting to more drastic measures, Pete had just opened the door to his office. He reckoned he had a few hours to spare before they found out. Plenty of time to come up with an explanation that would forestall the inevitable fit of pique. Unfortunately, all his vague ideas slipped away once he stepped into his office and found his desk was currently occupied by one singularly unimpressed part alien.

He could've been indignant, demanded an explanation for the whys and hows, but he found he was more grateful that the lock still looked to be intact. Instead he pretended like office break ins were a daily occurrence and walked over to give Rose a hug. "How are you, love?" he asked as he pulled back to look into her eyes, acting as if there wasn't a six foot tall person doing their best to glare daggers at him.

"Good, I'm... good." Rose threw a look at the Doctor before deciding to go with the flow. "How's Mum and Tony?"

"Missing you." Pete smiled. "If you've no plans you could come to Sunday dinner," he asked. "We don't see you as much anymore now, considering you're less than twenty minutes away from us."

Rose looked abashed, pushing her hair back behind her ear. "Sorry, things have been a bit hectic. You know how it is."

"Indeed I do." Pete turned to finally acknowledge the other person in the room, noting the absolutely expressionless face of the Doctor, who was now leaning against the desk with his arms crossed. "Doctor," he said in greeting.

The Doctor raised his chin slightly, flashing a tight smile. "Pete." He wasn't giving away anything, but even a child would've known it was one spark away from a full conflagration. The tinder was all set, plenty of logs laid and waiting... Might as well get it over and done with, save myself the trouble, he thought, deciding to just go ahead with it and say the truth.

"I can guess why you're here. Edgar must've wasted no time."

The Doctor made a half swallowed ironic snort. "Ah, no. He didn't."

"Figures." Pete wondered what it would be like, a perfect world where no one jumped the gun, where plans didn't immediately backfire and surprises weren't utterly spoiled. Such a wonderful place that would be, he thought.

The Doctor didn't waste any time getting to the point, fixing Pete with a level stare, chin raised slightly. "So, you've bought yourself a garage and a rundown building full of flats, Pete Tyler. I'd say congratulations, but first, what are your intentions toward the residents? Bound to violate several of your oh-so-important rules and regulations, considering there's now a good dozen or more civilians living on Torchwood property. The presence of my ship or not, that's bound to make all your bean counters a bit cross, involving civilians like that."

Refusing to rise to the bait, Pete said flatly, "They won't even know about it. Less for them to worry about, that way. As for the rest and the why, it came to me after we last talked, that you being a
wanderer and all..." Pete sighed, suddenly feeling worn out by all this. "Maybe if you just had a
place of your own, something besides that ruddy ship you're growing, that perhaps you might just...
settle down, be content. I don't know, find something to distract yourself and focus on while you pull
yourself together."

"Pull myself together." The Doctor spoke slowly, enunciating carefully like he was sounding out the
words to himself. He glanced over at Rose, one eyebrow raised. Rose was watching them both with
apprehension, eyes flicking back and forth as she watched for things suddenly progressing too far.
Pete rather wished this conversation could've been done without an audience. But then, if she hadn't
been there, he doubted things would be so coldly... civil. Or it was for now and he couldn't help but
think that could change any minute. Hopefully Rose could rein in their resident tempest in a teapot
before things went too far.

Pete decided to throw caution to the wind and went with it. "You seem to be..." he hesitated before
finishing with, "unraveling a bit."

The Doctor's expression went odd, ending up somewhere between affront and amusement. "What,
like a scarf that's all clapped out and needs mending?"

Pete blinked and shrugged. Odd choice of metaphor, but what hey, the bloke was an alien. "I
suppose you could say it that way..."

The Doctor turned to Rose, saying in a conspiratorial tone, "See, Rose, he's comparing me to
knitwear. The bloody cheek! And they say I'm a bit lulu." He rolled his eyes and twirled a finger
around his head. "Humans," he muttered under his breath, shaking his head in feigned disgust. Or
maybe it wasn't feigned, hard to tell with him. He pointed an accusatory finger at Pete "This better
not be some grand scheme of yours, trying to bring me to heel. Come on, Rose, we're leaving."

He made as if to shoulder his way past Pete, who was gritting his teeth and clenching his fists in an
effort to keep from throttling the insufferable prat in front of him. Without even thinking about it,
Pete reached out and grabbed the man's lapels, giving him a shake. "Damn it, I'm trying to help you,
you daft idiot," he snapped. "There's lunatic back benchers bent on seeing you and the perceived
threat you pose eradicated, and would gladly use any evidence of you not being under any sort of
control as an excuse to take down Torchwood. Do anything at all to achieve it, and just how long do
you think you'd last staying hidden, with some new owner taking over the building?" Breathing
harshly, he gave the Doctor another shake before letting him go, the Doctor's expression having gone
from stubborn defiance to one of chagrin. "Believe it or not, the whole universe doesn't revolve
around you."

Pete stepped back, adding softly, "You don't think I don't know there's no way you could move your
ship to safety or what those friends of yours mean to you. I know you well enough to know that this
was the safest way to do things. You'd do something stupid and then it'd be me having to cover up
enough crimes to land you in prison for the rest of your days." He nodded at Rose. "And after all she
went through trying to find your sorry arse, it'd be a crying shame for her to spend the next twenty
years only seeing you on supervised visits surrounded by murderers, rapists, and the like." Pete
rubbed a hand over his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. He was surprised at how tired he felt.

The Doctor stopped in his tracks, shuffling his feet and tugging his earlobe in embarrassment.
Scrunching up his nose as he tried to think of an appropriate apology, he said, "Well —"

Pete cut him off, holding up a hand. "No, just go. Go back to whatever hole it is that you like to
crawl into and just think, think about how difficult it's been trying to keep you safe from that lot out
there and how much more difficult you make things by being like you are. If I see you again for
anything other than Sunday dinner, I might end up doing something I'll regret later."
Avoiding looking at Rose, the Doctor made his way back to the lifts. He felt like a right git now and he knew seeing the look on Rose's face was only going to make it worse. She was hovering along right beside him, throwing off tension and disapproval in waves. One didn't have to be in the least bit telepathic to feel that. It was like being caught up in the eye of the storm, waiting for that short period of calm to break and the destruction and chaos to start anew.

Rose was steadfastly pretending to ignore him, jaw clenched as she watched the display above the lift doors counting down. Not that he could blame her, really, since about now he'd gladly pull up a floor tile or two and crawl under them. He hadn't realized how much pressure Pete was under, or that there were that many people out to get him still.

Finally, he dared to break the silence. "So, on a scale of one to ten, how much of an arse am I?"
Better to do it now and get it over with before they reached the street. Bus rides were bad enough as it were without having Rose not speaking to him.

Rose's shoulders tensed, her scowl deepening around the edges, but she answered. "Around a hundred and two," she said shortly.

Wincing, he nodded. "I deserved that, I suppose." At Rose's exasperated glance, he amended that to, "Okay, I definitely deserve it. I'm an arse, biggest one in the universes. But still, how else am I supposed to act? Every time someone gets into a position where they can push me around and I let them, it all goes terribly wrong. Let the Time Lords push me around, let them drag me into the War and whim! No more Gallifrey."

Rose goggled at him a bit, looking outraged. "Are you comparing my dad providing us somewhere safe to you wiping out your own planet?"

"Not entirely, but you've got to admit the similarities are there. Do this, don't do that, it all tends to come out to a disaster, especially when I'm the one getting told," he retorted.

Rose looked at him and threw up her hands in defeat, just as the lift stopped and the doors slid open. "You're hopeless, you are. Completely hopeless!" she sputtered, striding out across the lobby with him trailing behind.

He barely managed to catch up with her before she was pushing through the doors, trying not to notice the curious looks from the security personnel and then the people on the pavements outside. She was already disappearing into the crowd, heading in the opposite direction from which they'd came. Cursing inwardly and trying not to knock anyone over, he called out, "Rose, wait up!"

"Bugger off, Doctor," he heard faintly over the sound of the traffic, "I need some time to cool off so I don't end up smacking you a good one for this."

He stopped, the throngs of passersby parting around him. Not one to give over easily, he persisted in following her. Up ahead was the park, the one they'd occasionally had their lunches together in during those short weeks he'd worked at Canary Wharf. A sudden sense of foreboding crept up, along with vague, blurry memories of a dark cellar and a desperate terror. Something told him he had to stop her before she got there, before it was too late.

"Rose? I'm sorry?" he tried, starting to feel hopeless just as he caught a glimpse of a figure moving to intercept Rose. Or maybe not, could just be someone who was going to the park to get some fresh air. It could be that, but his instincts were telling him something entirely different.
She'd been sitting there, minding her business and watching the park across the way when opportunity knocked. Or rather, fell right into her lap. Edna could barely believe her eyes, after spending so much time wondering how much leverage she'd need and which would be the likeliest chance to get any when there she was. All by herself, no bodyguards, no Torchwood agents — only him running along behind and as it were, he was too far away to do anything before she got the drop on Miss Tyler.

As she got out of the van and crossed the street, she reached a hand inside her bag, thoughtfully fingering the gun hidden in there. She could grab the girl and shoot that freak, get her leverage and her revenge in one stroke. It was tempting, so tempting, but she quickly discarded the idea. There were no guarantees that it'd actually work, killing him, and besides, she needed someone to take the message and spring her husband from the clink.

Putting on her innocent old lady act, she shuffled into Rose's path, forcing the young woman to stop. Smiling up at the girl, she said, "Sorry to be a bother dearie, but have you seen my little dog? I'm afraid he's wandered off."

Rose held back for barely a moment, throwing a quick glance over her shoulder, but approaching the woman she perceived to be harmless. "What's he look like," she asked, just as Edna pulled out the gun and grabbed her.

Over the girl's shoulder Edna could already see that alien bloke of hers breaking into a run, even as she hissed, "One move and I'll blow yer head off, sweetheart." Raising her voice, she yelled to the man who was mere yards away now, "Stop right there or she gets it."

He skidded to a halt, eyes wide and dark. "You don't have to do this," he said calmly, reaching out a hand.

"I said don't move," Edna snapped, pulling Rose closer and pressing the gun barrel tightly against her neck. To her surprise, the girl seemed to be taking this in stride, showing no signs of any panic or fear. Her bloke however, for as calm as his face was, he was all coiled tension. When he didn't move again and stood with his head cocked to the side, obviously waiting for her to say her piece, she gave a tight smile of satisfaction. "Now, you want her back alive and in one piece, you get my Bryn back. You've got two hours."

The Doctor swallowed past a throat that suddenly seemed to have a boulder or three lodged in it. His worst fears, come to pass by another park with no one there to see or help. "That's impossible," he burst out, shaking his head. "How'm I supposed to get ahold of you?"

"I'll contact you," she replied simply.

"But —"

Edna paid him no mind, merely reiterating, "Two hours, any funny business and she's dead," before pulling Rose across the street with her, careful not to let her guard drop. One wrong move and the girl would get away and that alien pet of hers would be after her.

Still, wasn't it convenient how things always worked out? she thought as she reached the van. Of course, then came the tricky part, getting the girl into the back of the vehicle without her escaping and spoiling the whole plan she'd thought up. Seeing no other option, since she was without an
assistant, she shrugged and smacked the blonde upside the head, catching her as she crumpled to the
ground.

As he watched the van peel away with a squeal of tyres, taking his Rose with it, he started running.
Running back to Hackney, because it was the only place to go — all the stuff he'd need to get Bryn
out of gaol and get Rose back was there, starting with the sonic screwdriver and whatever else he'd
need.

His mind went through and discarded a thousand different possibilities as he ran, feet pounding
against the pavements as he went. So many choices, but only one that wouldn't end up with someone
dead. Edna had said no funny business, so that left out telling either Pete or the boys from the garage,
much less telling the rozzers. Knowing that old bint, she certainly wasn't bluffing. If he mucked this
up, Rose was dead. So be it, that left only one choice: time to go break into the Metropolitan Police
headquarters. Couldn't be too bad, could it? Well, on the other hand... right, time to go do some
jiggery-pokery and get this done. If Edna Holburn wanted her miserable wretch of a husband back,
fine then, he'd do it. Easy-peasy, actually.

Right now, he didn't care what he'd have to do to get it done or what the consequences might be
after, he just had to get Rose back safely. Everything else, rules and laws and such, could go hang
for all he cared. At this minute, nothing else mattered. But if she so much as harmed a single hair on
Rose's head, there'd be hell to pay. He knew more than most people about dishing out doses of hell
on those who'd crossed the line, and this time, they certainly had.
As per the norm, there wasn't much excitement in monitoring the CCTV cameras around the city. Except this time, there was, as a brief scuffle at a nearby park and a vehicle quickly leaving the scene right after caught Jason's eye. Quickly rewinding and then playing the footage back, Jason cursed under his breath and put the call in, even as he was scanning the rest of the network for further sightings of the van. It wasn't long before a team was on its way, following the van, and Pete Tyler himself was on his way to go track down the other person who'd been on the video.

As he drove into Hackney, he already had a good idea of what was going on. Since it was a clear cut case of kidnapping and the only person who wasn't the perpetrator or the victim had already left the scene, they could assume it was something involving some sort of ransom. What he couldn't figure out was what they wanted from the Doctor. Or rather, he didn't want to consider the implications beyond that his stepdaughter was in danger because, really, God alone knew what that man had stashed away.

Once there, Pete looked around with vague interest, this being the first time he'd ever gotten past the front door and not having to immediately deal with a hostile half alien bent on defending his turf. The flat wasn't as bad as Jackie's description had led him to believe, more cramped and rundown if anything. There was no one in the insanely small kitchenette, but there were sounds of someone moving about in the next room. The first thing that caught his eye was the large lump of coral sitting in a large tray and taking up a good portion of the minuscule sitting room. It was the first time he'd actually laid eyes on the thing, only having heard what Jake and the others who'd been there during the frantic search for the Doctor just weeks before. Of course Jacks had mentioned it, but hearing about it and seeing it were two very different things.

It was approaching the size of a filing cabinet, like the ones in his own office. Except he didn't have to try imagining those traveling through time and space and this... it was inconceivable, looking at it and realizing that someday in near future that lump of golden brown rock would be. Much less that it'd also be looking like one of those old police public call boxes then, like the sort that used to be scattered around the city, back when he was a kid. Mind blowing, really. And then there was its future pilot...

The Doctor was sitting hunched over something with a lot of wires trailing everywhere when he walked in, sonic screwdriver clench between his teeth and far too focused on what he was doing to notice anything else. Or anyone else, for that matter. Watching for a moment and trying to decide if he really wanted to know the answer he was most likely to get, Pete hesitated before asking, "What're you doing?"

Without pause, the Doctor removed the sonic, using it to solder a couple of wires together, distractedly answering, "Building a psycho-synaptic wave modulator."

"And what's that when it's at home," Pete asked carefully, wondering why he even bothered. It wasn't like talking any sense into the man did any good and threats didn't have much of an effect either.

Still intent on hooking in a sequence of relays and hooking up something Pete dimly recognized as a perception filter, the Doctor replied in a vague tone, "Overloads the synapses with enough stuff to send people into a nice, peaceful kip."

Closing his eyes and counting down from ten, Pete forced himself to remain calm, even though the idea of a device like that on the loose really worried him. Mostly harmless or not, who knew what he
could be planning, especially if Rose was in danger or the next time the bloody lunatic was getting interesting in the financial system. But still... "And you're using it for what?" he said in a smooth voice.

Now the Doctor was splicing some wires together with one hand and reaching for a roll of gaffer tape with the other. "Getting Bryn Holburn out of police custody."

"You couldn't go to the appropriate authorities and do it the legal way instead?" Pete hinted, leaning over to watch what he was doing more carefully.

"Oh, can't do that," came the blithe reply. "Pete said not to bother him before Sunday dinner and seeing as this is only Thursday..." He paused, scrunching his nose up as he thought back to when he had first noticed someone talking, thinking through to the now, when he realized that voice was awfully familiar. Too familiar. It sounded a bit like...

With a sinking feeling, he looked up, throat bobbing as he swallowed nervously and chanced a slight grin. "Hiya, Pete! Fancy meeting you here. Shame I'm so busy, 'cos otherwise...." He jumped up and made as if to steer Pete back to the door. "Anyhoo, mustn't tarry, things to do and all that. So glad you could visit, thanks for stopping by..."

Pete crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to budge and fixing the Doctor with a gimlet eye. "What the hell are you up to now, Doctor?"

Giving it up as a lost cause, the Doctor ran a hand through his hair, puffing out a shuddering sigh. He seemed to deflate a bit, his pretensions of being calm, cool, and collected vanishing almost instantly as he admitted, "Rose got kidnapped."

"I know," Pete replied. "Jake and the others are on their way to bring her back."

The Doctor's face turned ashen. "What? No! You can't do that, she'll kill her. She said... bugger that, call them off and go away, you're wasting time. Time we don't have much of, 'cos I really do need to be getting Bryn out of that cell as soon as possible."

Pete sighed. "Doctor, you don't understand. The police have been notified, my best agents are involved in tracking her down—"

The Doctor let out a harsh breath, gritting his teeth in frustration. With a growl he slammed the side of his fist against the wall, biting out, "No, you don't get it. This woman, she's got no qualms about hurting or killing someone to get what she wants. None. And you, getting involved, bringing in the police, it's just gonna get Rose killed. Just let me do it my way, please?"

"But—"

The Doctor interrupted, "She's all I've got. Without her," he nodded toward the hunk of coral in the corner, with its mass of cables running to and from it in the shallow container it sat in, "there's no point in bothering with that. It's what she wants, it's the only thing I've got to offer her and without her," his voice faded to a whisper as he ducked his head, "I'm nothing." He looked up again, eyes flashing. "Nothing at all, naught but an exiled mass murderer, as some would see it. So don't make me do something we'll all regret after, because I will, if I have to. I'll do whatever it takes to save her. I'll do whatever you want, anything at all." Voice fading to barely a whisper, he added, "Just please, don't get in my way or try to stop me."

Unable to stop himself, Pete sighed and cautiously nodded. It would probably be easier this way, not having to worry about trying to restrain a part alien while simultaneously coming up with a plan to
rescue Rose. Also, one never really understood the definition of 'puppy-dog eyes' until you'd had them turned on you, full force. Explained why everyone else seemed to have such a hard time telling the bloke 'no'.

"You'd better have one hell of a good plan in mind," he warned, pointing a finger at the Doctor for emphasis. "No going by the seat of your pants, hoping for a bit of luck along the way, either."

He wondered if his own luck would hold, since so far, Jacks hadn't called and what with her already being suspicious, he'd been expecting his mobile to ring at any moment for the last hour. If all went well, by the time she found out — if anyone was daft enough and had bollocks enough to tell her, that is — everyone would be safe and sound. Especially Rose, who was probably the only one who'd be able to save the rest of them from the wrath of Jackie Tyler. God help them all if anything went wrong.

She'd had a feeling what was coming, going with her instincts and starting to duck just as that woman clobbered her upside the head. Clobbered her, then patted her down until she'd found her mobile in her pocket and took it with her before shutting the doors with a crash. Not that it actually knocked her unconscious, merely dazed her, but bloody hell that cow had an arm on her. Blimey, she'd had hopes to see the stars again, but certainly not like that. It was a wonder she wasn't going to be permanently cross-eyed, what with a knock like that to the head.

If not for the fact she didn't know where the gun was pointed, she would have tried to get away then, instead of now being whisked away to parts unknown by some mad woman. Lying as still and limp as possible after the woman had shoved her in the back of the van, Rose took the opportunity to gather her wits. No blood, but a lump on her scalp that felt like it was bigger than a fairy cake. Eyes, ears, limbs... all present and accounted for, so she could get to doing the most important thing that she could do: observing her surroundings.

The back of the van was nothing to write home about — just like thousands of others around England, all cluttered with tools and the like, manky carpets, no windows on the rear doors, and very little light. When she turned her head a little, there was just enough coming through the windscreen for her to make out a dark stain on the carpeted floor, a mere six inches or so away. Heart hammering as she guessed what the splotch probably was, she closed her eyes to fight off a sudden wave of nausea. It might have been the effects from the blow to the head, but she didn't think it was. More like the evidence from the blow to someone else's head, just a few weeks back, now.

God, these are the same people that grabbed him, she thought. And Bryn, he shot Jasper...

Forcing herself to stay calm, she focused on how she was going to escape. Vaguely remembering the sound of the locks being engaged as soon as they slammed shut and after looking over and seeing the interior surfaces of the doors were hopelessly mangled, she discarded the idea of simply jumping out. She hadn't been tied up, but considering that from the sounds of the tyres and the din of multiple vehicles outside, they were on a road somewhere. Possibly a dual carriageway, so trying to overpower her kidnapper was also out of the question. For now, at least.

The woman was humming under her breath as she drove. Church hymns, if Rose's ears weren't fooling her. The irony was almost funny, except it wasn't. Not at all. There was a sudden shifting as the van started to turn, an unidentified clattering of stuff moving about around her and the sound of the vehicle's turn signals in use. That was a roundabout; then; either they had been on the Aspen Way and were heading south toward Greenwich, or they were headed for the docklands around the...
old East India Company. The latter was her guess, considering.

With nothing else to do but wait, she took the time to think about the full implications of her situation. The Doctor was probably frantic with worry and all she could do was hope he wouldn't blindly rush in with no concern for his own safety and end up... oh why bother? She knew him well enough to know he would. All she could do was hope that whatever plan he had would go off without a hitch, but she had a feeling it probably wouldn't. Things usually did go wrong, spectacularly so, so in that case, she just hoped someone at Torchwood was monitoring the CCTV as carefully as they were supposed to do. That is, barring them being busy with some other crisis, like an alien invasion or... oh hell.

Remembering the confrontation between Pete and the Doctor just minutes before all this had started, Rose cringed. That settled it, then. Escape plans were an even higher priority than before, because someone was going to have to keep those two separated for their own good. And while she was at it, she might as well think about what she was actually going to say to him when this was all done and dusted.

Unable to sit still, he continued working on the device while he waited for Pete to return. Wire by wire, connection after connection, as he mulled over the situation. Random thoughts popped in as his psyche avoided anything approaching a concrete plan. Plans were for lesser mortals and those lucky sods with whom the universe didn't take great joy in taking the piss on and scuppering everything when they had the temerity to try planning anything.

And he wasn't — planning, that is. Pete was the one with the grand scheme, encouraging him to do this bit his way, using diplomacy and Torchwood's influence, instead of charging in like a bull in a china shop, as he'd put it. What an odd turn of phrase, that. He had to wonder if some barmpot had actually tried that and if not, what was the prejudice against male bovines anyway? Even if they were a bit large, had a bit of a pong and all that, they did have female counterparts that provided milk. Very important for the proper cuppa, that. And there went those wandering thoughts again, haring off thither and yon, trying to protect him from worrying too much about Rose.

Rose.

No, she was a capable girl... woman, now. She'd long since grown up in the years they'd been separated. Brilliantly, fantastically so, he had to admit. Certainly no frail flower, her. After all, she'd crossed worlds just to find him and now it was Pete in there, telling the coppers some story about taking Bryn Holburn over to Canary Wharf for 'advanced interrogation techniques'. Ha! As if. Still, it probably was a better idea than just waltzing in, stunning the entire building into unconsciousness, then waltzing back out with their prized prisoner. Also, it was now possibly less likely that he'd end up on the same cell block as Bryn before the day was over. Not that he cared, as long as it meant Rose was safe.

Rose.

It was an odd thing for him, letting someone else take control of such an important portion of the whole plan. Terrifying really — not being in control, depending on someone else. That was what had set him off earlier, that sudden realization that he couldn't control anything, not his autonomic nervous system, his surroundings, nor even his own fate. He'd been perfectly willing to venture into property ownership, but under his own terms, and Pete... it had scared him, that sudden, unexpected reinforcement of his own futile attempts to find something he could control. Being the blind, helpless...
puppet of Fate's fickle ways rankled and unsettled him like nothing else. Well, other than this...

The Doctor fumbled in his pocket for his mobile, running a thumb across its surface and staring at it in nervous anticipation. At some point — very soon he hoped — it would ring and it would be Edna, calling him from Rose's phone, telling him where they'd meet up to do the exchange. Not that he trusted the woman — not one bit, 'cos while he was born at night, it wasn't last night, Sunshine — but he knew she wanted her husband back too much to pull anything daft this early on. No, it was the part where they'd all be face to face where things were bound to go pear-shaped. Hence the device he'd been working on. That was his contingency plan.

Ha! Contingency plans — how the mighty have fallen. If other me could only see me now. Then again, good job he can't, he'd throttle me for getting Rose into this mess in the first place. I mean, I want to throttle me for it. He'd be chucking my worthless arse into the nearest black hole, forthwith. Which I completely deserve, and... Rose. Rassilon, if I hadn't gone off on Pete like that, been a total prat, she wouldn't have walked off like she did, Edna wouldn't have been able to get to her and....

Rose.

The rattle of the rear door handle on the SUV startled him out of his reverie. Pete was standing there, looking grim, absolutely disgusted, and holding Bryn Holburn, who was securely handcuffed.

"Got him," he said shortly, opening the door to the back seat and shoving Bryn in. He did so none too gently, before getting in on the driver's side next to the Doctor. "You have no idea the yarn I had to spin or the deals I had to make just to get this wanker out," he grumbled, jerking a thumb in the direction of the scowling man behind him.

"It's for Rose's sake — she's worth it," he said simply, swallowing past a throat that suddenly seemed like it was lined with cement and had lumps of gravel in. Casting a hostile glare in the direction of the rear section of the vehicle, the Doctor turned back and proceeded to then ignore Bryn, who was muttering dire threats and cruel taunts under his breath. Let him talk, he didn't quite particularly care what anyone thought anymore, other than Rose. And apologizing to her.

Rose.

Pete started the motor and they were off. Off to dare the universe to be its usual harsh, cruel self and this time, it had better not dare. He'd been pushed around enough, he was tired, and the last straw had been a few centuries back. So let it dare take the one last thing keeping him from flying apart, 'cos there'd be far worse than hell to pay if it tried. Far worse, 'cos he didn't care what he had to do to get Rose back safe, he'd do it. And he had a few other tricks up his sleeve, just in case. So did Pete, but he wasn't going to rely on that alone. No, like he'd told Donna back on the Crucible, just before he'd pulled that lever and got himself branded as a perpetrator of genocide by... himself, really — and what did that say about him? — he was the Doctor and currently he was pissed the hell off.

After what seemed like an eternity spent driving in what she'd rapidly deduced to be circles, Rose felt the van slow, then stop. The woman up front was mucking about with her mobile: she could hear the beeping as she sorted through what she guessed was probably her contacts list.

"Unnatural, that is, creature like that havin' a mobile. No more unnatural than that tart shagging that... that thing," Rose heard muttered, just before a number was dialed.
A sharp retort rose in her throat, but it was held back by what was said next. From what she heard, the meet up was happening at the Thames Barrier park. God, that brought back memories — the cannon dropping her in a crowd gathered on the street adjacent to the park, UNIT medics bringing out a stretcher with a body on it...

All she could think of was how frantic he probably was right now. He was barely clinging onto sanity as it was; just about anything could tip him over the edge, especially something like this. The way he looked at her when he didn't think she saw him, the way he said her name when they made love, the way he slept with his body wrapped around hers: it was like she was his whole world — his entire universe, even, and God knows what he'd do if anything happened to her.

Blood, anger, and revenge...

Please don't let anything go wrong, he'd... Rose stopped herself there, unwilling to let that thought go any further. She knew full well what he was capable of, had seen it firsthand and worse, knew that things had deteriorated after she'd gotten trapped in Pete's World enough to put him on that gurney in that alternate timeline. No, without someone to stop him, to tell him when he'd gone far enough, he'd easily become a monster. And that was the other him. This one, he was missing all those controls, the stops, that nagging voice in his head that kept him from going past a certain point. Considering his planet and the Time War, who could tell what that point would be, but she knew him well enough that the full Time Lord wouldn't have said what he had just for funsies.

As much as she loved him, she knew damn well what he was. Both of him.

Edna had disconnected the call while Rose was busy praying to whatever and whomever was listening, driving a bit further before pulling over again and parking. Acting under the assumption that Rose was still unconscious or dazed, she jumped out of the vehicle. That's when Rose made her move, rolling and diving into the driver's seat, one hand already on the key as she heard the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked. She turned her head slowly to see Edna's cold, tight smile.

"Knew you Torchwood types were a slippery lot," she said with satisfaction. At Rose's blank stare, she added, "Don't think I didn't know, Missy. Your pet alien, he talked. Babbled away as he lay there, all helpless and trussed up like a Christmas goose. Could've killed the freak, but I didn't. Should've, though, since I couldn't sell his scrawny arse. Pulled a sham, he did, acting like he was on death's door and scaring off the buyer."

That was it, direct confirmation. She'd done it, that bint had really done it, almost killed him. And for what, an extra quid or two in her pocket?

"You bitch," Rose snapped, not even caring that Edna had raised the gun higher. It was pointing right at her head, but that didn't matter. One simple squeeze of that trigger and she'd be dead. Dead and then the Doctor would go completely off his trolley and the world would burn as a consequence of that. He'd do it, she knew he would and that's what stopped her from provoking her captor any more, even if the red was creeping around the edges of her vision.

Edna smiled, showing crooked and yellowed teeth. "Been one for forty three years and proud of it," she said with satisfaction. At Rose's blank stare, she added, "Don't think I didn't know, Missy. Your pet alien, he talked. Babbled away as he lay there, all helpless and trussed up like a Christmas goose. Could've killed the freak, but I didn't. Should've, though, since I couldn't sell his scrawny arse. Pulled a sham, he did, acting like he was on death's door and scaring off the buyer."

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Edna smiled, showing crooked and yellowed teeth. "Been one for forty three years and proud of it," she returned smugly. "Now, step out of the van. I don't think I have to tell you what'll happen if you try to get clever again."

Rose unlatched the door, opening it slow and careful, stepping out onto the tarmac with knees that were slightly wobbly from anger and the urge to smack the woman into next week. "You're not gonna get away with this," she snapped defiantly as Edna grabbed her and turned her around, gun now pressed against her spine. "You may have been a bitch for forty odd years, but he's been a
complete and utter bastard for centuries. He's a Time Lord. Could erase you and everyone you've ever loved from history, he could. Messing with me's just gonna piss him off."

Edna just chuckled and prodded her with the gun's muzzle, urging her through the gate and into the park. "Don't worry, I've got plenty enough bullets for the pair of you, you mone..." World will be a better place without a few more of your alien lovin' kind in it. Finish what I started weeks ago, I will, and me and my man'll be free from you lot forever. Living all posh besides, what with the bounty on that one's head."

Doctor, Rose pleaded to herself silently as she trudged past the abandoned play area. School had just started a few weeks back and at this hour there was no one on the swings. They'd all be at their lessons and rightfully so: last thing she wanted was innocent civilians getting caught up in this. It was late enough that the morning joggers and people out walking their dogs were long since left; too early for the evening dog walkers or the druggies to be about yet, either.

In short, it was just them. Her and Edna Holburn, the bait in what she now knew was a very nasty trap. And all she could do was hope and pray that the Doctor was on the ball enough to realize what he was walking into. Cleverest man in the room or not, he was easily distracted and she knew exactly what was the only thing occupying his mind right now: her. She just hoped that wasn't going to get him killed.

Pete noticed the slight tremor in the Doctor's hands as he answered the mobile, heard the breathless, but steady tone in which he said, "Hello," when the phone rang. But he didn't mention it when the Doctor hung up shortly after and gave him the directions on where to go. No, he catalogued it away, knowing it was an indicators of what was going through the man's head.

The Doctor had been mostly silent as they drove around London, waiting for the call. Shoulders hunched and jaw set in a tense line, he'd stared ahead through the windscreen. A million miles away, judging from his expression; an expression that recalled dark, terrible things lurking unseen and that feeling you got in the air just before the first peal of thunder was heard and all hell broke loose.

For a moment Pete understood some of the things Rose and Mickey had said about him, remembered the term 'the Oncoming Storm'. It all fit, looking at those unblinking dark eyes that suddenly appeared utterly ancient and entirely inhuman. Those inane, almost whimsical freckles only made it worse, like painting a smiley face on a bomb. It was so easy to forget, after dealing him acting like the little god who was throwing a tantrum when things didn't go his way or that daft grin he'd have on when he wasn't. Forgetting was not something he, Pete Tyler was wont to do and it was why he'd been trying to rein him in, steer him onto a path that would've prevented things like this from happening.

God, I just hope you never go around the bend completely, or get to the point where I have to stop you to save the rest of the planet from your wrath, he thought fervently, hands tightening on the steering wheel in reflex.

"There," the Doctor said suddenly, startling Pete. Pointing, he said shortly, "Pull off there, we'll walk from here. Don't want to spook her."

As the Doctor got out and came around the vehicle, Pete got out to intercept him. Hand against the rear door to stay him for a moment, he spoke in a low voice so Bryn wouldn't overhear, "Doctor, I just want you to know if anything goes wrong—"
"It won't," the Doctor said flatly, crossing his arms over his chest and raising his chin to stare down that long, thin beak of a nose of his. "I won't let it."

Pete raised a hand to still him. "Even so, if, and I mean if, anything happens, you've still got us. Jackie and I, we'll still be there for you, no matter what."

The Doctor swallowed, glancing away and blinking furiously. He nodded stiffly, expression softening around the edges before firming into one of grim resolve. "Let's do this," he said finally, reaching for the door handle.

Their eyes met for a moment. The Doctor held his gaze evenly, untold depths in those deep, dark mirrored pools. Then Pete gave a slight nod before stepping aside to let him open the door. There was an understanding of a sort between them now, a truce as it were. Whether or not it'd hold, especially in the case of cruel misfortune, he didn't know, but Pete had hope. Just a glimmer, but it was there.

He watched the Doctor and Bryn quickly walk off down the pavement, the designated park less than a quarter mile away. He heard a brief, hostile exchange of words between them, but they were already too far away to make out what was said. There was a tightness in his chest and an almost overwhelming feeling of helplessness as they disappeared from sight. As much as it pained him, he had to let this play out. Edna Holburn was the one with all the cards and this was her game. Hers and the Doctor's, and he just had to trust that the Doctor would get the upper hand and things would come out as they should.

Sighing, Pete got back into his SUV, reaching for the comms link automatically. As he went to unclip the device from his belt, he noticed an irregularity. A stonking great irregularity: his sidearm was missing from its holster. That cheeky, clever little bastard, he thought, half in stunned admiration. He's bloody well done it again.
Chapter 60

They'd had the bloody van in sight, there right in front of them. All of them were tense with bated breath, not even daring to blink in case it made a sudden turn, all while thinking over every possible outcome for the situation when the Comms unit went off. They'd stared incredulously at the radio as the tone-less voice had given the recall order, unable to make heads nor tails of it even being true. They didn't even stop following the vehicle in front of them while they were arguing over whether to follow orders or not. Jake and Lane were both loudly insisting it had to be a sham, that someone had to have hacked into their systems in order to bugger everything up. They were in mid argument when someone's mobile rang.

"What now," Jake complained, looking at his mobile in annoyance and consternation. Since then he'd been listening to the voice on the other end of the line in stark disbelief and incredulity, continuing to drive with a vague detachment. As much as none of it made any sense, as much as it seemed an outright folly, he couldn't deny what he was hearing, even if he didn't quite fancy it. He could still barely believe his ears even after they'd hung up and he was closing his mobile with a curse and tossing it aside. "This is just..." he exclaimed, shaking his head.

"What is?" Lane asked cautiously, after exchanging a look with Sally. "Who was it?"

Slamming his hand against the steering wheel and making a wordless noise of frustration, Jake snapped out, "Pete. It's real, it's really real. Those plonkers are tellin' us to back off; head back to the shop, someone else is handlin' the situation."

"So it's really not a trick then, it's actually real," Lane murmured, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Then someone's gone potty, then. Just who are they supposed to be getting in to get Rose back?" Sally exclaimed, looking confounded and as angry as they all were. She was already wondering if her sister had suddenly managed to get really persuasive, but she couldn't quite see that happening. Another glance over told her that Lane was feeling just as apprehensive as she was. "Surely not the police? I know they would in normal circumstances, but this is Rose, one of us!"

"No, it's not them." Jake snorted in disgust. "But I'll give you three guesses and the first two don't count," he muttered sarcastically.

It was easy to come to some conclusions with that hint and they all look stifled a groan. Lane finally asked in a quiet voice, "So, what do we do?"

Looking determined and already thinking through possible scenarios and their outcomes while trying to ignore what he imagined would happen if they actually did follow the orders that had just come down, Jake made a quick decision.

"Right. Anyone who's feeling a little squeamish or doesn't want to get the sack, better shove off now or stay in the van," he warned, turning in his seat to look at his friends and fellow agents. They'd all been through some pretty sticky messes before and they'd always had each others backs, but this was above and beyond the usual stuff -- this was outright disobedience of a direct order. People had gotten their memories wiped and then dropped off in the Orkneys for less. No one protested or even eyed the doors like they were even considering leaving, so he continued. "Sally, you're the best shot out of all of us, yeah?"

Looking dubious, but nodding, she said cautiously, "I suppose, but--"
Turning to Lane, he quickly went on with, "An' you, you passed the driving course with flying colors, even with a broken arm and being on the mobile trying to explain to your mum what you were doing back in with us lot again, right?"

"What're you--" Lane started, beginning to look worried.

Not that Jake was even paying attention. He was too busy making the turn off onto a side street behind the van ahead, dropping back a bit so they wouldn't be quite as obvious. He could see trees ahead and an open patch that denoted there was a park there.

Before long Jake was hunkered down on a park bench, pretending to natter on to a friend on his mobile while actually watching the woman holding Rose from a distance. The phone line was currently routed through their communication system on a private channel, so they wouldn't inadvertently hear or be heard by official channels. Lane was over by the duck pond, tossing bits of bread and pretending to listen to music, while Sally was jogging through the park.

"Not many other people about," Sally murmured through her concealed headset.

Noting a couple walking a collie nearby, Lane replied back on his, "Just enough that we're not overly conspicuous. Then again, the way she's watching everyone..."

"I know." Jake, as the one in closest position to Rose and her captor, was the one who stood the greatest risk of being discovered. "She's obviously expecting some sort of exchange or something. Don't think it's the normal hundred thousand quid swap. Any sign of anything happening?"

Lane casually pulled out a pair of field glasses and gave a sly look about. They'd handed the binoculars to him since if he was the one by the ducks, he was the only one likely to be able to get away with pretending to be a bird watcher or the like. "Not so much as a hair of anything yet. No coppers, no Pete, and I don't see him anywhere."

"What the hell?" Jake sputtered. "I can't see him just faffing about like this, not when it's Rose."

"Maybe he's got a plan," Sally offered as she paused to jog in place by the south gate.

"We live in hope," Jake sarcastically muttered. The last time the Doctor had had a plan, half of Shoreditch was reduced to rubble -- he wasn't sure he wanted to see what he'd come up with this time.

Rolling her eyes, she stayed where she was, pretending to check her watch while really she was using the reflection on its face to check behind her. Rose and Edna were still in the distance, Edna holding Rose's arm in such a way that anyone not paying attention would think it was just an older woman out for a stroll with her niece or something. Whoever she really was, this was obviously something she'd done before, Sally observed. Wonder who else she's done this to, she thought to herself. Either way, the clock is ticking here...

Trotting on a ways, she jogged onto the lawn and closer to the roadway beyond the fencing. Glancing over the hedges to the pavement beyond, she spotted a couple of blokes a few hundred yards away and approaching at a quick pace. They were too far away to clearly identify, but something about the way they were moving told her their destination was the park.

"Uh, guys..."
Almost as soon as they were out of the van Bryn was trying to wrench himself free. "The hell," he sputtered, looking over his shoulder at the Doctor. "This isn't Canary Wharf! I'm supposed to be getting questioned by those Torchwood gits, not... where's my --"

Already they were gathering some interested looks from the passers-by on the pavements around them, reminding the Doctor how careful he had to be with this situation. One squawk from the cretin, and the whole thing would end up a disaster and...

Rose

He flashed one of those inane grins at a pensioner who was holding the leash of her poodle clasped to her chest and eyeing him suspiciously. She squinted a bit harder and stood her ground for a moment before finally moving on, throwing a glance over her shoulder. She'd probably be making a complaint to the first copper she saw walking his rounds or calling up the papers as soon as she realized who he was, but that didn't matter. At the moment nothing mattered except getting to that park on time, without getting stopped, and getting Rose away from these people. Waiting until the old cow had gone on about her business, he turned back to Bryn and with a decidedly less friendly smile, the Doctor leaned close enough to whisper in the man's ear, "Nope, this isn't the Wharf and guess what? I'm not Torchwood. Now shut it, Sonny Jim."

Though he kept his tone even and measured, the grin showed enough teeth to pass on the hint of warning he'd intended. As soon as he saw the man flinch and shrink back, he relaxed his features into a carefully blank mask. With a push that was far gentler than he'd thought himself currently capable of, he got them both back walking in the right direction, eyes flicking across his surroundings and the people around him.

There were fewer than he'd have expected in the London he knew so much better, but then the Cybermen had taken their toll, hadn't they? A couple people showed a spark of recognition in their eyes when they saw him, but he ignored the looks and whatever else they were doing. Gossip; speculation; who really gave a toss? Certainly not him; not at this point, that was.

But Bryn wasn't entirely cowed, despite the slumped shoulders. "You can't... it's not legal, not--"

"Oh? And, grabbing folks off the street, bonking them upside the head and carting them off is?" he retorted, again forcing himself to stay calm.

"That's different, you're not hu--" Bryn spluttered before being interrupted by the Doctor almost barking, "The bloody cow has Rose, you xenophobic git! And if she's harmed one hair on her head, one single bloody hair at all, I swear I'll--"

With difficulty, he caught himself, jaw snapping shut and teeth clenching in rage. His heart beat echoed in his ears as he fought to return his breathing to a semblance of normal. Mustn't make a scene, you know, mustn't... What he wouldn't give to just for once, just once, to be able to forget the rules and just do it, like he had during the... "Don't push me, mate, cos you're not likely to like what you end up with," he snapped, once his breathing was normal and the adrenaline levels were starting to wane back to something normal. Bloody human hormones, see where they got him?

Bryn shrunk back, eyes flashing with fear as he started to get an inkling of what he was dealing with. Namely, a spectacularly fed up half alien that had reached the end of his rope and was just about done with all this nonsense. Good. He was starting to get the idea. Bloody thick humans and their...
Couldn't go there either. Had to keep calm, remain focused, and... the park was up ahead.

He could see the wrought iron fencing that surrounded it, the oaks by the gates that still showed scars from Lumin's folly and newer flashes of color from graffiti that had accumulated since. Every step was taking them closer and closer and his heart was beating a steady tattoo in his chest, thoughts starting to spin and whirl, and he could feel an odd wetness in the palms of his hands and starting under his arms. Shoes scraping against the worn pavements, the sounds of traffic beyond, a slight breeze carrying the faint scents of rubbish tips, petrol, and freshly cut grass... funny the things that stand out in those odd moments between waiting for something to happen and the happening itself; that shadowing between expectancy and reaction that etches itself in memory as time skips and stutters and slows a crawl.

She didn't know how anyone could ever miss Jake and the others, even someone who'd never seen them in their life, but Edna certainly had. Oh, she'd given them the once over, thoroughly eyed them, but had obviously dismissed them as a threat. If it wouldn't have alerted the woman, Rose would've laughed then and there. It was one of those moments, when the tensions were running so high and that so much was riding on something that could be completely unraveled by one slight mishap or even something so seemingly insignificant as the wind blowing in the wrong direction that the mind struggled for something to make light of the situation. Or at least it was for her; she'd long ago noticed her tendency to giggle at an inopportune moment when things were a bit overwhelming. Those years travelling with the Doctor and all the Torchwood training since hadn't sorted that one out.

As for said training, all that had told her was that unarmed, she was better off going along with this crazy woman's demands. For now, at least. Later was a different story and a lot could change in the span of a few moments; her own instincts and training told her something was about to happen, and soon. Very soon. Firstly, she knew him. Even if the Doctor had been a bit unpredictable these last few months, even if he'd been practically climbing out of his own skin with restlessness, even if he'd been thrown himself headlong into anything and everything he found remotely interesting or dangerous... but then, he'd always been like that, just now it was a bit more noticeable than before. That sort of behavior was rather par for the course and didn't stand out as much against the surreal landscapes of alien worlds and the claustrophobic corridors of space stations in the distant future. However, when the backdrop was the local shops along the high street and Sunday dinners with her mum... but this, a clearly defined 'bad guy' with a dastardly plan and a companion to save, this was right up his street. Thing was, while she trusted him to have her back, what she didn't know was how far he'd go to keep her safe and that's what worried her.

Rose was letting her thoughts ramble on in order to keep herself distracted from the fact that time seemed to be ticking over slower than treacle. So much time waiting for something to happen and everything dragging on like it would never end. Then suddenly, everything seemed to lurch into a flurry of motion and Rose had to shove aside her thoughts as first Bryn, then the Doctor came into sight. She thought she'd never been so relieved in all her years, other than the dozens of times when the stakes had been far higher than this.

When they were about thirty feet away, Edna tightened her grip on her shoulder, calling out, "That's quite far enough, Doctor."

The sound of the hammer cocking back by her ear was startlingly loud, and as shocking as the reminder of the gun that she'd briefly forgotten was there. Her heart did a sort of fluttery thing in her
chest when he entirely disregarded her captor and cheekily asked, "Miss me?"

Suppressing the urge to grin back at him, she pretended to ponder it as she drawled out, "Maybe..."

"Ahem!" the woman interrupted, glaring at them both.

The Doctor sighed. "Oh, yes. Where were we, then? Right, I remember now." He pulled Bryn to a halt and mirrored the woman by pulling him closer, like he was a human shield. "Hostages."

"Yes, hostages," the woman said curtly. "Hand him over, and I'll let your bit of fluff go."

There was a glint to his eye as he suddenly chuckled without the slightest bit of humor. "Edna, Edna, Edna," he clucked, shaking his head in mock disappointment. "I'm not half as stupid as you think I am."

"You forget, I've got the gun," the woman that Rose now knew was called Edna said smugly. The grip on her shoulder tightened to the point it was almost painful, making her suppress the urge to wince in discomfort.

The Doctor must've seen something however, because he suddenly grinned savagely, slowly raising one hand and putting it on Bryn's head. "You forget, I could turn your dearly beloved husband's mind to nowt but mush in an instant. Now drop the gun."

If not for the scene in the warehouse the night before and Percy being in hospital because of it, Rose would've felt sorry for the man. Bryn's eyes were almost bulging out of his head and he looked ready to piss himself. Even Edna wasn't unaffected because she was suddenly releasing her shoulder. Rose could see her backing away from the corner of her eye, wearing an expression of sheer terror. But the woman still had the gun. This wasn't over yet.

"Drop the weapon, Edna."

The Doctor sounded just as quietly furious and threatening as before, but Rose could hear hints of something else in his voice.

Edna swallowed, eyes darting back and forth as she hesitated but then tightened her grip on the gun. "If I do, what's to stop you from... no. No, I won't." She raised her chin in defiance as she raised the gun once more.

Eyes narrowing, the Doctor said noting, merely tightening his fingers against Bryn's temples as he tightened his grip on the man and calmly staring Edna down. She merely put her finger on the trigger and turned the gun towards Rose as his fingers tightened more and Bryn suddenly cried out, "Edna, don't! He'll do it, he's gonna..."

Rose couldn't have said what silently passed between the Doctor and the woman, just that there was a long moment where they stared into each others eyes and not a word was spoken. It was like they were in a bubble, everything beyond them so far removed that it didn't even matter. Even the normal sounds of London and Bryn's continued panicked babbling was something that blended into the background. Even things like breathing, thinking, feeling just faded away into the blur that the rest of reality had become.

Then, unbelievably, Edna's arm began to tremble, finger twitching then starting to come away from the trigger; even Bryn had fallen silent. And later, Rose couldn't have said what came first: the bright bloom of blood drops flying through the air and spattering upon the grass below, or the flat crack of sound the gunshot made.
Chapter 61

Everything seemed to happen all at once, in the way of such things when Time shifts one way or another and when may be, could be, and might've been changed to is, was, and will be. One of those moments that he'd never been able to stop or change, even before he himself had changed. Not that that would've stopped him back then, not with his unstoppable urge to meddle and prod at the course of history, mind -- but it was something entirely different when one was just as subject to Time itself as everyone else, rather than being a Lord of it.

As it were, he only saw a brief flash out the corner of his eye before everything just went a bit wibbly. Pear-shaped was only the half of it, as he gaped down at the dead body on the ground, the echo of the gunshot still ringing in his ears as a sense of profound wrongness crept over him. Wrongness to a degree that he barely noticed when he let Bryn slip out of his grip, or heard distant shouts and sirens. Not that he was a stranger to violence or death, and it wasn't as if he'd never killed another living being before, but something about this instance -- the way everything seemed so... off. The brightness of the blood in the grass, the way the rest of the world suddenly looked so pale and colorless by comparison -- it didn't seem real. Or as real as it should do, since there was a dead woman on the ground before him, a gun in his hand and, while he could certainly remember wanting to do it, wanting to end this sorry, sordid chapter once and for all, even if it meant by violence, for the life of him he couldn't actually remember doing it. But he had to have done, since the evidence was there for anyone with eyes in their head to see.

To wit: one smoking gun: tick; one dead body: tick; slightly bewildered and aghast bystanders and one grieving husband, now widower: tick. Nowt complicated or confusing about that, was there? But somehow, none of it seemed to add up. Nothing made any sense and it might never make sense again, but at the same time it made all too much sense in a very wrong sort of way. And he wasn't sure if he could even bring himself to care -- that is, if it wasn't for the look on Rose's face.

She was standing there, eyes darting between him and the dead woman on the ground, just sort of blinking in a suprised, detached kind of way. When Sally and Jake ran up, Jake taking Bryn into custody and Sally moving to verify Edna's condition, it seemed to jar her out of her moment of shock. He knew what she was about to say, saw the words gathering themselves and preparing to launch but then Lane was butting in.

"That... that was the last thing I expected from you, mate," he said unsteadily as he gently reached for the gun in the Doctor's hand. "Considering she," he nodded towards Rose, "always said you were against these sort of things."

"Things, people, they all change," the Doctor found himself mumbling, unable to look anywhere but at Rose. She was still there, standing some distance away and still gaping at him, looking at him like he was some sort of creature she'd never seen him in her life and probably didn't want to ever again.

Everything after seemed to happen in a rush. A blur of people asking him questions while eying him like he'd grown a second head or something; Pete anxiously pulling him aside and nattering on about something he didn't quite catch and couldn't be arsed to ask him to repeat; somehow ending up in one of those colorless rooms in the depths of Canary Wharf that he seemed to be spending too much time in these last few months. People seemed to come out of nowhere, dozens of them -- some he recognized and some he didn't -- all going on and on about what, when, and why. Stupid questions, really. Especially when you considered how obvious the answer would be if they'd just stop blathering on at him and just think for a moment. Think, like he'd give anything to be able to do right then and couldn't because all these plonkers kept bothering him. Then, when hours had passed and
everyone seemed to have suddenly wandered away, having run out of either questions or patience, he was finally alone again. And that was even worse, because he wasn't even sure where Rose was and that was worse than any of it, wasn't it?

Pete stared at the man who was sitting in a chair hunched over the table in the small interview room like nothing had happened and this was just the end of a normal day. Glad of the one-way glass, he tried to make sense of the day's events and then square them with what he knew of the seemingly harmless but occasionally blustery bloke who'd followed his stepdaughter home all these months ago and couldn't.

From what he'd heard, Edna Holburn had been in the process of laying down her weapon, the hostage situation seemingly diffused, and then... she was dead. There were multiple witness accounts, all saying the same thing, and then there was the one who'd fired the weapon whose only reply had been, "Suppose I must've done, yeah? Or at least I think it was; can't quite remember. Got any tea, perchance? I could murder a cuppa right now. Oooh, terribly sorry about that. Bit tasteless of me, considering."

It wasn't what he'd said that was unnerving, considering that glib responses to pertinent questions weren't out of the ordinary, more that he'd barely seemed to be aware what he'd said. Or aware of any of them, for that matter. Preoccupied was just the half of it, since after the first hour he'd just seemed to fold in on himself and shut down into a state of silence that was nearly terrifying to anyone who knew him.

He could only shake his head at it all.

"Shock, I'd gather. Not surprising, really."

Looking up, Pete realized that that overly curious policewoman hadn't left like he'd thought she had. Of course not, she was worse than a dog with a bone.

"If you think about what had transpired between him, Bryn, and Edna in the last several months and that week he was missing..." She said softly as she stood to watch through the glass beside him.

"But that, that's not him," Pete replied. "He's not... wasn't... that sort."

Gail chuckled humorlessly. "You do remember what three people reported him saying right after the shooting, right?"

"You don't know him," he started.

"And neither do you. Not really, if we go by your own testimony," Gail interrupted. "People have a way of having... hidden depths, and out of those depths... come things that we wouldn't normally expect if the circumstances are right. I'd say that having his girlfriend held at gunpoint by the same woman who bloody well would've killed him if her husband hadn't panicked would count as one of those sorts of situations. Just a normal human reaction, I'd say."

"That's just it, he's not," Pete murmured softly. "Human, that is, and we've all been forgetting it as of
late, which is precisely the problem." With a sigh Pete turned away, unable to put his finger on what it was that felt so... off about the whole thing. He cleared his throat, asking in a firmer voice, "Charges?"

"Doubt there'll be any. There'll be an inquest; his attendance will not required since we've got enough witness testimony and a very thorough report. All this," Gail hesitated, since the very idea of it got under her skin even if she did see the reasoning, "will be kept quiet, though it would probably be best if he disappeared for a bit or at least stayed low."

Pete nodded. He'd already come to the same conclusion and already filed paperwork to make things look like they were on the up and up. He'd already pulled enough strings and called in enough favors to make sure that certain people didn't get wind of any of this. Not for the sake of the man sitting slumped in a chair, looking like a broken toy with its batteries run down -- but for the sake of Rose, who'd already been checked over by several doctors and one of the psychiatrists attached to the Crisis Unit. Though considering her past, being held hostage wasn't anything to fuss over for Rose. Not after the Dimension Cannon.

It was just how it ended that had Pete concerned, since the way she'd kept looking at the Doctor -- that was something that he knew was going to stay etched in his memory for a very long time.

He kept trying to remember exactly how things had gotten from him staring Edna down to her lying dead on the ground, but he couldn't. Nothing seemed to connect in a meaningful way and didn't make any more sense now than it had before. Still, he couldn't find it in himself to be sorry about it all, any more so than he did about flipping that damned lever back on the Crucible. Thing was, he actually remembered that, all of it, from all the shrieks and explosions of dying Daleks to Davros' howls of impotent rage and the look of absolute disgust on His face. Bloody hypocrite, as if he'd not have done the same, if he'd been the one on the spot and had heard what Dalek Caan had said. But all that, it didn't change this, did it? Didn't change the fact that between the last moment he'd been staring into that woman's eyes, watching her waver between doing something very stupid and doing the clever thing, and her lying dead there was just... nothing. No memory of actually squeezing that trigger, of actually taking that final, irrevocable step, and no memory of anything but bright red droplets flying through the air and a noise so loud he'd not even heard it.

All that and more was flying through his head when he slowly realized that the door to the room they'd left him in was open and that he had a vague memory of someone telling him he was free to leave. That was all well and good, but leave for where? If he right, and he usually was, Rose was more than a bit cross with him at the moment and would probably need a bit of time to... digest all this. After all, it wasn't like they'd a TARDIS that they could just pop off to another planet in. Time to man up and face the music, so to speak.

With a sigh he uncrossed his legs, used the table to lever himself to his feet, and began the inevitable. The corridor outside was empty, as was the lift he took to the equally uncrowded lobby. The receptionist on duty barely even acknowledged him, not even looking up from the bumf they were treading through to buzz him out through the security doors.

The air outside was cold by comparison and he suppressed a shiver, glad that the pervading sense of numbness seemed to be on the retreat. The street lamps were all on; surprisingly so, since he'd not realized how much time had to have passed. Having a dodgy sense of time since the metacrisis was one thing, but this was something else. Something that had only been happening in recent weeks, ever since...
"I almost decided not to wait, you know."

Rose was sitting on one of the benches that were scattered around the courtyard in front of Torchwood's headquarters and he'd not even noticed her. Something was definitely off, then. And it wasn't just him that saw it either, he realized when Rose flinched as he approached. That was definitely... new, and he didn't like it. He didn't like how she wouldn't look at him, not even when he crouched down so his eyes were at the same level as hers.

Before he could think of anything to say, she was standing up, brushing imaginary dust off her clothes as she said in a resolute voice, "I could do with a shower and about a week's worth of sleep."

Feeling like he'd dodged a bullet, he nodded and followed her. Apparently the place wasn't as abandoned as he'd thought, because Jake had pulled up in one of those overly conspicuous black SUVs that this lot seemed all to fond of and they were getting a lift home. A lift that was all too silent with no one knowing what to say and everyone being too knackered to even think of anything. That and there was tension in that vehicle so thick you could've served it with a ladle and spoon. Bullet dodged? No, just momentarily... delayed, and that was even more worrying than Rose's continued silence.

He'd properly cocked this one up, hadn't he and he was, not even sure how. Well, he couldn't quite say that, could he? He had an idea of how, the gist of why, but nowt about it made any sense. It seems like sense and logic had gone on sudden holiday and he wondered if it was before or after he'd woken up oh such a long time ago. From finding out about the building to confronting Pete and everything after until now... buggered if he could see how any of it fit together in any logical way.

Like no time had passed at all, Jake was pulling the car over by the kerbing in front of their building and Rose was grabbing his hand and pulling him with her as she got out. She said something to Jake about not being long, but that didn't quite compute. Not then, at least, because he was just too bloody grateful that Rose was safe: they were finally back home, where he could go have a lie down and he'd never appreciated the human need for sleep so much in all his centuries of life like he did now. But sleep, as it turned out, was something that was going to be a long time coming.

Rose wasn't surprised that he followed her so readily, just that he'd not started babbling questions or anything, and hadn't tried his usual habit of running away. Somehow, the way he silently hovered at her shoulder while she unlocked the door to the flat just made it worse because it was like he was waiting for the ax to fall and he was just preparing for it.

All that time she'd spent waiting after everyone had stopped peppering her with questions and asking her how she felt, she'd been thinking. Thinking, and remembering blood on the grass and the loudest noise she'd ever heard. And him, standing there with a gun in his hand and not a shred of emotion in his face. More so, his eyes -- so dark and cold, she well knew this was someone who'd seen the beginning and end of the universe.

I killed them all and I'd do it again if I had to, now step out of the way, Rose...

...Born in battle, full of blood, anger, and revenge.

It was her fault really, for forgetting that. She'd forgotten all that somehow, taken in by the sunny smiles, the declarations of love and forever. And now, standing in the middle of a tiny, rundown flat that was missing most of its curtains and had managed to avoid getting carpets, she was having to
face an unwelcome truth.

He was just standing there, hands in pockets and his chin slightly raised, looking at her steadily down that long nose of his that was just ever so slightly crooked... and waiting. He didn't flinch, didn't turn away as she met his eyes for the first time since all... that happened. Looking into his eyes, she couldn't help but note that the darkness he'd formerly kept hidden was plain to see again. That darkness had always scared her, knowing what he was very much capable of.

"You've changed," she said with regret, stepping forward and touching his cheek softly.

"No. I am who I've always been, Rose." He quirked a humorless half grin at her, continuing evenly, "Nothing's static, Rose. Everyone and everything changes over time, because it has to or else we'd all be in a constant loop of time where nothing happens. Everything dies, remember?"

She closed her eyes hearing that, trying not to let so many painful memories take hold. The past was done, finished, and do you think he could let it go, move on before it could consume him? No, he couldn't and suddenly she was just tired; too tired to deal with it all. "He was right, you know," Rose said evenly, opening her eyes again to glare at him.

Pulling back slightly in startlement, he eyed her mistrustfully. Anger was already starting to ooze past his initial feelings of hurt. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Rose waved a hand at him, pointing out the leather jacket and the gun now shoved in the waistband of his trousers. She didn't even know how he'd gotten it in the first place, much less how he'd gotten it back. That is, if it was even the same one. "This, all of it, I never know whether to expect you to shave your head, ask me to go out for chips while the world burns around us, or me ending up havin' to defend Daleks from you again. It's like you've gone backwards or something."

"Backwards?" He let out a bitter laugh and shook his head ruefully. "No, it's more like you lot keep forgetting."

Cheeks flushed, Rose challenged him, despite having started to acknowledge the truth on her own. Acknowledged it, yes, but it was still too new, to sudden to go saying it aloud like that. "Yeah? Forgetting what?"

"That I'm not human; you think a little bit of your DNA is going to make me one of you lot. Well, that's just not possible, is it? Not when everything is still under control of this," he tapped the side of his head, "and that's still Time Lord. Still me -- isn't that what you wanted?"

She could only nod.

"My life didn't start just before I met you in that basement, Rose," he said softly. "Been around the block a bit, me. Been a lot of things to a lot of different people."

For a moment it was like an echo from the past, like they'd stepped back in time to an underground bunker in Utah. "But not a killer," she reminded him.

"Wrong. 'Killer of my own kind,' or did you forget that too?" he replied in a voice so calm and flat it put chills down her spine hearing it. He never looked away, his eyes never wavered.

"I guess I did, didn't I?" She sighed wearily, stepping back to push her hair out of her face. She had to get some space, and get a handle on her emotions before everything boiled over. All this... it was just too much, she needed some time to think, and getting in a row wouldn't help anything, least of all the headache that was beginning to creep up on her. Turning away, she headed for the bedroom.
Of course he followed, watching her wordlessly. Doing her best to ignore him and the emotions that were threatening to overcome her, she found her knapsack in the back of the wardrobe. Trousers, shirts, knickers, her makeup from the little vanity crammed in the corner by the window...

"I did it for you, you know. Otherwise she would've..." he started suddenly, but then fell silent again when he realized she wasn't going to respond.

She continued gathering her stuff while he went back to watching her like she was some unfathomable creature from a different world that he'd never seen before and was trying to suss whether to approach or run. Yeah, because running was what he did best, she'd learned a lot from him, and this was her getting away before the inevitable happened. Because if she didn't, if she made him actually sit down and listen to what was on her mind and made him actually explain himself, then he'd be the one gone but for dust just to avoid the truth.

Truth was, some things you couldn't fix or make better, no matter how much you tried, and not just overnight or even a few months and not when the other person wasn't willing. Right now, if she stayed, the only way for things to go on was if they just swept it all under the carpet and pretended it never happened and she couldn't do that anymore. That had gone on far too long, and she was just too old for that shit. And apparently she'd said most of that out loud without realizing it because he was standing there with a look of concern and disbelief on his face.

But he quickly got that all under control, everything shoved back behind that mask he always wore, because that was so him. "Would it help if I said I'm sorry?" he hazarded, eyes no longer meeting hers and shoulders now slumped in defeat.

Typical, she thought as she straightened and stood regarding him. "No, Doctor, it would not." She was very firm about that, at least.

"I-" He sighed and stepped backwards. "I'll just let you... get on with whatever you're..." He made a vague gesture, rubbed the back of his neck, and nonchalantly fled the room. Just turned and walked away as if this was a normal occurrence and they were going out for fish and chips after. Sometimes she couldn't even begin to fathom how his mind worked and this... this was exactly why she was going to be spending a few days at her Mum's. She heard the door to the loo slam as she shoved the last bit into the bag and zipped it up.

She had to be grateful for that. If he'd been standing there, continuing to look at her with that kicked puppy dog expression, she'd never be able to do this. After all, it wasn't like it was forever. She just needed some time to put things in perspective and she couldn't do that here, when even looking at him reminded her how much she'd never really known him. And maybe, just maybe, this might just give him a chance to realize that they just couldn't go on like this, that the masks had to come off at some point.
Chapter 62

The linens were cool against her cheek, so cold compared with the fire that burned within her veins. Face turned against her pillow as she fought to both get away and never leave, she felt his weight upon her. His hands pinning hers above her head as he moved within her, keeping a gentle but steady rhythm. Naked skin against naked skin, it was all she could do to suppress the loud moan that nevertheless escaped her lips.

At her moan, he paused, raising himself up to look into her eyes. He gathered both her wrists in one hand, keeping them still pinned and stared down into her eyes. All she could see in the darkened room was his face, just barely limned by the faint light that came from the window. Eyes full endless depths bored into hers as he watched her struggle against him, trying to get him to continue. She could see the faint amusement tinged with something darker cross his face as he carefully thrust so deep she had to close her eyes against the pleasure.

"No, Rose. Look into my eyes so you'll see who I am," she heard him whisper. There was a caress of her cheek then and another thrust, more forceful than the last. It skirted the threshold between pleasure and pain; a third one crossed it. And his voice again, in time with his movements and each one less gentle as his voice grew sharper, "Who am I? Say my name, Rose."

Opening her eyes in shocked surprise, what she saw in his face and eyes then was nothing she'd ever seen before. For a moment he froze, going so still it was like he'd turned to marble where he crouched over her. Those dark eyes had gone from the gentle, slightly sorrowful brown she was familiar with to something else. Something that was ancient and terrible, the planes of his face hard and merciless. The face of a monster who'd watched a million worlds burn...

As her struggle became real, became a struggle to get away, she heard him laugh low in his throat, a delighted chuckle that brought even more terror than looking into his eyes had. With little effort he switched his hold on her to something that while superficially was more tender and cradling. But it was one she had even less chance of escaping. Heartbeat thundering in her ears, she closed her eyes again as he leaned down so he could brush his fingertips against her temple before burying his face against her shoulder with a sigh of contentment.

"I love you," he whispered as he rained fevered kisses that burned like fire against her neck and collarbone. "There's no place I'd rather be now, no when. Now I have you with me under my power. Forever with me, until the end of time."

All she could manage was an incoherent "Please" as he started moving again, his rhythm and angle something that under normal circumstances would have been nearly perfect. But this was as far from normal as things could get and everything had changed. He'd changed, wasn't what she'd thought he was. He wasn't what anyone had thought, he'd fooled them all and seeing this, seeing what really lay beneath -- all she could do was run as far and as fast as possible, before it was too late. If it wasn't too late already.

Fighting again to get herself free from his embrace, he held her tighter as he let out a breathy chuckle against her ear that ended in a hitched breath, before he whispered in a voice that carried both urgency and pleading, "Say my name. Please, you know my name, Rose. Rose...

"ROSE! You can't sleep forever, you know."

With a muffled scream, she bolted upright, throwing back the duvet even as the echoes from her dream still rang in her ears. "I'm up," she mumbled, then paused. Wait, had there been a time loop or
something? She wasn't living with her mum, not anymore, at least. They had a flat, in Hackney... and God, that dream. That was just something else, but what on earth could it possibly mean? What had she been thinking about, and where was...

Then memory came flooding back -- all too soon, by her reckoning. A few more hours of ignorant, happily forgetful bliss wouldn't have gone amiss right then, not as she remembered everything from the night before. The way she'd kept walking away from their flat door like she was just popping off to the shops for a bit, the once again mostly silent ride with Jake to her parents' mansion -- silent because neither of them knew what to say, with too many questions and way too many answers that were easily avoided by not saying anything at all -- and then her mum, not asking a single question for once. Just took one look at her, opened her arms and hugged her, then half carried her to the kitchen for a cuppa while she finally let out all those emotions she'd bottled up inside. A cuppa with more than a touch of whiskey added, which explained the headache she had now and the taste in her mouth that was reminiscent of a cat's used litter tray.

As she stumbled to the en suite for her toothbrush and the shower she'd have given anything for the night before, she briefly wondered why her mum was waking her so early. It wasn't as if she had a job to get to, not after giving up working at Torchwood so she could keep an eye on him. God forbid he should cause any more embarrassment or blow up half the neighborhood, right? But now, that wasn't her problem, she told herself. If he decides to muck about with pyrotechnics or starts fiddling with the hot water, on his own head be it. And this, this was exactly why she'd had to get away. Too much more of this she'd be just another inmate at the local asylum with the screaming meemies just from the pure frustration alone. God, for someone who said they were 900 odd years old, he bloody well did his best to impersonate a spoilt rotten brat deserving of a proper smack... and no, she wasn't going to do this. She was going to have that shower, after she stopped chewing on her toothbrush like it had personally wronged her.

It wasn't until she had just gotten the shampoo worked into her hair that she remembered something about promising to accompany her mum to one of the charity things she did. She really hoped it wasn't anything too posh or such, since she thought the closest thing she had to formal wear was one of the Doctor's button-downs she'd grabbed by mistake. Bugger.

After showering and dressing in a pair of jeans and a blouse she thought was halfway acceptable by her mum's new standards, she wandered downstairs for the coffee she'd need to finally clear away the mental fog. Unspeakably grateful to find the breakfast nook empty and hearing her mum off in another room with Tony, she hurriedly made some toast and fixed her coffee before sitting down. It had to be some sort of luck or fortune to be able to get this far without answering any questions and having the chance to wake up before having to face anyone right yet. It wasn't half short of a miracle, considering her mum's tenacity for poking and prodding for info. But then, even her mum probably wasn't surprised by this, was she? Already prepared for the interrogation, since she'd mentioned the night before that Tony was going to be off to playgroup early with Mabel. That meant she didn't have long to mentally wake up before the onslaught began, either.

As she drank, she browsed through the morning news online with her mobile, she found it odd that there wasn't a single mention of what had happened yesterday. Just the usual run of smash-ups on the motorway, muggings in Southwark, and celebrity sightings. Nothing at all about a shooting in a slightly rundown park, with Torchwood agents and a half alien involved -- exactly the sort of thing that should've had the paps clustered outside the gates, but no. Not a word of it had gotten out, and that was more than slightly disturbing when she thought about it. Especially when she factored in what Pete must've done to cover that one up. God knows how many tens of thousands of pounds worth of bribes, she thought with a wince.

He was probably at a whole new level of livid on this one, she thought with a sigh before reading on.
There was some sort of stuff about an MP calling for more oversight on asylum seekers, specifically the ones from off-world. Said that if people on Job Seekers benefits had to check in regularly, why weren't aliens who were potentially threats to humanity not required to do the same? After all, everyone saw the destruction caused in Shoreditch by just one unmonitored off-worlder...

Almost choking on the coffee she'd swallowed wrong, Rose hurriedly left the BBC News website, unwilling to read any further. God, not Isaacson again. Bloody fool doesn't know when to give over and really, does he really think a pile of extra paperwork and monthly required meetings is going to stop the likes of him? Rose thought to herself with bitter amusement as she wiped up the small amount of mess and went for a second round of coffee. Not bloody likely, mate. Better luck herding cats, even if you just want one of them to check in.

Still, considering the Earthers and the recent hostilities in the press and such... this could bear some watching. There was the General Election coming up the beginning of next year and if people like Isaacson and his lot got enough support, things could definitely get a bit difficult. Especially if Isaacson somehow managed to get enough support to actually have his currently pointless calls for government oversight on Torchwood to actually carry some weight for once. And Pete had been stressed out about meetings with some MPs and Cabinet members in the last month or so, hadn't he? Especially right after the Shoreditch incident... Okay, she'd be getting back to that particular news story, but later on when her brain was fully awake and functioning.

"Have a good day, sweetie! Be a good boy -- and Mabel, don't forget to make sure they keep him out of that juice. You know what he's like after," she heard from the vicinity of the front door and immediately steeled herself, counting herself lucky she'd had as long to get ready as she'd gotten.

"You feeling more awake yet?" Jackie Tyler was standing in the doorway, arms akimbo just mere moments later. At Rose's mute nod she came in and grimaced at the coffee perculater before filling the electric kettle and plugging it in. "Don't know how you drink that nasty slop," she muttered with a shake of her head.

Bracing herself against the coming tirade, Rose was pleasantly surprised when her mum continued to potter about before sitting down with her tea and then proceeding to natter on about inane things. Apparently the charity thing was something about them trying to figure out how to get scads of money for a pile of different charities in a relatively short amount of time. The solution to that one seemed rather obvious to Rose.

"Why not just have a Red Nose Day, like we had back home?"

Jackie blinked for a moment before she gushed, "Of course! We could easily book the Palladium, I suppose, but I'd have to run it past all the girls first. You know how people like to have their say on this sort of thing. And see, Rose, this is exactly why I asked you along."

Rose gave her mother a skeptical look, hiding her smirk behind her mug as she took another swallow.

"Don't roll your eyes at me, missy. Was planning to ring you up and ask you to come with anyhow, ever since Sharon had suggested we get some 'input from the younger generation.' Over-stuffed biddy," she added with a sniff. She nattered on about various things that Rose mostly tuned out until finally Jackie cleared her throat and gave her a glare. After a pause, she sat back and casually asked, "So what did he do this time?"
The morning sun in his eyes was what woke him. Grumbling, the Doctor went to pull the duvet back over his head only to find that the duvet seemed to have disappeared. Not only that, but his pillow had as well and the bed didn't feel as it should do either and... Sitting up, he immediately groaned when he realized where he was. Rose was going to be cross when she got up and found him still on the floor of the lounge, still surrounded by bits and bobs of various hardware. Best try sneaking into bed in hope she'd not noticed yet...

He got his trainers and jacket off and was halfway to the bedroom before he remembered. Muttering words that the TARDIS wouldn't have ever translated, he fought back the urge to punch something in his frustration. The only thing that stopped him was the fact he'd also remembered who his new landlord was going to be and he couldn't imagine Pete would be half as forgiving as Edgar had been. That and the flat was once again a rubbish tip, the outcome of the night before when the only thing he could think of doing that might possibly accomplish anything useful was working on the TARDIS. He'd gotten things prepared for the last stages of growth before passing out somewhere in the wee hours before dawn, but that was about the only thing he'd accomplished other than he'd gotten his emotions in check again.

It had been the easiest part of the whole blasted evening, letting the pall of Time Lord impassive detachment descend as the whir of the sonic and the mindless routine of splicing wiring and fusing the connections after so he could actually think without getting all het up. Or rather, without letting his actual feelings to get involved. Because really, wasn't it better this way? She'd be safer, far safer, since they all knew who his constant companion really was. All those years, from the beginning when he'd first been forced to flee the junkyard he'd hidden in with his granddaughter and ended up ten thousand years in the past with two terrified school teachers and a pile of cavemen -- all the way through now. By now he'd a body count that was probably only beaten by Time itself and possibly the Daleks. Billions left in his wake and that was just Gallifrey. There was the rest of the Kasterborous system that had been just as dead and wasted as the planet he'd intended to destroy.

He'd not bothered to keep track since that last, hellish day, just knew the names and faces that still haunted his dreams. Changing universes hadn't ended it, either. Hadn't shaken his unseen follower, just made it so the destruction was concentrated into a smaller area and left those who got too close even more vulnerable. People like Rose and Jasper and the people in that neighborhood in Shoreditch, who'd all become targets just because they'd been in the way and as ever, he was a magnet for trouble. But nothing to get maudlin over, he'd always known it'd come to this. The other him had tried once more with the denial and had that thought that trapping them both here was a solution when any Time Tot would've known the difference in their cradle...

A banging jolted him out of his reverie of just standing there staring at the cracks in the plaster outside the bedroom door. He wasn't surprised that there was a knock at the door so early. Nor was he suprised who was on the doorstep. Mutely he handed Pete the gun that he'd set aside the night before, knowing it wouldn't be long before someone came looking, and went to close the door.

Pete's foot stopped it easily. "Doctor, we need to talk."

"We talked yesterday. Twice, even. Once in the morning and then later,” he replied patiently, trying to manoeuvre the offending foot out of the way so he could try closing the door again.

"Doctor,” Pete grated, sounding distinctly peeved and annoyed.

"You can talk just as well out there, can't you?" he reasoned snappishly, pushing a bit harder. The
door wavered a bit, but the man wasn't giving over.

"Doctor!"

Wincing at the shout, the Doctor sighed. Maybe this was the only way. "Fine, but make it quick. I'm busy right now."

He let go of the door, turning away immediately and heading over to pretend to work on the TARDIS. There wasn't much left to do before it was ready for him to just leave it and wait for her to finish the job herself -- and nothing that could be done there. Just some final arrangements to be made and...

"I've come to realize that all a thousand years of living has gotten you is the mastery of the art of avoidance," Pete said sarcastically.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," the Doctor replied smoothly, not looking up. "I'm better with denial and running away."

"Same thing," Pete pointed out gruffly.

"Bah, running's more fun and the direction isn't guaranteed just by the word itself, where as with avoidance it's more set in stone that you're running away, instead of to," he replied evenly, still fiddling with the bits of wires in his hands and trying to keep his voice light.

Pete sighed and obviously decided to stop dancing around the issue and just asked point blank, "What really happened out there?"

"Told you that yesterday," was all he got in return.

"Yes, but why is Rose back at the mansion instead of here?"

The Doctor shrugged. "You know, you could always try asking her. She's probably better on knowing the answer to that one, mate."

Pete grabbed the Doctor by the shoulder and forcibly turned him around, giving him a shake. "For God's sake, man, what the hell is wrong with you? Does anything get through that armor of yours ever," he all but roared. "She showed up last night, in tears, and spent all night drinking in my kitchen with my wife. Now, I'd say that would make me entitled to a whole hell of a lot of answers -- answers that you're bloody well going to answer for once. No more of your shite, Doctor."

It was probably something that worked on humans, the getting red in the face and teeth all gritted in rage, but overall it paled in comparison with half the similar situations he'd been in before. Pete Tyler was mild in comparison to the Eight Legs and their Queen, much less something actually worrisome like the Paradox Faction. More like one of the Chancellery Guard with their knickers in a twist, like Maxel, just less of a desire for seeing him dead. Possibly.

Keeping his face carefully blank and breathing calmly, he merely cocked an eyebrow. "Have you considered that it's probably better this way?"

Looking absolutely confused and bewildered, Pete sputtered, "What the hell are you on about?"

"This." The Doctor casually waved a hand, indicating the flat around them. "She's away... and safe."

"Safe?" Pete finally released the Doctor, hands dropping to his sides.
Straightening himself absent-mindedly before beginning patiently, as if explaining something to a very dull child, the Doctor repeated himself, "Safe. As in not here, not with me. That sort of safe."

"But--" Pete began, looking even more taken aback.

"All those years travelling, it always ended the same-- they always left. Oh some went by choice, some not so much, but it was always the same in the end. Believe me, it's better this way. She'd never leave on her own, and it's far, far better that it's her choosing to go instead of ending up as so many others did. Because that's what happens -- people who stay with me, they end up dead, broken, or married off to shouty barbarian kings on planets lightyears from their home. This way, she still has her mum and everything that matters. And you get your best Torchwood agent back," the Doctor said softly before turning away to stare out the window, signalling the end of the conversation.

He could feel Pete gaping at his back, but ignored it as he watched people hurrying down the pavement to get to the bus stop so they could start their commutes to work, Argo cranking open the awning at the front of his shop and then setting out a board with the day's discount priced items. Down there the rest of the world was getting on with their lives, busy doing what humans did best: forgetting. He'd always envied that. Envied and been utterly exasperated by it also, but that's what they did. Had to to be able to get their narrow views of the world to fit inside those tiny little brains of theirs. Imagine what would've or could've been if his own people could've managed the same.

"Doctor--"

"'M done talking now, so you can bugger off. I've got more important things to do than stand here jawing with you," he said flatly, waiting until he heard the sound of steps walking away and the door closing.

As much as he wanted to go running after her, beg her forgiveness with a hundred thousand or even a million words, just beg her to come back -- he couldn't. He'd ask for forgiveness later, when it wasn't just so many words to go with all the other ones he'd already said. Because Martha was right, wasn't she, when she'd said he talked and talked and never said anything. All too right, and somewhere out there on the other side of the universe was someone who was just as guilty of it as he was, if not more so. Someone who'd never really given her a choice in anything and that needed fixing, so it did.

He knew all the calculations by heart, had worked them out during that long night and knew just what it would take to make it work like it should. Just needed one more thing, one more component, and there was going to be a bit of a wait on it. Still, considering the current rate of growth... eight, nine months tops. Until then..
Chapter 63

It rained that night; it was pouring down when Pete came home late that evening, body language extremely casual, but his eyes avoiding hers even as he'd exchanged one with her mum that carried some sort of hidden meaning. Water sluiced down from the sky when after they'd eaten their evening tea while everyone pretended everything was completely normal and everything Tony did was cause for lengthy discussion, her dad took her aside while her mum took off, ostentatiously to put her little brother to bed. It was there in the same room where she'd once desperately tried to explain that a voice in her dreams was calling her and telling her to go to a deserted beach in Norway that he finally told her. With a pitying and sympathetic look in his eye, he'd handed her a sealed envelope that he said had been delivered to his office by a bloke in a magenta mini dress and four inch puce stilettos.

An envelope with nothing but a hastily scribbled note and a key -- the key to the flat, since she'd not even bothered to take her copy with her when she'd left. All the note said was I'm sorry, but someday you'll understand. Watch over her for me, don't let her die forgotten and alone. I'll be back. Probably.' No goodbye, no signature other than a pile of circular doodles that were reminiscent of the sticky notes that she used to see stuck up in random places in the TARDIS. There they were, the words she'd secretly expected since day one.

That note burned so brightly in the fireplace, but she wasn't paying attention to anything but the dull ache in her chest and the mix of guilt and anger beginning to seep around the edges of the numbness she'd purposely wrapped herself in. Hugging herself against the cold that seemed to pervade every bit of her body, she didn't look up or even respond when Pete had started talking, trying to combine an apology and condolences into one when all of it was pointless.

Pointless because there was no retrieving the stone after it was thrown, taking the words back after they'd been said, or stopping the champion runner after he'd already cleared the horizon. Because that's what he'd done -- left and if he was even in the same time zone she'd be surprised. In the three days since she'd walked out, he'd have had time to make the sort of arrangements necessary to disappear to someplace like Budapest or Pago Pago. Or knowing him, and the sort of connections he was capable of, he might not even be in the same solar system anymore. Pointless because Pete had said he'd immediately rushed over to the flat in Hackney and had found nothing missing other him, that leather coat and his sonic screwdriver. Nothing else gone, but everything had been cleaned to the point of being spotless and that was indication and proof enough for her.

So she'd put on a brave face, squashed all those tricky emotions down inside where no one would see, and pretended it was nothing. Went into Torchwood the next morning and resumed her position, signing up for the most dangerous field assignments while carefully turning away the inevitable questions and ignoring the pitying looks. It wasn't as if she'd not had prior experience doing it, she'd done it plenty back before and during the Dimension Cannon. Knew well how to ignore the whispers of "She's still pining for him, her alien lover, poor thing" and pretended she just didn't hear them. She just got on with it.

While it was easier to ignore the memories during the day, it didn't mean she could entirely escape. Oh no, that just would've been too easy, just like it would've been easier to forget him and move on, if he didn't haunt her dreams every night. Or rather, if the other Him hadn't been haunting her so much. Usually it was nothing as overt or as sinister as the first one had been, just a normal dream until her sleeping self caught a glimpse of something in the corner of its eye and there he was, watching from a distance. Sometimes he wore leather, and sometimes it was the velvet or the opera capes she'd briefly gotten glimpses of during her travels with the Cannon. No matter what, there was
always a sense of an intimidating vastness looming over her, like she was staring into an abyss. If the
dreams were anything to go by, it most certainly was looking back, too. But that was alright.

When she occasionally didn't turn down the invitations to a night out at the pub with her team, she
still went home before midnight and went to bed alone. Even if occasionally she cried herself to sleep
or ended up lying awake trying to avoid the inevitable dreams that came nightly, staring at the ceiling
until the first hints of dawn were on the horizon and she could finally justify getting up to do her
morning routine before going to work, then that was alright too.

Everything was alright, because she was alright. She, Rose Tyler, was just fine. And if everyone
would stop asking, that would be even better. Then her whole world would be perfect, with the only
aliens she had to deal with were the ones who were either just having a bit of engine trouble and
would be on their way before afternoon tea or were in the cells waiting for the Shadow Proclamation
to pick them up. There was more than just Torchwood, too. She'd even humored her mum, attended
a few red carpet events, and had her face splashed all over the tabloids. And if anyone commented
on her showing up without a date, or was speculating on what had happened to her "mystery man"
from a few months before, the tall, dark one with the good looks, mysterious past, and a penchant for
getting in trouble with the law, well then that was alright too. She'd just ignore it because you never
let the damage show.

Just like that woman had told her, the one with the curly hair and the all too knowing look that she'd
met in the far future on one of her Jumps. She'd been the definition of alright, standing there with her
back to a crack in the universe and a mini blaster in her hand. "Spoilers," that woman had said when
Rose had been about to ask where and when she was, before the woman had said that she'd gone too
far, try aiming for London instead. That had been one of the last trips before... but that was all in the
past, and she was moving on. Still, it was hard to believe that had only been six months in her past,
before the beaches and explosions, or cramped, rundown flats in Hackney, and a stranger in her bed.
But that was alright, as well.

By now, she was probably the Queen of Alright. And that was alright, too.

He watched the autumn come on with all its changes from the Yorkshire Dales. Watched the leaves
turn and the nights lengthen, and marvelled at how his breath turned to fog in the early morning air.
He slept in abandoned shepherds shelters of stone in the hills, or huddled in a toilet stall behind a
service area off the motorway. Oh, he could've had it easier, could've sweet-talked his way into any
number of rooms for the night and transportation anywhere he wanted. But he didn't. He didn't
because it was easier just being an anonymous face in a crowd or at the side of the road, where no
one equated the bloke they'd seen in the rags accompanying a certain heiress about old London
Town with a scruffy chap who'd not shaved in a month. It was easier because no one ever really saw
him, just avoided him or chased him away so no one got close enough to know. Easier because if he
woke up screaming and anyone was around to hear him, they'd just assume it was just the ravings of
the common garden lunatic and he'd be gone before the policeman showed up to cart him off to a
mental ward.

Easier because when he was busy concentrating on finding the wherewithal to keep putting one foot
in front of the other since he'd never travelled to Aberdeen this way before, and certainly not this
Aberdeen... well, he certainly wasn't thinking about her. Sure he'd seen occasionally her photo on the
cover of numerous gossip rags, all dolled up and schmoozing with the other rich and famous humans
on one of those fancy zeppelins or walking into the Royal Albert, but that was just something to
shrug off and remind himself that this really was easier. For him and her, actually. And if he ended
up being rather maudlin as he watched the sun set over the Firth of Forth and slightly more peevish
when his wallet had been stolen by some ASBOs, well that wasn't anything to remark on, was it?

Anyhow, he was learning so much out here on his own. So many things that he'd not considered or even known about even after all his centuries of travelling. Things like the particular depth that the chill seemed to leach into his bones when one had been sleeping rough and had gotten caught in that cold November rain. Or how strangely intriguing, and alluring but embarrassing and slightly horrifying it was to be propositioned by a prostitute named Miranda in a back alley in Glasgow. Better yet, how difficult it was to sneak aboard a ferry to Belgium or how long one could end up slipping about the Inverness docks before one got another chance to try that again, once they were watching and had your description.

But still, it was getting easier to push away those feelings of guilt and longing. Day by day, it grew less difficult to see her face looking back at his when he chanced upon a mirror. That's not to say it wasn't less of a problem seeing his own looking back at him with that accusatory look, hence why he'd not shaved in a month. Eventually, he'd given up on getting away by boat, since some of the immigration agents he'd seen scouring the docks had looked somewhat familiar and he'd not been sure if he was gaining an incipient case of paranoia, or if a certain Pete Tyler was making sure he didn't stray too far. But in the cold, clear light of dawn, he told himself that wasn't possible. No one had made any effort to stop him, when they had to have known what he'd planned; no one had come after him either, and everyone knew Torchwood wasn't exactly a hands-off organization. If they'd wanted him, they'd have had him tucked away somewhere or rotting away in a cell on Jura by now. But they hadn't. And here he was, finally and fully alone. Just him and a millennium's worth of memories following behind, with the more recent ones buried even deeper than the lost temple of Phe Pho Fhat in the forests of Io in the 79th century.

But the bloody things kept popping up at the most inconvenient of times, just like he found his mind trying to reach out for something that wasn't there on those long, dark, lonely nights spent on the floor of a derelict warehouse in Manchester or an alley in Blackpool with all the arcades and fruit machines shut up for the winter and waiting for the first warm breaths of spring.

Even when he'd occasionally wander into a pub to warm himself and catch a glimpse of the real world again through the bottom of a pint glass, he was forcing himself to forget certain things. Things like the urge to point out certain things he saw, like the view from one of the Fells in the Lake District or the flight of an Eagle over Llanfair. Or the need to explain the difference between the puffins on the cliffs of Lands End and the ones on Skzanzi 4, since they really were an alien species that had originally planned to invade but had settled for the quiet life of the seashore and all the fish they could eat. Since after all, there was no one to hear him, other than the puffins themselves and there was no one left to blame for that, was there?

He spent Christmas in a room over a shop in Sheffield, having found work at a garage down the way. No one knew him there, and certainly no one was looking past the facial hair and the false identification he'd bought off a man in Liverpool. Gavin McLoughlin they thought he was, and no one cared as long as he did his job. Briefly he'd considered using the usual 'John Smith' but had figured that would raise too many questions and possible some alarm bells. Then there'd be people putting one and one together and then there'd be even more questions, ones that they'd be demanding answers to, and quite possibly paps at the door. If he kept himself to himself, carefully rebuffed all their attempts of making better acquaintance, and let everyone believe he was just a miserable git, well that was fine by them -- and him, too.

Cos really, they weren't too far wrong on that last part. Especially when he'd watched the rest of the world ring in the New Year with fireworks and parties, and he'd caught a glimpse of her on the telly, hosting a gala in London with some famous people. But that was alright, because she there she was, living that fantastic life he'd told her to have oh such a long time ago, it seemed now. He'd been a
different man then, literally, and it seemed like she was a different girl now too and finally able to move on. Just like he'd wanted.

Now if he could only manage to figure out how to stop that part from hurting, and tell himself that he was only imagining that she looked utterly miserable even despite that big smile she'd worn and that posh gown that probably cost a few thousand quid more than his pay stub had been that week. That sharp pain in his chest, and the thickness in his throat, that was just another sign of the human weakness that had been inflicted on his system. That and his inability to let go of all these meddlesome emotions and move on like a proper Time Lord. Or even like a normal human bloke might manage, except he wasn't either, and that still found a way to annoy him, being neither fish nor fowl. More like a bit of a carp-y goose, he reckoned.

Time was said to heal a broken heart and it should, because they both knew this was the best thing for her and they both knew who was to blame. They just needed some time on their own, even if he had been the one walking through the cold November rain.
Chapter 64

Come the end of winter, with its cold and icy rains and occasional snows, he was out of Sheffield and headed southward, as Sheffield had suddenly become complicated. Complicated in that Lena Harris, the daughter of his employer had taken a fancy to him, deciding to press her suit one Saturday evening near the beginning of March by shoving him against the wall near the pub's toilet and snogging him thoroughly. For months he'd been more or less successfully suppressing and ignoring certain urges that had come with this body and for a few moments then, all the carefully imposed restrictions and constraints were almost completely forgotten. Forgotten until the part of him that faintly remembered dedication to duty and impassive observation and a whole host of taboos regarding animalistic urges and behaviours suddenly raised its head.

Oh he'd long since discovered that ignoring certain things most definitely didn't work and that sometimes, taking the problem 'in hand' was the only solution, especially if he'd any hope of doing owt besides squirming uncomfortably for an entire night while most of humanity for the nearest thousand miles slept. So what if he'd also found that giving over to certain demands of the flesh meant that he was less likely to wake up with visions of Arcadia and Elysium fresh in his mind, clear enough that he could still hear smoke and the sounds of several million creatures dying? That was entirely different to finding oneself shoved against a wall with a few thousand nerve endings screaming, "Do it," even as the ghost of a memory surfaced: 'I'm not like you lot, with your urge to procreate like rabbits, spreading your DNA across the universe...'

By the time self restraint had overruled everything going on below his waist and he managed to wrench himself away, he'd been the one doing the pinning against the wall, instead of merely being the one up against the plaster. As he had wiped his mouth and struggled to catch his breath while hurriedly backing away, the realisation that the teenage girl in front of him had probably been, at most, seconds from finding herself being shagged in a poorly lit hallway in a badly run pub by the last person she should be going anywhere near in the first place. Blimey, he was too old for this shit, far too old, and that look of bewildered hurt on Lena's overly painted face had quickly turned to one of contempt.

"What the hell-?"

"This really isn't a good idea, not with you being you and me being me, and after all, you've only just gotten your A levels, and me, well, you really don't want to know," he'd stammered out, backing away with his hands raised and trying to suppress the rising levels of panic that were making everything in his mind go fuzzy.

"'Me being me'? And what about you, Gavin?" she'd retorted indignantly, her voice suddenly taking on an accusatory sharpness. "Not like that's your real name anyway," she'd added with a sneer, as she'd started advancing upon him to glare up at him good and close.

It had been like being menaced by an irate poodle in one respect, but in another more terrifying way, her words had struck home. Remembering to respond to whatever pseudonym he was using had always been a problem of his, even when he was actually trying to conform to said identity for once.

"Don't think I'm the only one who's noticed how long it takes before you actually reply when someone calls your name. So for all that, you suddenly think I'm not good enough for you?"

She'd had him backed against the wall again in a manner completely opposite of the last time, and he'd been stammering out a denial and trying to think of a way to explain. If only there was a safe way to explain without him getting slapped and anyone ending up in tears, and...
"You bastard, it didn't bother you one bit when you'd your tongue half down my throat and you as randy as anyone ready for a fuck against a wall," she hissed, stepping close enough that he could feel the heat coming off her body even through his own clothes. Hell, he'd been able to see her anger, even with his eyes closed.

"You've completely wrong on that one, but I can see where the source of confusion is--"

"Confusion? Confusion?! I'll show you confusion, you bastard!"

He had easily ducked the blow aimed for his face, catching her arm and holding it at a safe distance, wondering what the bloody hell he was going to do next and how he was supposed to diffuse this fine mess he'd found himself in.

"Coward. I'm gonna tell them exactly what you are, forcing yourself on me, and who do you think they'll believe, Mr No-name, or me," she hissed, and he flinched, visibly flinched because that was the final straw.

While part of him had wanted nothing more than to be buried hilt deep with that bint's legs around his waist and showing her exactly what he was made of, at that moment he wasn't sure which he hated more: the bit of humanity contaminating his systems or the ancient and timeless side that was absolutely appalled and growing more angry by the second. He was absolutely livid, because even he at his most oblivious wouldn't have ever missed the threat in her words and who was she, a mere human, to threaten him so? His people had had a thriving, extremely advanced society with time travel before her world had even been a speck of dust floating in the vastness of space. Just because he'd been forced to destroy that world, and oh how easily he could do the same to this one as well, and then ended up exiled on some miserable backwater of a planet with a pile of brainless, scheming apes...

He'd left her slouched against that wall, surrounded by the smell of piss and human despair, unconscious and the last five hours of her memory scrambled beyond all repair. Her 'dignity' had been thoroughly intact as well, at least as far as he was concerned, since his own would never let him stoop so low. Blowing up Gallifrey, of course, excluded.

That's how he'd ended up leaving Sheffield in the dead of night, and found himself staggering into Birmingham on a rainy evening about a week later. What little dosh he'd had left had come via the sonic and a cashpoint at a motorway service area and went on a bacon sarnie at an out of the way cafe, along with a small cup of tea that was barely tepid and failed to warm him any.

Already chilled to the bone and more knackered than he ever remembered, he'd spent the last of it on a room at a small hotel that was nearly as disreputable looking as he was by then. He didn't remember getting into the probably pestilence ridden bed, but he remembered waking up to someone pounding on the door and feeling worse than he had since Androzani.

At least those final moments before the regeneration had afforded a better view than what he'd got when he'd opened the door to see a small man that claimed to be the manager and was demanding that he leave or pay for another night. Since he was utterly skint and had somehow acquired a cough while simultaneously losing the ability to see straight, much less maintain his balance without the assistance of the walls and then the doorway, he'd had no other recourse but to send the man on his way with a dose of telepathically induced forgetfulness before staggering back to bed.

Wrapping himself in the ratty duvet, he'd slept for the best part of the next four days. When he'd finally woken, he'd barely had the strength to stand still, had only scattered memories of dreams more hellish than normal, and a vague itching sensation in the back of his skull. It felt like something or someone was calling him, but honestly he'd barely made it to the shower where he'd washed off the
smell of his own filth and sweat, shivering and sweating by turns.

Unable to stand the smell of the room any longer and feeling that call become an irresistible pull, he'd managed to drag on his clothes and shoes and start walking once more. He'd not made it out of Birmingham apparently, rising from a stupor at some point later in a room with too much light, and a stranger poking and prodding at him.

"Pneumonia," he'd heard before sinking back into the depths of unconsciousness again, only to find out sometime later that he'd managed to walk as far as the pavement in front of a church before he'd collapsed.

Next time he awoke, it was to an anxious looking priest of some sort trying to feed him broth. Broth that didn't stay down on the first attempt, and really, that first experience of reverse peristalsis was enough to almost make him call it quits on the whole "part human" business right there. Gallifreyans had never had to deal with such an indignity, and he could almost hear a million dead Time Lords laughing at him. But he'd survived.

He'd spent nearly a month there recovering, watched over by Father Flanagan, as he'd learned later on. Somehow he'd fortunately had the presence of mind to be able to convince the man who'd found him not to call either the police or the ambulance service, which was a relief. He'd not been the only unfortunate that Father Flanagan had taken in, as there were others who'd fallen on hard times and then through the cracks of human society, but he'd not bothered learning names or socializing while he was there. No one had ever asked his name, either, and his anonymity had been just as intact when he'd wandered out of Birmingham as when he'd wandered into the city, albeit nearly two stone lighter than when he'd arrived.

That was the second week of April, and there was a general election coming up in a few short weeks, though he wasn't aware of it and wouldn't have cared if he did know. But he'd have been very concerned if he'd known certain details on some of the people standing for office.

Jake watched Rose pretend for nearly a month before he'd started looking into certain things. He'd had some ideas about what had happened between her and the Doctor, but of course she'd refused to say a word about it. Instead she'd deflected and changed the topic of conversation, other than once when he'd talked her into going to a club one Friday night.

She'd been rather pissed and slurring her words when she'd let out a bitter laugh and said, "Should've remembered he was a killer. After all, he blew up his own planet, never mind all those Daleks, and he'd even said so. I'm such an idiot, to think... bugger, look at the time. Better be getting back to my flat."

And like that, she'd left, refusing his offer of an escort, and refusing to say anything else about it ever again. She'd been her usual self at work on the Monday after, other than the avoiding other than when necessary him part.

It wasn't until then that it occurred to him to see if anyone had ever checked the CCTV footage from the park on that fateful day. And somehow, no one had. Frame by frame he'd gone through it, stopping at the point of the shooting and going through even more carefully. There was nothing overly conclusive, but two frames had stood out: one with a bright flash about 5 milliseconds before Edna Holburn had been killed, and the second two milliseconds after. In that flash there'd been a silhouette of something, but no matter how much he'd nagged the lads down in R&D had they come up with a way to improve the blurred image to show anything beyond a figure in a robe with a massive collar, holding a gun aimed at the now deceased woman. None of Torchwood's sensors had
picked up even the slightest blip of any anomalies, but all the streetlamps around the park had simultaneously shorted out at the exact same time as the second flash, when the figure had disappeared.

Pete, of course, had been awfully interested. Interested enough that he'd sent out a good half dozen agents to find the one person who would even possibly know who and what that was. Jake had been one of them sent, with strong warnings to all of them to keep it schtum, since the last thing Torchwood needed was the fact that there'd been a possible alien incursion that had gone completely unnoticed for over six months, especially with the current political climate and the likes of Isaacson possibly gaining popularity and power in near future. Also no one would be best pleased to find out they were trying to get the Doctor involved, least of all Rose.

Even with full access to CCTV and police reports throughout the country, he was a hard man to track. There'd been a few possible sightings, and a suspicious trail of cashpoints that had suddenly developed problems from London all the way to Sheffield, and there the trail ran cold for awhile. For over two month they'd watched a garage there before there was a report of a dodgy cashpoint out by Spaghetti Junction on the M6. There the trail had ended, with no sign of the Doctor and all the searches of the CCTV footage showing no one who even resembled him. He'd disappeared like a ghost, as far as they could tell.

While everyone whispered and made sad faces and noises of concern and worry, she'd moved back into the flat in Hackney. It wasn't for his sake, certainly not, and she wasn't waiting for him to return or anything, even if that was the one place he was guaranteed to turn up if he did, but she'd not been able to bring herself to abandon that chunk of coral. The building was under the auspices of Torchwood now, though Pete had given Jasper and Percy free lease on the garage below. Little else had changed, other than the plumbing had finally been sorted, but it was the one place where no one was busy pointing and talking behind her back, and it was far from her mum's eye, even if she was still occasionally going to posh functions to ensure her mum didn't visit. Not because Rose was trying to avoid her, but because it didn't feel right letting anyone else in there, what with that coral having morphed itself into something resembling a large grey column one day whilst she was at work.

Knowing that that was something significant, but not know exactly what, she'd taken a week's holiday, to watch it. It was her summer holiday, long delayed, and a week with just her and what looked like something from the parking garage under Canary Wharf taking up half of the lounge. Somehow all the wiring that the Doctor had painstakingly spliced, assembled, and draped over that chunk of coral before he'd left had disappeared nearly a year before. Absorbed, she hoped and assumed, but she didn't know for sure and she'd have given anything at that moment to be able to ask. Not like she had any prior experience with this, much less anyone else, and damned if she'd let anyone else near it.

It was a long week, with little to do after she'd gotten the cleaning, laundry, and setting up the alarm system again out of the way, other than wish the temperatures weren't so hot and humid. The temperatures had been unbearable all summer long and that week wasn't any different than the ones before. It was also a completely unremarkable week, other than one thing: the dream she'd had on that Sunday night before returning to work.

She woken up, and he'd been sitting there at the end of her bed with his back to her. Not the one who'd left her here, or even the one that had left them both, but her first Doctor. He'd been sitting there hunched over, the shadows hiding everything but the shape of him and those daft ears, but she'd known it was him immediately.
"Doctor?"

"Oh Rose, I'm sorry," he'd said in a rush, voice hoarse and barely above a whisper. "I'd never meant it to come to this, never. I shouldn't have left you here, and I almost... but I didn't, I couldn't, she wasn't you! And here I am, just a daft old man with no clue on what to tell you. You probably hate me now, and quite right, too."

"I could never hate you, Doctor. Never." Heart in her throat, she'd crawled down to wrap her arms around him, breathing in the scent of leather and something that was so quintessentially Him that she'd never been able to forget. Tears began to fall as she tried to tell him he needn't say anything, needn't apologise, and soon she was sobbing into the lapel of his jacket and he was cradling her against his chest and breathing wordless murmurs of comfort into her ear.

"You can't be here," she finally said, because it was true. The last time she'd seen this face was just before it disappeared in an explosion of light.


"But you changed, and then you left. The walls of the universes, and all of reality was at risk you said."

He'd gently raised her chin so he could look into her eyes. There was a deep sadness there, a sorrow that words couldn't describe. "Rose, I never left."

And then she'd woken up, it was Monday morning, and her alarm was squawking. It felt like she'd not slept a wink, she was so exhausted, but she'd managed to get herself showered and dressed. The Tube was delayed and once she got to work, she was headed back out almost immediately. A craft had crashed down in a field in Dorset, and they were needed immediately. She spent the day combing through burning, stinking wreckage, looking for survivors and nearly managed to push the dream out of her thoughts entirely.

Whoever they had been, they'd been humanoid, as far as they could tell. Whether they were actually humans and time travellers or something that looked human that had ended up scattered across a farmers field, that was something that would have to be determined by Torchwood's labs, as the background radiation was messing with their field equipment. It was late when she finally stumbled out of a cab and was half asleep when she finally walked into the flat. The all too empty flat. The empty flat with its very conspicuously empty corner that was suddenly missing a large object that resembled a concrete column and she knew all too well what that meant.

He'd been and gone, with nary an alarm being tripped, and now the TARDIS was gone as well. The next morning, when she'd read in the paper while riding to Canary Wharf in a cab because apparently the Underground was closed down that day, that Prime Minister Isaacson's Immigration Reforms would be taking effect that day, she could only be grateful for small mercies.

Like a ghost he'd sneaked into Hackney, barely able to avoid Maddy's watchful eye for the whole day while the Siren's call from within that flat was becoming more unbearable by the hour. She was calling him, she was ready, and she'd been making sure that he knew it ever since Birmingham. That small itch had slowly grown to what it was now, which was an all-over discomfort, like someone was trying to pull his brain out of his ear with a hook.

Unable to wait any longer, he'd gone in just after dark, when everyone was busy having their evening meal and settling in for the night. It was easy to disable the alarm that he'd anticipated would
be engaged, and even easier to get past the locks, though he'd been proud of Rose for trying. If he'd been an ordinary bloke, it would've worked and there'd been a hundred Torchwood agents showing up to take him into custody the minute he'd even touched the doorknob. Instead, a few adjustments to the sonic's settings and he was standing before her.

She was beautiful, utterly gorgeous, and the last time he'd done this, he'd been an old man with a granddaughter and she'd been a relic in a museum. A lot had changed since then, and oh wasn't that the understatement of the aeons, but it was so very, very right. When he laid his hand against her side, and the tendrils of her awareness had wrapped around his, he felt somewhat whole for the first time since he'd stepped foot on that damned beach. Then a door appeared next to his hand, already open and waiting for him to enter. In that moment, all the suffering and pain, all the scars that marked him both body and mind, they were worth it. Just one important thing more needed doing, and a few more minor things, and then, depending on the outcome, everything would be perfect.

He stepped inside, forcing himself to ignore the urge to look around, and laid a trembling hand against the console. "Hello, Old Girl," he whispered, as he closed his eyes and started the dematerialization sequence without even having to think about it. Everything was laid out exactly where it was supposed to be; every knob, every dial, every button where he expected it.

He'd never been able to find even a makeshift briode nebuliser, or any of the other devices that the Time Lords had installed for safety's sake to prevent people from ending up splattered from one end of the space/time continuum to the other. Not to say he didn't like taking risks and facing challenges but this was dangerous, even by his standards. Whether this ship carried enough of her mother's essence and memories and all the block transfer computations had been correct, or if this was an untamed TARDIS that was going to end up going wild or inverting the moment she hit this universe's version of a time vortex, he'd be finding out very shortly. Hell, he wasn't even sure if there was a vortex stable enough for her to enter, or if she was even fully compatible with it, but he hoped she was since she'd grown here and if she'd not acclimated to the energy in Pete's World she'd have still been a tiny lump of coral that fit in the palm of his hand and...

"Bloody hell, just do it, Spaceman," he heard echoing from an old memory, and he did. When he pulled that final lever, he did so gritting his teeth and praying to every god he'd never believed in that he didn't bollocks this one up.

For five and a half hours she sat there waiting for that cement cylinder to reappear, telling herself that this was absolutely stupid and how she'd promised she'd never, ever do this again. After all, if he really did now have the chance to run as far and wide as he pleased, what made her think he'd ever come back? He'd been running the whole time since Darlig Ulv Stranden, even when he'd been sitting perfectly still, before he'd done it for real. Granted, that was after she'd walked away, after giving him up for a lost cause, but no, she didn't think he'd be back. No, did I mention it also travels in time or did you miss me, just a dent in the carpet where a lump of coral had grown until the day it was able to disappear completely. By now he was probably on some alien world, continuing his quest to forget or to get himself killed, or already dead and buried a thousand centuries from now.

Just as she was getting ready to give up and call Pete to let him know that the Doctor was well and truly gone, and so was her sole decoration for the lounge, she heard it: that wheezing groan like an elephant being strangled and the sound of the universe being torn in half that had made her heart stutter since she'd first heard it all those years before in a different universe.

Slowly it appeared, flashing lights on top first before the shape of a blue police box gradually
managed to look like it'd been there forever. The door opened and... no one stepped out. Oddly, the door opened outwards, instead of inwards like she'd expected.

Muttering and grumbling and completely uncertain if this was the proper TARDIS or his, but planning to give whichever one it was a piece of her mind, she shouldered her way through and stepped inside. The grating was the same and the ceiling was still far above her head with various cables hanging down, though the coral struts had been mostly replaced with iron girders and the walls were grey and covered with strange, round indents.

"They're called roundels."

He was watching her from the other side of the console, which looked similar to the one she'd known except there weren't any bicycle pumps and none of the levers had been replaced with whatever scraps he'd managed to scrounge up. As soon as she laid eyes on him she knew which one it was, even if he was thinner than she'd ever seen him and he was wearing the same clothes he'd worn the last time she saw him. For all that, she could barely recognise his face beneath the matted hair hanging in his eyes and the thick beard he wore.

No wonder Jake and the rest never found him, she'd thought to herself, because she'd known, despite how quiet they'd kept it. She'd made friends with a girl named Toshiko Sato who'd transferred in from the Cardiff branch, and Tosh was a computer whiz of the first order. It hadn't taken much effort to find the files and memos, no matter how deeply they'd been buried in the servers. If it wasn't for the eyes, she'd not have known him, but those seemed even older and darker than before.

"What're they for," she asked lightly, deciding to skip over the more important but difficult topics.

There was a hint of a smile as he shrugged. "Buggered if I know." Without further ado, he reached out and flicked a switch, setting the whole ship to juddering and the engines coming to life with a wrenching groan.

It almost threw her off her feet, but she managed to stay upright by wrapping herself around one of part iron girder, part coral struts nearby. There wasn't a single railing to be seen anywhere, which somehow didn't surprise her, even if the rest of this did. "What the hell are you doing?" she snapped, utterly outraged by his behavior.

He'd never asked, just assumed, it felt like the whole thing was going to fall apart around them any second now and just where the hell was she taking her? Her voice was are most lost in the din, but she heard him yell back, "Something that should've been done the first time around."

He was hanging on to the console for dear life with a gleeful grin and watching a set of dials, while occasionally making adjustments. Suddenly with a sudden jerk, everything stopped, the ungodly noise, the shaking, it all stopped. Before she could even stand up properly and adjust herself, he was moving.

"Sorry about the racket, the harmonic balancers and mufflers aren't quite fully matured yet," he apologised as he pushed past her to open the door.

Forcing down the urge to shake him, slap him, or otherwise try to knock some sense into him before lecturing him about the things one should and shouldn't do to the ones they supposedly care about, she followed close behind him, standing behind him as he waited with his hand on the door. "Where are we?"

"I'd go for 'when' actually," he deflected lightly.
She smacked him on the shoulder and she heard a chuckle that he quickly muffled before turning to face her. He was all seriousness as he looked her up and down and then sighed. She saw his throat bob and his eyes close, like he was summoning his courage, before he said softly, "Darlig Ulv Stranden."

Rose went cold. She could barely breathe, she was so surprised, but she only managed, "But --" before he rushed to explain. "All this, it's my fault, all of it. You never got a choice in any of this, staying here with me and right now, through those doors, his TARDIS is going to appear. If you go out there, in about two minutes he'll be there, and he won't make the same mistake twice."

Feeling like she'd been punched in the stomach, she backed away. "You can't do this, you can't."

He stayed where he was, casually leaning against the door with his hands in his pockets. His eyes flashed as he raised his chin, defiantly retorting, "I most certainly can."

"But it didn't happen like this before," she denied.

"Time can be rewritten."

"Not like this, not by you," she whispered, backing even further away.

He didn't even flinch, dark eyes never leaving hers as he replied, "Time Lord Meta-crisis, me. The only one ever to exist in any universe, much less this one therefore the laws of time here are mine and they will obey me."

"You can't," Rose repeated, the dream from the night before suddenly sharp and clear in her memory. That had been one thing, something her subconscious had come up with, but here, now, he was ready to create a massive paradox that could wreak untold amounts of havoc that even Torchwood would be unable to deal with, just to... just to give her a choice for once. The choice she'd never gotten the last time, on the first time around, as he'd put it. She could step out there and be on that beach...

And at the same time, she couldn't. If she did she'd be leaving the only version of the Doctor who'd ever given her the chance to decide her own future. She'd also be leaving the only one of them who'd been able to finish that sentence.

She walked towards him, stepping close enough to feel his breath against her face. He'd screwed his eyes shut at her first step, thinking she was going to do what he'd expected her to and unable to actually watch her do it. He'd visibly jerked back in startlement when she touched his cheek and whispered, "I told you forever, right?"

With those words he was a blur of movement as he suddenly grabbed Rose and kissed her, pushing her backwards up the ramp and onwards until her back was against the console. One hand was on her arse, holding her against him, as he set the dematerialization sequence and sent them into the vortex with barely a shudder for once. She'd made her choice and unbelievably, she'd chosen him. He never stopped kissing her once, other than when she'd pushed him away for a moment to kick off her shoes and shimmy out of her jeans and knickers. It was the work of a moment to pull down his zip and since his pants had worn out sometime before he'd left Sheffield, he wasn't wearing anything else so he was all ready when she was. Then he remembered Lena in Sheffield, and he couldn't do it; not like this anyway, not against the TARDIS console like she was just a common bit of fluff... but
she was pulling him closer, refusing to let him pull away again, and he couldn't help but give over. He'd never been able to deny her anything, and if this was what she wanted, so be it.

Pausing to stop and remind himself that he wasn't dreaming this, he looked into her eyes, trying to find any signs of uncertainty just in case. "Are you sure?"

At her nod, and whispered, "Yes," he lined himself up and groaned as he sunk into her, feeling her grip on his shoulders tighten. He paused for her to adjust, kissing her gently. When she nudged him with the leg he'd pulled over his hip, he started moving gently, closing his eyes against the swirl of emotions that filtered through his mind then. This -- taking her against the console, with his trousers around his ankles -- had long been a fantasy of his, since before he'd been into wearing pinstriped suits and long, long before a certain incident with a dear companion and a jar. Her moans in his ear, that was what he'd dreamed of all those months and all this was what he never thought he'd be able to have again.

It didn't last long though, and he'd barely had the chance to reach down between them to where they were joined to make sure Rose wasn't left out before he finished with a groan and a muttered curse. Her own cry of release had been close enough to his ear that it was still ringing slightly when he'd been able to breathe normally again. Ringing enough that he'd barely heard her whisper, "I missed you."

"Missed you even more," he whispered back, holding her close enough that he could feel their hearts thundering away in sync. Everything was now as it should be, he was right where he belonged, and...

"God, you don't half pong, do you?" Rose muttered.

Pulling away with a chuckle, he pushed his hair out of his eyes with one hand. "Probably could use a shower," he admitted.

"And a shave?"

"Most definitely." Remembering to pull up his trousers before he ended up tripping over them, he gave her a cautious smile. "Wanna go see if we can find if she's installed an en suite yet?"

"Are we likely to end up lost?" she asked sensibly.

"Possibly. Quite possibly."

They were fortunate, as they found a shower stall in a cupboard at the end of a corridor. It was under a stairway that ended at the ceiling, since things were still sort of under construction. It could take centuries before this TARDIS ever reached the size his old one had been, and considering how little time it had taken, linearly speaking, he wasn't going to complain. Rose joined him in the shower, scrubbing his back and other places, which led to them fumbling their way blindly along the corridor until his questing hand found a door and beyond it, thankfully, a bed.

They went much slower this time, as he took the time to rediscover all the spots that made her moan or squeak that he'd carefully remembered for all those long months. He brought her to orgasm with his lips and tongue between her thighs before he'd crawled up over her to chase his own. After, she'd laid in his arms, cradled against his chest and murmured sleepily, "Never leave."

"Never, I'd sooner die," he replied, and it was true. He would sooner die without hope of regeneration than leave her like that again. If this was the last day of his life, if this was all he'd ever know from today on, he'd be happy to die in her arms and count himself lucky for doing so. There
were far worse things than suddenly being a bit more mortal, he'd found, even if he didn't deserve any of it. And to think, somewhere on the other side of the void, there was a self-righteous prat with two hearts that'd never know what it was like to fall asleep in the arms of the woman he loved on his very own TARDIS.

Around them, the very young TARDIS hummed contentedly and dimmed the lights around the sleeping lovers while continuing to drift through in the Time Vortex peacefully. In the control room, the figure of a woman in a worn ballgown briefly appeared and smiled to herself before fading away. All was right and proper in the universe, and everything was as it should be...

until suddenly, it wasn't.

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